

PART ONE

SUMMER

CHAPTER ONE

GRADUALLY THE girl came to the conclusion that she was ill. It could not be anything else.

She pushed her way across the pavement, stood with her back against a brick wall, felt the rough surface scraping her skin through her blouse and jeans. The brickwork seemed to move, like a piece of automatically operated emery paper. Up, down, up, down. Her groping fingers found a doorpost, gripped it; it was moving too. Up, down, up, down, gyrating.

People pushed past her, bumped into her. A woman clutched at her, almost pulled her down, but somehow she held on. Everybody was rushing, a seething mass of hastening humanity as though everybody was ill, that they were hurrying back to their homes before they collapsed in the street. A street that undulated like a slow-motion roller-coaster, had you clinging on to anything you could find, throwing up. Somebody had been sick, she could smell it. It might even have been herself.

Jackie Quinn just stood there, made a supreme physical effort to stay upright. That feeling of faintness kept coming and going, waves of black and red, hot and cold. Sweating and shivering. A hubbub of voices, louder, dying away, rising again, human voices crying out inarticulately, but nobody stopped; they all had somewhere to go. Maybe she ought to join them, stagger along with the shambling tide.

Her brain wasn't working properly, even her terror was numbed by a sense of incomprehension. Frightened one second, accepting the situation the next. I'm Jackie Quinn. I don't know who I am, where I am. Yes, you do, you're in Shrewsbury. Where's Shrewsbury? How did I get here, where am I supposed to be going? I don't know, just stay where you are, you can't do anything else.

She narrowed her eyes, exerted all her remaining will power in one big push to adjust her vision; pushed again and made it for a second or two. The street was a sloping bend, traffic at a standstill, some of the vehicles empty, abandoned by their drivers as they, too, joined the lemming-like stampede. Run, because you can't do anything else. But Jackie remained where she was.

There was definitely something wrong with her eyesight. Like tunnel vision, the tunnel becoming narrower and darker, people fleeing. Fleeing from her? An awful sensation of guilt; blurred faces glancing back every so often. She could not quite make out the fear in their expressions but she knew it was there. You've done this to us, Jackie Quinn.

No, that was damned stupid. Whatever was the matter with her was the matter with them also. Only I'm not going with you, wherever you're going. I'm going to stay right here, try and work it all out for myself. Then the tunnel darkened, blanked everything out. Who am I, where am I? I don't know.

A shrieking wailing sound, a dazzling blue light that seared her eyeballs, the concrete beneath her starting to heave up again. She felt her stomach coming up, didn't try to stop it, turned her head away and let the spew come with its own force. Falling, hitting the hard pavement but still hanging on to that wooden post; if you let go you'll be swept away.

After she had vomited Jackie felt marginally better. Another flash of lucidity, much stronger than the last one, opening her eyes but the light was too bright. Not just the flashing bulbs of ambulances and police cars caught up in the stationary traffic but dazzling sunlight like you found in tropical areas. Squinting, determined to watch what was going on. Noise that had her wincing, cowering back. A police car, a red and white one, had ploughed into the standing cars and an ambulance had gone into the back of it. Vehicles were shunted, buckled.

People were screaming. Everybody had gone mad.

I'm mad, too, she thought. But what the hell is the matter with me? She had to find out, get help. Still holding on to that wooden upright she twisted herself round. People buffeted her as they streamed past but she managed to maintain her grasp. A shop window, some kind of display, but it did not register in her brain because she wasn't interested, only in the reflection in the glass. That familiar street scene but she forced herself to dismiss it, didn't want to see it again. Only herself!

Oh God! Her own image came at her, barely recognisable from the one she had studied in the mirror before leaving the house that morning.

Which morning?

It was her face. She pressed herself up against the heavy-duty glass pane in her anguish. Her smooth skin had become blotched and rough, almost raw in places. The eyes had sunk back into dark sockets, pinpoints of blue that glistened unnaturally. Her pert nose and lips were thick, squat, almost mongoloid in appearance. Smooth silky carefully groomed blonde hair was tangled and awry, coarser, as though a new growth predominated; darker too. Her breasts appeared to have inflated, she could feel them pushing against the restriction of her bra. And then the vision faded, darkened, and she thought she was going to pass out.

She sank down to her knees, sobbed. It was like a feverish nightmare where weird fantasy became macabre reality amidst a heap of sweat-soaked bedsheets. You kicked and tossed, fought your own battle, sweated it out, and eventually everything turned out all right. Closing her eyes, trying to pray only she could not remember the words, not a single one. Crying with frustration and fear, beating her fists on the hard pavement. The concrete should have been damp linen, it wasn't. It was concrete, real concrete. Reality!

She slumped against the wall, cried out with pain as a passer-by trod on her outstretched foot, kicked it in blind anger before stumbling on. She was trembling, pushing hard in an attempt to make her brain work, a motorist jamming his finger on the starter-button on a frozen winter's morning. Come on, for God's sake come on, you bastard!

It hurt, like a darning needle penetrating her brain, bringing with it

blinding migraine pains, darkness streaked with crimson, a crazy reflection of the workings of her own mind, loose wires that did not connect. Fusing.

Then, without warning, everything came right again. You're ill and you're lying in a street, Shrewsbury. You came here shopping like you do every week but something went wrong. She could see, painful in the bright sunlight, but she could see all right. Oh Jesus, what was the matter with everybody?

Crowds everywhere, a shambling disorientated throng which surged one way then the other like mobs of rival soccer hooligans charging one another, climbing over the tangled heap of crushed metal where the police car and the ambulance had shunted the traffic jam, uniformed figures sitting motionless inside the vehicles seemingly oblivious to everything around them; they might even have been dead, held upright by their seat-belts. Fighting, falling, being crushed by motiveless feet.

Jackie pressed herself back against the wall, took a deep breath but did not close her eyes in case her vision went again. Try to think logically. It wasn't easy; a man with a blistered face came gambolling down the pavement, saw her and checked. Stooping, peering, tongue licking festered lips, eyes bright orbs that glowed with primordial lust. A hand reached out, would have grabbed her had not somebody bumped into him, sent him staggering. A shriek like that of a wounded animal at bay came from those diseased lips and then he, too, was swept up by the tide of relentless, purposeless movement, and was gone for ever.

Jackie scanned faces; wild and fevered all of them, a hopelessness about their expressions. Some fought, but only because others got in their way. A kind of exodus but nobody was going anywhere in particular.

They're ill, she thought, like me. But how can everybody be ill? Her brain threatened to blank out again, a flickering hesitating light bulb in a thunderstorm, a transformer that could not take the additional load. A helmetless policeman in the midst of a bunch of teenagers, his headgear a football, the game being played under elementary rules. Kick it, watch it bounce, kick it again. The officer joined in, booted it high into the air but nobody went after it; everybody was too busy going nowhere in particular.

She told herself she could not stop here. I have to go home. Where's home? Thinking again, overloading her delicate aching thought-mechanism so that it bleeped and gave off a mass of red floaters in front of her eyes. Her home was up in the hills thirty miles away from all this madness. Jon, her husband, would be there, totally oblivious to all of this. Maybe he wouldn't even care if he did know because their marriage was finished and no doubt he had that Atkinson girl with him. A kind of mutual agreement that you came to when there was nothing else left between you. You both had lovers, made a pretence of keeping it a secret from each other but it was all a waste of time because you both knew anyway. A facade, a game you played. Go and enjoy your day's shopping, dear, I'll be OK (because Sylvia will get my lunch and I'll be able to screw her). Stop on late if you want and go to Tiffany's because you know I don't like dancing. I know you'll jive all by yourself. (If you find yourself a man for the night please don't tell me because it'll spoil our little game.)

But I want to go home! Maybe under normal circumstances she would have given way to hysteria. Women were crying and screaming all around her. Damn it, I'm going home!

She stood up again. Funny, she should have been weak, legs threatening to buckle under her, throw her back down to the ground. But she felt strong; ill but strong. It was illogical, too complicated for her to work out.

She held her bare arms out in front of her, gazed at them in revulsion. It was as though she had dipped them in a bath of scalding water, the skin peeling yet hardening, knitting together again in a strange kind of plastic coating. So rough, they didn't hurt half so much now.

Check your reflection again in that shop window. No, I don't want to see. Well, you can't stop here.

She found herself running, a crazy zig-zag sprint that took her across the road, weaving in and out of cavorting, stumbling men and women, reached the opposite pavement. A hand closed over her arm, grasped her wrist, but she threw it off. Keep going, up those steps to the church above. Don't stop.

It wasn't a church. She knew that only too well, had been in here often enough, every week in fact. St Julian's Craft Centre, much of the church edifice untouched, stalls where once there had been pews, the altar removed during the process of deconsecration. Stained glass windows that flickered brightly, had her turning her head away because her eyes hurt. So cool and refreshing, she could stop in here forever; die here!

No, you're not going to die. Pull yourself together. A man, the only occupant of the interior, features she recognised in spite of the awful disfigurement, but she had never known his name. He was to be found in here most weeks, a browser who wore a long frayed black coat, summer and winter alike, a long straggling beard giving him a bohemian appearance. Today he looked wild-eyed at her, acknowledged her with a smile that had spittle stringing down his hairy chin.

"They ... did ... this . . ." He had difficulty getting the words out, a physical effort like one who stammered, wrenching the sounds out of his throat.

'Who?' Jackie barely recognised the sound of her own voice, a nasal grunt that had her drawing in breath to refill her lungs.

He regarded her steadily, a look that said, 'You fool, you don't even know.' 'The Russians,' he said at length, leaned his full weight back against a creaking stall table.

She stared, tried to take in his words, let her own personal computer process the data, spit out the answer.

The Russians. Her mind threatened to go blank again; a familiar ominous word. The Russians! She had to fight to comprehend and it hurt. And then her smarting burning flesh went cold.

'The . . . Russians'

He nodded, closed his eyes momentarily, reminded Jackie of a drowsy bird of prey.

'Somehow. . . they've done . . . this.' His breath rasped in his throat. 'Not ... the bomb ... we wouldn't be here now if it was. Something . . . else . . . don't know . . . what.' Fighting for air, wheezing, holding hard on to that table. 'We're all going to ... die!'

The shock to her system blanked her out again and she moved away, walking unsteadily across the flagged floor, her footsteps echoing. An open door; she knew she had been through it before. A corridor; through another open door.

This time it was the aroma of cooking food which brought back her hazy powers of thinking, hit her like a whiff of smelling salts to a fainting person. Her brain whirred again, that starter-motor turning over sluggishly and just managing to fire; only just.

Of course, she was in Delany's. She came in here every week; baked jacket potato and cheese and a pot of peppermint tea. The familiar smell had revived her and in that instant she knew she had to eat. Whatever had happened to her body it still cried out for food.

The vestry restaurant in the old church was empty. Ovens steamed, a kettle was boiling dry. Jackie moved up to the counter. Everybody had gone, spilled out into the street leaving the food to spoil and waste, yielding to a sudden panic before their reasoning was blotted out. Hers would go soon, her system could not stand this stop-start much longer. Then she, too, would follow the masses, turn into a human lemming.

Some kind of nut shortcake in a long tray, divided up into square portions. She grabbed one, took a bite, chewing noisily and spilling crumbs. Christ, she was starving so she could not be as ill as she thought. A glance down at her hands and she jerked her eyes away. Her fingers were raw, thicker as though they were swollen, but not bleeding. Just unsightly, ugly.

Time wasn't on her side, any second she might click back into being a mindless moron again. Don't push too hard, thinking hurts but you've got to get the hell out of here. This place was hell. The car, it was parked on the big riverside park. She thought she knew the way, back down through the Riverside Shopping Centre and over the suspension bridge. But even if she managed to find it, would she be able to drive it? You might black out suddenly. The streets would be jammed with abandoned vehicles and crowds aimlessly blocking the way; mobs that would surely go on the rampage.

Despair. She wouldn't make it, neither could she stay here. In that case . . . and somewhere in the recesses of her confused mind she remembered the empty house in First Terrace. It was a long way from here, further than the car park down by the river, but it was out of town and maybe she would make it.

A year or two ago she used to go there quite a lot, in the days before Pauline's mother had died. A calling place, mainly to fill the afternoon in before it was time to go to Tiffany's. As far as she knew the place was still empty, some structural problems that had prevented the family from putting it on the market. Subsidence caused by the drought of 1976 had cracked the foundations and, according to Pauline, the insurance company were being bloody awkward about it, looking for loopholes and trying to get the family to have a cosmetic job done and put it up for sale at a third of the market value. They were still arguing, which meant the place was still unoccupied. And for the moment that was the place to go.

In those few seconds before her mind fogged again Jackie had the foresight to fill her empty plastic carriers with food from the counter, scooping up anything within reach, regardless of how it broke or crumbled. The rest of that nut crumble, handfuls of fresh salad, some baked potatoes that were going cold. A morass, a bag in either hand, and then the mist came down again.

She wandered aimlessly around the restaurant, shied away from the steaming unattended stoves because fire terrified her; a creature seeking a way out from an unfamiliar place.

She found her way back into the main church. That man was still there but now

she did not recognise him, did not remember having seen him before.

'They did this.' He regarded her with a glassy stare, still dribbling. The Russians.'

Fear; because she did not understand his words and his whispered tone frightened her. He was a threat to her safety. She ran blindly, not knowing where she was going, a panic-stricken flight that took her back outside into the hot dazzling sunlight, blinded her so that she did not see the flight of stone steps.

She screamed as she fell, felt the impact, but strangely it did not hurt; rolling, bumping, her inflamed body cushioning the blows, still clutching those carriers as they spilled scraps of natural wholefood in her wake. Landing on the pavement below where everything came back to her again. The fall had jump-started her brain, set her sluggish reasoning in motion once more.

People still milled about aimlessly, unintelligible shouts and grunts filled the air. Pushing, shoving, a young girl screaming as they trampled her, maddened cattle preparing to stampede.

Jackie Quinn pulled herself up, scrambled back up those steps, still carrying her squashed food. For a few moments, at least, she knew the way she had to go, through St Julian's again and out the back way; keep clear of the crowds and hurry whilst she still remembered which way to go.

There were fewer people on this side of town. A woman was slumped on a bench, she looked dead, and a man sat beside her apparently unaware of her presence. He looked up once as Jackie hurried by but he gave the impression that he did not even see her. He might have been blind.

It was amazing, frightening, how her strength had not waned. If anything she felt stronger, fitter, except for the smarting of her flesh and that constant thumping headache. In those first few awful minutes (hours?) she had weakened, felt abominably ill, but now that sensation had passed. She refrained from looking down at herself, didn't want to know; it was as if she had been given another body, a strong coarse squat butch frame. A sex change? God, she'd never look at herself again.

Hurry, your mind could go again at any second and then you'll be lost!

It was a long way, maybe two miles. Over the English Bridge, turning to the right, preferring to walk in the road because there were people about again, most of them sticking to the pavements, an instinct that was too ingrained in them for them to venture on to the highway. Yet.

A jumble of motor vehicles, a dozen or more minor crashes except for the one in the middle of the road where a lorry had shot the lights and gone over a Mini. The lights were still working, eerily, pointlessly; red, amber, green, but nobody was going anywhere.

A body lay on the tarmac, stark naked. Man or woman, it was hard to tell because it was mangled and bloody, probably thrown from the crushed car. Jackie thought she might spew again but that feeling of nausea was stopped instantly by an animal-like roar that had her forgetting the carnage.

A man was coming round the back of a bumped Ford pick-up, shouting hoarsely, pointing at Jackie. In one fleeting second she saw and understood. He was big and muscular, blotched skin like everybody else, and naked from the waist

downwards. He wanted her, all right, and for one reason only!

She broke into a run, her carrier bags bumping and jogging against her, fast strides that scarcely affected her rate of breathing. Weaving her way through the line of cars, aware of his padding bare footsteps. Louder, closer, he would catch her soon, it was inevitable. Her heartbeats speeded up in time with her pounding head.

And then she heard a scream, half-checked and turned her head back to look. Her pursuer had altered his course, spied a woman propped up in a newsagent's doorway. A couple of bounds and he had her, threw her roughly down on the concrete. She struggled, screamed again but it was futile. So deliberate, so fast, a stag taking his hind by force on the rutting stand. A forced mating, any female was fair game.

Jackie fled, veered to the other side of the road because she spied a bunch of youths and wanted to avoid passing close to them. They did not appear to notice her. More than her life was at stake.

With relief she saw and recognised the Monkmoor lights. A phone box; an idea that hurt like a migraine stab almost blanked her out again. She would ring Jon, he would come and rescue her. Whatever had been between them in the past was a strong enough link. He would not desert her in her terrible hour of need.

Jackie Quinn glanced around, furtively, guiltily. A youth on the opposite side of the road was watching her, yet his expression was not one of lust like the man who had chased her, rather vacant as though he saw but did not understand; almost hypnotised.

She dragged the heavy glass door open, went inside and let it bang shut behind her, a vibration which jarred her nerves, speeded up the thumping in her head. Jon would come, he did not have to drive through the blocked town. Down the A49; she could even walk down and meet him there. Another thought, perhaps he would not believe her, think that it was some ruse on her part or else she had gone mad. Everything up in the hills would be perfectly normal, nothing untoward ever happened up there. You've got to believe me, Jon. Something's happened, everybody's come out in ghastly rashes and nobody knows what they're doing. Except me and I might go on the blink at any second. It's the Russians! I know it is because ... a man told me it was. Oh God, it sounded lame, a kid's fantasy. You've got to believe me, please. Her head was vibrating as though there were steam pistons in her brain. A robot, controlled by ... Oh Christ Alive, her vision was tunnelling again, like looking down a telescope from the wrong end, seeing just a circle with a tiny grey telephone ringed in it. Start dialling now before it's too late!

Her forefinger was almost too thick to go in the hole. Fumbling, missing and having to start again. Pushing with all her psychological strength, a tremendous effort.

0... 5. ..8. ..8. ..4. ..It was going to take hours. The dialling tone started up another vibration in her brain, a minute pneumatic drill boring into her so that the tunnel was becoming even narrower. She could barely make out the numbers now. 8 ... 4 ... One slip and you'll have to start all over again. 5 ... 5 ...

And then everything went black and red and the receiver was swinging on its flex like a pendulum gone berserk, banging against the pay-box.

It took Jackie Quinn some time to work out exactly where she was. A wide main

road, totally deserted, not even an abandoned vehicle. The river below, a deep muddy current, the grass on either side brown and sun-scorched; dying.

Just walking, aimlessly, because there was nothing else to do, accepting what she saw with numbed apathy. The fear, the pain were gone. There was nothing left.

She still carried the plastic bags filled with mashed food because it never occurred to her to discard them, a mindless living thing in a dead world.

Scattered trees that appeared to have gone into their annual leaf-fall, but if you looked close you saw that the foliage was shrivelled and blackened instead of a golden brown tint. Heat scorched. But Jackie Quinn was not aware of this nor anything else.

The thumping in her head began again, more persistent and painful than before, bringing with it a glimmering of fear, the beginnings of realisation again. Stopping, holding on to a low branch of a withered tree. Waiting.

The pain came back, brought everything else with it. Oh God, she hadn't managed to phone Jon, hadn't made it in time. A sensation of helplessness, hopelessness, seeing the scorched countryside and knowing that it was not just a month of hot June weather that had done this. It was . . . she didn't know what it was, only that suddenly the whole world had changed.

She would go on to Pauline's mother's house. There was a phone there and she would try again. The blackouts were becoming more frequent; she had to hurry.

Almost running when she saw the traffic island. Miraculously she had continued in the right direction; not far now.

The pub, its doors closed, an atmosphere of finality about it. The housing estates beyond, people standing about, flesh-scarred caricatures of their former selves, not understanding, not caring. Just living, but for how long? Death was surely the next stage, Jackie prayed that it was because to go on living like this was too awful to contemplate.

There had been a pile-up on the island, a car and a van meeting head-on, an articulated lorry ploughing the wreckage up on to the concrete, flattening it, a body in the road. No help had arrived and it certainly would not be coming now. Even if it did it was too late.

She broke into a run, felt her vision beginning to channel before it actually did, forced into the road again where the kerb had been built up in Sundorne Road, not a footpath, just a meaningless raised stretch of tarmac, dangerous because one could so easily fall back into the road; but it didn't matter anymore. There would not be any traffic again, ever.

Turning left into First Terrace, sensing her power of reasoning beginning to fade. Number One, she knew it so well. Almost derelict, broken slates on the roof, a square hole dug out by the front door where the surveyors had attempted to investigate the subsidence cracking. The grass lawn a foot high, withered as though it had been sprayed with paraquat, the flowering bushes in an advanced state of macabre autumnal change. There had been no rain for months.

She saw the front gates framed in a tiny circle, dilapidated woodwork that hung heavy on the concrete, her hands closing over them even though they seemed a hundred yards away. Pushing, dragging, almost falling headlong as they yielded to her efforts, a tinkling of metal as a rusted hinge snapped and

clinked on the ground.

The throbbing was fading, that tiny circle magnifying, knowing only too well now what was happening to her. The feeling came and went, her logic an early-morning mist evaporating in the warmth of sunlight. So much stronger again, the waistband of her jeans straining as her body filled with unnatural physical strength.

Another couple of strides and then everything was gone. She stood there on the short weed-covered drive not knowing where she was nor why she was here, not questioning, still holding on to the carrier bags because there was no reason to jettison them.

She breathed deeply then found a new rhythm, one that flared her nostrils into wide squat cavities, her lips pulled back to expose strong white teeth, realising that her body cried out for something but not knowing what. Then her stomach rumbled and she knew that she needed food. The bags dropped from her hands, spilling out their contents, but they were ignored; reaching up, pulling at foliage, sniffing it but it was brown and bitter, unpalatable. She grunted with rage, tore at more branches, cast them aside. And overhead a wheeling crow cawed its own anger and frustration. It, too, was having difficulty in finding food in this burned-up land.

CHAPTER TWO

'Jesus CHRIST, what wouldn't I give for some proper food.' Sylvia Atkinson wrinkled her freckled features in disapproval as she chewed on a handful of freshly pulled bean sprouts. 'Being a health food freak isn't my idea of eating, Jon.'

'It's the difference between surviving or dying.' Jon Quinn regarded her steadily, furrowed his brow and wondered how long it would be before she went over the top, ran up that flight of steps and out into the remnants of the world they had once known. 'At the moment we have two advantages over the rest of the population of Great Britain, maybe even over the western world. We have a seed-sprouter and an almost unlimited supply of fresh food, and, as far as we can tell, we're more or less all right, just like we used to be. God knows how everybody else will finish up, how much longer they'll last. All we can do is stop down here and wait.'

They ate in silence, everything that had to be said had been said during the last few days. Now they were starting to get on each other's nerves, which was inevitable. He studied her carefully, let his gaze run over the small slim figure clad in a soiled cheese-cloth dress, sandalled feet and purple toenails, ran his eyes all the way back up her again. Her short dark hair was tangled and needed combing but she wasn't in the mood, her complexion so much paler without make-up. Dark eyes that no longer shone, were pouched and baggy underneath. A permanent expression of hopelessness, she was fast giving in, becoming a problem that he could well do without. Jackie had more resilience,

would have come up with a few constructive ideas by now. And, that constant nagging thought, where was Jackie?

Shrewsbury, no doubt. Alive or dead? It was anybody's guess who was alive or dead out there.

He found himself studying the interior of the cellar again even though every square inch of it was indelibly imprinted on his mind. Boring, but it was the sole reason they were still alive.

The idea of converting this underground ten-by-ten cubicle into a nuclear fall-out shelter had seemed a crazy whim five years ago but, as he had pointed out to Jackie, it could serve a dual purpose; food storage in case it was ever needed, an ideal place for seed-sprouting and a few mushroom buckets. A potato store, too. That way Jackie had not been so cynical about it, only begrudging the money spent on filters and other items of equipment needed to combat radiation in the atmosphere. All the same, he had constructed the shelter subversively under this ploy, got his own way by cunning. There was no incentive to build something which you hoped you would never have to use but if it had an alternative purpose it wasn't so bad. The ironic part was that Jackie wasn't here so that he could say, 'I told you so.'

Shelving on two walls, mostly stacked with durable foodstuffs from the health food shop in Knighton. Coffee (decaffeinated), a selection of herb teas, muesli bars, a variety of nuts, tubs of seeds for sprouting, dried vegetables. Eating, for Jon, wasn't any different now from what it had been for years. Jackie wouldn't have minded but Sylvia was yearning for a return to convention. That might never happen, probably wouldn't, but he could not tell her that because it would destroy that last tiny flicker of hope that kept her going.

Eight years ago he had been just an ordinary clerk working in a Birmingham office, nine to five, Mondays to Fridays, on a take-home of eighty a week. He wasn't well, nothing that you could put your finger on, probably a combination of junk food and boredom that inspired him to vegetate. It was Jackie who had been the driving force behind him, had dragged him out of the rut. Earlier in her life, before their marriage, she had been a vegetarian and she had realised the necessity to find an avenue of escape from their conventional existence. Reading and fantasising about 'the good life' was one thing; having the courage to put it into practice was another.

The following spring she had persuaded him to dig up the upper-tier lawn of their small semi-detached garden and plant it with vegetables. 'It's a positive start,' she had said. 'Grass is no good unless you've got a goat or a cow, and as local bye-laws prevent us from having either we must use the ground constructively. Mowing lawns is just unconstructive work!'

The next spring the lower-tier lawn went the same way and Jon's enthusiasm grew. Little by little she had 'enlightened' him; wholewheat bread instead of white sliced, textured vegetable protein replacing the Sunday joint and just as tasty. His health, his whole outlook, improved. The big step was looming up but again he had needed her to give him a shove.

'We'll sell up, buy a smallholding and take our chance,' she told him one evening.

'We don't have the money.' His resistance, his townie caution was only to be expected.

'We will have,' she smiled, 'when we sell this place. Residential houses fetch

money and there's a property boom on at the moment. We'll get twenty grand for this house even if it is a semi. That kind of money will buy us a small spread up in those Shropshire hills where land and cottages are relatively cheap. We don't have a lot of mortgage left anyway and it'll be more of a swap . . . this house and your job for a smallholding, and after that it will be up to us.'

He'd been scared, scared so that he lay in bed each night telling himself what a bloody fool he was but he didn't care because this sort of artificial existence was no more than ticking the years off, waiting for retirement. And when you were retired all you had left was another period of waiting . . . waiting to die.

It had worked out. The house had been sold and they had found a seven-acre spread and a tumbledown cottage in the hills and had even had a thousand left over after the mortgage was cleared. But without Jackie he wouldn't have made it even then; she had her own ideas about farming, ideas which made them 'cranks' in the eyes of the sparse local community.

'Look at it this way,' she told him one night after he had spent the day propping up the sagging roof timbers in the old stone cottage. 'If we go in for conventional stock farming we'll be lucky to make a thousand a year with a few cattle and sheep, and that's providing we don't have any mishaps which we probably will have because we're only amateurs, after all.'

Jon closed his eyes, waited for it. But, after all, she had been right about digging up those lawns.

'We'll start up an organic farm,' she smiled. 'It'll be hard work but there's a genuine need for the produce. Carrots for cancer sufferers; under alternative treatment they have to drink three pints of organic carrot juice a day, plus goats' milk yoghurt, so we'll keep goats. And garlic, there's a big demand for garlic but most of it is imported. There's lots of other lines we can experiment with too. We won't make a fortune but we'll make a living and most important of all we'll have our freedom.'

As usual Jackie had been right. It had been hard work, very hard work, and still was but they had made it. Contrary to popular local expectations, they had succeeded in growing their crops on a windswept slope 1,000 feet above sea-level, they had built up their own goat herd and even had a billy for stud. They still had the old Citroen Dyane but had managed to buy a battered old canvas-topped Land Rover for farm work as well. That part of it had worked out, but somewhere along the way things had gone wrong for Jon and Jackie; they found themselves drifting apart. These last few days Jon had tried to put his finger on the cause but it had eluded him. In a way he felt guilty about having Sylvia in here with him, occupying Jackie's rightful place in a tiny haven of safety. It was as though he had traded his wife's life for that of his mistress. If Sylvia took it into her head to walk out of here and go on up there, get herself all burned up or whatever, then that was her lookout. No, it wasn't, he'd do his utmost to stop her because if she went then he would be left alone and he could not stand that.

'How much longer do we have to stay down here?' She broke the long silence, asked a question which he had been asking himself these last couple of days and had not had the courage to take responsibility for the answer.

'Another few days, I guess.' He stared down at the bare concrete floor and wished that he had saved that old piece of coconut matting out of the kitchen instead of burning it. Jackie's motto was that you never got rid of anything. 'That freak gale and rainstorm last night will have helped to disperse

whatever was in the atmosphere.'

'God!' Sylvia covered her face with her hands and for a moment he thought that she was on the verge of hysteria. That's all I bloody need! But when she looked up again that expression of panic had passed. 'It is a nuclear attack.* She spoke calmly. 'It's got to be, hasn't it?'

'No.' He pursed his lips, shook his head slowly, a physics master aware that he was going to have difficulty getting a new theory over to an intelligent and questioning class. 'It's not a nuclear attack. That much was made plain in the early radio bulletins before they cut out/

Try the radio again.'

'I have. Nothing at all. Plus the fact the batteries are beginning to run low. I should've stocked some spares. Next time I will.' He laughed at his own joke, made it sound more unfunny than it was.

Then what do you think's happened, Jon?'

'It can only be one thing.' He watched her steadily, wondered if he should put it into words, decided that there really wasn't any point in keeping anything back. 'I reckon it can only be one thing. Germ warfare^

He saw her pale; it had to be a trick of the uncertain oil lighting because she had been deathly white for days.

'How do you know?' She asked the question because she felt she was expected to say something.

'I don't, I'm only guessing. The early reports hinted at a radioactive fall-out but they didn't know where it was coming from. There hadn't been any fireball, any direct attack, nothing picked up on the detection devices. All that was happening was that people were coming out in terrible skin rashes and their minds were going blank. It spread faster than the plague and I guess that when the newsmen caught it that was the end of all means of communication. We're OK because a shelter like this has a far better chance against micro-organisms than it does against radiation.'

'But how . . . how would an enemy attack us with these germs? Surely there would have been some kind of warning?'

'I guess it's the most deadly weapon of all, the one which we're most vulnerable to,' Jon Quinn went on. 'As you say, no bang, no warning. I suppose the enemy synchronise their agents to release the micro-organisms into the atmosphere, say at half a dozen strategic points in the western part of Britain so that the prevailing winds will spread the germs. You can't see 'em, hear 'em or smell 'em and they've got you before you realise it. It could be the same story in the States and in Western Europe. At the moment we've no means of finding out. But you can bet there's a few other survivors besides us, total annihilation would be an impossibility even for the most ruthless enemy. At the moment we've no idea what the effects of these diabolical bugs are. Early reports seem to suggest that they affect the skin and the brain but nobody seemed to be dying as a direct result of it! At least, not right away.'

'It's horrible.' Sylvia shuddered.

True, but think of the advantages from the enemy's point of view. Buildings are left intact and when it's ah over the enemy just arrives and takes over. They could have all the slave labour they need, thousands of zombies at their

disposal. And the rest go to the gas chambers.'

'We'd be better off dead,' she groaned.

'Well we're alive and we've got to make the most of it,' he grinned, hoped that he sounded optimistic. 'As I said, that storm came from the west and with luck it will have cleared the micro-organisms. We've got all the food we need so we're lucky. Tomorrow I'm going to take a walk outside, see what's happened to the livestock.'

'I'll come with you,' she said, a sudden fear of being left alone; suppose something happened to Jon and he didn't come back.

'No,' he replied. 'If we both go then there's a double risk of contamination or whatever. I shan't go far, just a quick look around the holding. And if everything's OK then maybe we'll be able to make some plans to explore further afield.'

'All right.' She lapsed into another silence and her thoughts returned to Eric, her husband. For the first time for years she found herself wishing they were together, which was damned silly because they had got used to spending their lives apart. As a feedstuffs rep covering most of Wales he was away for days at a time and she knew bloody well he'd got other women. It was a rep's perk. So she got her own back by having Jon; she just needed screwing, every woman did, and when your man was away from home week after week you took steps to get it, just like he did. You never admitted it to each other but you both suspected - knew. Life went on that way, you didn't expect it to change. And then without warning something totally unexpected like this cropped up and you had your lover for keeps and your husband, if he was lucky, had one of his fancy women. A kind of enforced wife-swap. But right now she'd have swapped for Eric, because of all the men she had over the years he was the one she had never really got to know. Now it looked like it was too late.

So she was going to stick to Jon Quinn because she needed somebody to protect her. Somebody to screw her. And he needed her because, like Eric, Jackie was out there in a dying land.

She would have to accept the situation and so would Jon. It would be like a second marriage for both of them.

CHAPTER THREE

JACKIE QUINN had a sensation like waking from a long deep sleep, refreshed but still having to fight to bring back hazy recollections which did their best to elude her like marshland jack-o'-lanterns.

She was indoors; Pauline's mother's house. She recognised the lounge even though all the furniture was gone and the paper was peeling off the walls, exposing spreading patches of damp which even the hot dry weather had not been

successful in eradicating.

Outside it was getting dark, the sky turning saffron, a single twinkling star seeming to mock her through the dirt-streaked window-pane. She crossed to the window, stood looking out across the overgrown garden towards the roadside hedge, a thick untended length of hawthorn and lilac. The streetlamps came on, one flickering, dimming, burning low due to some electrical fault probably. She shuddered. It was eerie, artificial lighting still operating in a world where nobody was ^capable of any kind of maintenance. Unless, of course, like herself lucidity came back in flashes. But it would not be enough. Sooner or later the lighting would pack up and all amenities would come to a standstill. No medical service. Disease would follow. One way or another, if you didn't die now you would later. It was the beginning of the end.

Suddenly she stiffened, narrowed her eyes and stared out into the orange-tinted dusk. Something had attracted her attention. She saw a shape, then another, movements that rustled the scorched vegetation in the garden; branches swaying, twigs snapping.

Oh God! Unmistakable silhouettes in the half-light, grotesque naked shapes that had to be human because they

could not have been anything else, stooping, shambling forms, men and women, crouched amongst the bushes, conversing by means of gesticulations and grunts,

Jackie stifled a scream, backed away from the window, an urge to flee but there was nowhere to go because she was trapped in this place, a prisoner between the four walls of a terraced house, outside a bunch of naked savages that belonged to a primitive age.

She dropped on to her hands and knees, crawled across the room. They must not see her, must not be aware that she was hiding in here; the frail doors and windows would not keep them out. Her head began to ache again but it was too dark inside here to know whether her vision was starting to tunnel again.

Out into the hall, listening. Chattering. The noise reminded her of those jungle movies her father used to take her to on wet Saturday afternoons when she was a child. Incessant grunts and squeaks. And she knew only too well that the sounds were real, that no way were they the figments of her tortured brain.

She found herself in a rear room, vaguely recognised it as once having been the dining-room. A few years ago Pauline's mother had persuaded Jackie to stay to supper and they had eaten in here. The ceiling bulged, there was a gaping hole where water from the bathroom directly above had deluged through, probably a burst pipe during one of the recent severe winters. A rusted electric fire hung precariously to the wall in one corner; a broken concrete floor, a two-foot deep hole in the centre, further evidence of where the surveyors had dug down in an attempt to locate the fault in the foundations. And a telephone perched on me window-sill!

Jackie stared at the dust-coated instrument, experienced a sudden surge of hope. She closed her eyes, opened them again, and it was still there; afraid in case it was a mirage, her brain taunting her with false hopes. But it was real, dusty but real.

She raised herself up to the level of the sill, peeped over it. Those awful sub-human creatures were in the rear garden, too, a group of them squatting in a circle amidst the tall seedy grass of the larger lawn, a cross-legged gathering as though they represented some kind of council seated in judgement,

grunting and nodding to one another, their rough bodies stark naked.

They're awful, inhuman.

You're one of them, too!

But I can reason, think.

But for how long? Your periods of civilised behaviour are becoming shorter and shorter!

Her stomach churned. Suddenly that telephone on the ledge by her hand was shrinking, growing smaller and smaller, framing itself in a reducing circle, around which was impenetrable blackness spotted with red! Now, before it's too late!

She grabbed the receiver, almost dropped it. Rehearsing her words in case they suddenly evaporated from a brain that was starting to go blank. I'm in number one, First Terrace, Jon. They're outside, camped in the garden. Primitive savages and they'll break in and kill me if you don't come quick. Please believe me, Jon, it's true, I swear it is. Come quickly. Bring the shotgun. Oh Jon, please save me from these hideous creatures!

Starting to dial ~ 0 ... 5 ... 8 ... 8 ...

Something was wrong, her failing sense of reasoning screamed it at her, a realisation that modern technology had ceased to function. No dialling tone, just a total silence. When the house had been emptied the telephone had been disconnected!

Sheer primordial rage engulfed her. She gripped the plastic-coated object with both hands, snapped it in half so easily that it might have been rotten. One half fell, bounced on the bare floor, the other swung on its flex, mocking her. She caught it, pulled, tore it from its connection, then grabbed the squat remainder, not knowing what it was, not understanding, only that it was an alien that had to be destroyed. Smashing it against the wall, fragmenting it, kicking it, crushing it beneath her feet. Killing it!

And then she was sitting there in the darkening room, smiling to herself. Whatever it was that had angered her was no more and she was satisfied. Outside those voices were louder, soft footsteps padding round the house. A scratching sound. She looked up, saw the face pressed against the glass, squat hairy features, eyes that rolled and only became still when they saw her. Fingers, long broken nails, scraping on the glass, clawing it, trying to find a way in. More faces, coarse beneath the masses of hair, jostling each other eagerly, angrily, for a view of the creature which lay within.

Jackie was not frightened, only puzzled. She did not know why she was here, why she should be in one place and those people should be in another, cut off from her. She stood up, smiled at them, grunted a kind of welcome. Let me out, please.

A crash of breaking glass, shards falling into the room, splintering. A bloody clenched fist powered a second blow and half the window shattered. Those outside were clamouring excitedly, beginning to force their way in, shoving one another on the sill. Blood was spurting, a crimson fountain, but they did not appear to notice it, jetting on to walls and ceiling, sluggish rivulets trickling down.

Four of them, fearsome muscular naked males of a species that surely dated

back to the mists of time, rough hair matting their tough coarse skin, shaggy beards that virtually hid their expressions; except for their eyes, pinpoints of fire that burned with a lust that was necessary to keep their race alive, circling the woman who stood before them, uncertain. Perhaps slightly afraid. Then backing off, except for one.

Jackie's gaze met the latter's and a half-smile eased out of her stoic expression. Instinct, somehow knowing what was expected of her, accepting it, even relishing the prospect of what lay ahead.

The man was big, well over six feet tall in spite of his hunched shoulders, his muscular legs slightly bowed as though he had only recently learned to walk upright. He stepped close, tapped her on the shoulder with an extended forefinger then pointed to himself. An order. The other three retreated to a corner of the room, the smallest of them still spouting blood from a gashed wrist and trying to stem the flow unsuccessfully with his other hand. His hairy torso was saturated with the bright scarlet fluid; he did not appear to understand; amazement but not fear. None of the others seemed to realise that soon he would die, or perhaps it was not important. They had found a female who would in time bear young; their numbers would not be diminished.

Jackie Quinn followed the big man's fingers with her eyes, saw the outstretched hand coming towards her, a tentative exploration, not so much a fee! at her well-formed breasts but rather a stroking of her nylon blouse, callouses snagging the material. Pulling at it, grunting.

She did not understand any more than the other did. Her body should have been free, unencumbered; instead it was unnaturally encased, uncomfortable, preventing her from stretching her limbs, displaying herself for the admiration of these males who had come to her. Something was wrong, she should not be imprisoned, shackled in this shameful way. Her skin was itching, screaming out for its freedom.

Now it was her fingers, no longer slim and sensuous, which secured a grip on her upper garment. Buttons were beyond her comprehension, she just knew that she had to rid herself of these garments in the quickest possible way. She pulled, the blouse tore diagonally. Another tug and it was shredded right across; tearing frantically, desperate to free herself.

A gasp of surprise from the tall dark male, stabbing with his fingers again at her tight bra-cups, rubbing in search of the nipples which were hidden from view. Somehow his clumsy fumbblings found the strap and the strained elastic twanged, brought a howl of fear from his thick bearded lips as it lashed him. Then he saw the exposed pink firm nipples and his teeth showed in a wide smile. She was female after all.

The tight-fitting jeans posed a problem for both of them, smooth cotton with nowhere to grip. He spun her round, ran his hands down her buttocks, let out a loud sigh. A nod of his head and two of the others stepped forward, the third one already crumpled to the floor still trying to plug his gashed artery.

Help me, for this is indeed a strange woman!

It was sheer combined strength which finally conquered the stubborn jeans, the trouser legs being ripped upwards from the bottom so that the fastener flew open. Further amazement as a pair of scarlet pants were revealed but there was no time for curiosity now. They were torn asunder, flung to one side. A warning growl and the two helpers hastily retreated to join their dying companion. Their leader had picked his woman and it would be a foolish man who tried to contest the prize.

Beneath her coating of fluffy hair Jackie Quinn's coarse skin prickled and she shuddered in anticipation, knew automatically the role which she was expected to play. It was her duty, pleasure came second. A half-glance down at the other's lower regions showed her the solid length of pink flesh protruding from a thick forest of hair. He was ready, she must not delay or else he would become angry, might fly into a rage and kill her. None could deny him his right.

She nodded, turned, and dropped lithely on to all-fours, thighs well apart, buttocks raised. Tensed, waiting.

He fell on her from behind with the primitive eagerness of an animal which has been kept waiting too long, gripping her thighs painfully for support, stabbing at her to find her entrance, hurting her but she did not cry out. She pushed backwards to aid his penetration, braced herself in readiness for his slamming thrusts.

So hard and fast, over almost as soon as it had begun, dragging her upright with him, gripping her arm tightly as he turned to face the watchers. The fleeting glimmer of hope in their tiny eyes died instantly. This time the pleasure was not to be a shared one. Their leader sought more than the delights of mating; he required this strange woman to bear his child, to prepare his food and to tend his needs.

His word was law and none would question it until the day came when his leadership was disputed. And that time was not nigh yet.

Blood dripped steadily into that square hole in the concrete floor, following the slight slope, with a noise like a leaking tap, a crimson lake that would partially empty and then congeal. The man on the floor was dead but his passing would not be mourned. Where there was life there was always death, it was the law of Nature and was accepted without question.

Jackie looked up into the face of her lover, recognised his sheer strength and power and her flesh goosepimpled with pride.

'Jac,' she tapped her breasts and smiled.

His eyes appeared to glaze over for a second, a moment of half-hesitation as though he was trying to remember something but his brain withheld it; a flicker that might just have been fear and then it was gone.

'Kuz.' His reply was forced as though his vocal chords were unused to speech.

There was no more to be said. Between the three of them they lifted her safely through the broken window, climbed after her with more caution than they had shown on entering. Glass was not strong but it was capable of cutting. And killing. They had learned and they would not forget.

Shapes emerged from the wilderness that had once been a suburban garden but in the darkness it was difficult to distinguish between male and female. A silent watching crowd which looked to the one called Kuz for leadership. Where he went, they would follow unquestioningly.

With Jackie at his side he strode off in a southerly direction, striking across the fields, skirting those lines of amber lights, glancing fearfully at them and quickening his pace, obeying an instinctive calling to be away from this place which he did not understand. Ahead lay the hills, a landscape unchanged and older than his own species.

The calling was very strong.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT NEEDED an awful lot of courage to step outside the cottage into a world you had once come to accept and now feared what you might find there. Jon considered some type of protective clothing; there had been a play on TV some time ago about the survivors of a nuclear holocaust. They had donned plastic coveralls to go outside, left them at the doorway when they returned. Fine, but he didn't have any such garments, an oversight which had caught him out. But this wasn't radioactive fall-out, it was micro-organisms of a decidedly nasty species. His working overalls hung in the lobby, Jackie's alongside them.

'We'd better put these on,' he said, 'and leave 'em here when we come back.'
'If we get back!

Sylvia wrinkled her nose in disapproval; a mistress clad in the wife's apparel. Humiliating.

'I'd . . . rather not,' she replied huskily.

'Look.' His tone was sharp. 'You either put them on or else you stay here and wait for me. I ought not to be taking you along anyway.'

Reluctantly Sylvia Atkinson reached down the thin green plastic overalls. There was a rip in the side, the rest plastered with dried mud like a suit of army camouflage clothing.

'They're too big,' she muttered sulkily. 'I can't wear these.'

'You'll have to,' he snapped. 'Roll the sleeves and legs up. You're not going on a fashion parade, after all.'

Reluctantly, petulantly, she obeyed. 'Is that to your satisfaction, sir?'

'That's OK,' he nodded, glimpsed the twelve-bore propped in the corner, wondered if he should take it along. No, it would not be necessary; you couldn't shoot micro-organisms.

He opened the door, went outside, sensed her following him but did not glance back. Suddenly Sylvia was a nuisance, a liability. Jackie would have co-operated, come up with some constructive ideas. As it was, he was lumbered with a passenger, an additional responsibility. Even being alone would have been preferable. Or would it? You wouldn't know about that until it happened, and by then it could be too late.

The yard with its row of outbuildings faced him. The goat-house, its door

open, the animals probably grazing the field at the rear. The woodshed and implement shed, the hay barn. To the right was the vegetable patch, the weeds which a week ago had been brown and going to seed, now ready for hoeing, sprouting fresh greenery; that storm the other night had been heavy, an array of puddles still on the rutted track. Maybe an inch of rain. The surrounding countryside had an artificial camouflaged look about it too. Overhead the sky was gun blue, just an odd wisp or two of fluffy white cloud. The long dry spell hadn't cracked, just a freak interlude. Everywhere smelled fresh and if you had not known what had happened you would never have guessed.

'Where the devil are the hens?' Jon spoke aloud, a puzzled look on his face. Usually the poultry spent most of their time scratching in the yard and trying to devise ways of getting through the chicken-netting into the garden. But now there wasn't a single bird in sight. It was strange. Eerie. He experienced a chill in his stomach, licked his lips nervously. The hens were always around; now suddenly they were conspicuous by their absence.

He stepped forward, squelched in the mud. He'd better check on the goats, he'd been worrying about them ever since he and Sylvia had been confined below ground. The kids would be taking the milk so there was no worry about mastitis setting in, but he did not like leaving them untended. They surely would not be far away.

He saw them, the three nannies with five kids along the hedgeside nibbling at hawthorn shoots, boughs devoid of bark where they had stripped them. Relief because the animals were OK.

A horned head went up. Rosie, the oldest goat, had seen him; the ridge of hairs along her back stiffened, the hackles rising. A bleat, deep and nearly unrecognisable. Two more white Saanen heads jerked round, eyes reflecting a fear of the unknown. Kids leaped out of the undergrowth, skipped towards their mothers. Suddenly danger threatened.

'Rosie,' Jon called. 'Rosie, it's only me.'

But Rosie did not recognise her master, that much was clear. She backed away, turned, the other two following her, the youngsters staying close to their respective mothers.

Cloven hooves scampered, thudded on soft grass as the animals broke into a run heading diagonally across the small rough field away from the two humans. Fleeing in fear.

'Well, damn me!' Jon Quinn cursed. They've never done that before, ever. Usually the moment they see me they come running, hoping it's milking time and they can get a bucket of concentrates. It's as though they're . . . frightened of me, like they've never seen me in their lives before!'

'There's another one over there.' Sylvia pointed towards a spreading oak tree some fifty yards away. Another goat stood beneath it where it had been taking advantage of the shade, a much bigger animal with long curved horns and a straggling beard, head erect, watching them; a rough coat, the hair straggling down almost to its forelocks.

That's Gilbert,' Jon breathed. 'At least, I think it is. He looks kind of... different. His coat shouldn't be that long and his horns ought to be shorter too. Come to think of it, the nannies' coats looked much rougher than usual.'

'Well, he's coming this way,' Sylvia muttered. 'He certainly isn't afraid.'

Jon tensed, stepped back a pace. Something about the male of the species alarmed him. All billy goats had to be treated with a certain amount of respect, in much the same way that you never trusted a bull, no matter how docile it was reputed to be. Usually Gilbert was content to browse the hedges and graze the grass, lived in an old rusted corrugated tin shelter down in the dingle, but now he was certainly interested in the two humans. Deliberate steps, stopping, sizing them up.

Jon's pulses quickened. Gilbert had certainly changed. He looked bigger, too. Gone was his usual stare of mild interest at humans infiltrating his domain. His eyes slitted, thick neck thrust forward arrogantly.

'Move backwards,' Jon spoke softly out of the corner of his mouth, did not wish to alarm his companion unnecessarily. 'He might just be protecting his harem. Sometimes billies are a bit temperamental.' Don't take your eyes off him.

Going backwards a step at a time, Jon mentally calculating the distance to the gate. Ten yards at the most, no more. Sylvia's hand clutched his arm and he could sense her fear. For Christ's sake don't panic. I can smell my own sweat, and so can Gilbert. He knows I'm shit-scared.

The big goat advanced, tossed its head, its eyes never once leaving the two people who retreated before him, blazing sheer malevolence at them; an enemy trespassing in his domain, a threat to his supremacy, the male of the species seeking to prove his prowess in battle.

Jon anticipated the rush, saw those tremendous leg muscles tensing, a springboard to thrust the beast on its final rush. He had lost count of the number of yards to safety but the time for calculations was over. He wheeled, grabbed Sylvia in the same movement, half-leaped, half-ran. The aluminium steel gate was open no more than two or three feet; Sylvia screamed and he knew just what he had to do. Terror lent him strength, enough to hurl her forward, sent her sprawling in the thick mud on the other side; hearing a snort from the enraged goat who saw his intended prey suddenly escaping, a drumming of hooves as the death-charge began.

It was the mud which saved them, the soft mire deep enough to slow the billy's speed, gave Jon those few extra precious seconds in which to jump through the narrow gap, drag the heavy gate shut after him.

A metallic clang as Gilbert's horns struck the bars, buckled the middle one, became momentarily entangled. A roar of pain and fury, extricating himself, banging the gate again. The bars were buckled but they would not snap, made to contain the most devilish of fierce bulls. Clanging, echoing in the still air, the frustrated fury of a killer beast.

Then Gilbert sensed the futility of it all, backed off a pace, stood watching the pair who had tricked him; they should have been dead by now, gored by those sharp horns, mutilated, disembowelled. Instead, they lived.

Sylvia was trembling, leaning her full weight on Jon, crying softly. 'Oh, my God, he meant to kill us.'

'Something's happened to him.' Jon watched the billy closely, noted the roughness of the hair again, the size, the way those eyes blazed their crazy hatred. A man-killer, a creature maddened beyond reason, its former domestication replaced by instincts age-old in its species; no longer the smallholder's animal, it was a goat gone feral. Immobile, knowing that it could not pursue them but at least it had driven them from its territory. They

would not return. It had won.

'Well leave him to cool his heels for a while.' Jon Quinn was trembling. Til maybe get a rope on him when I've got time. In the meantime let's check the other field. I bought some calves in a fortnight ago, three-month-old Charolais heifers and I'm a bit worried about them. At a hundred and fifty quid each you can't afford to lose 'em.' Except that money doesn't exist any longer. If civilisation ever gets going again it'll be back to the old barter system. //.

Along the thick hawthorn hedge, following a muddy well-trodden track, aware that Gilbert was keeping pace with them on the other side. Occasionally they caught a flash of white where the branches were sparse, but overall the hedge was stockproof and no way would the billy be able to get at them. At least Jon hoped so, preferred not to think about it too much. He remembered the shotgun in the porch, almost suggested that they went back for it but it would only serve to alarm Sylvia still further. They didn't need a gun now, that need was past and they were still alive.

'What's that?' She clutched at his arm suddenly, pulled them both to a halt.

'What's what?' He felt his skin start to prickle.

Then he heard it, some kind of bird noise coming from the overhead branches of a clump of Scots firs which some former owner of this place had planted as a windbreak, dark green spiky foliage, the trees planted close and never thinned, forming an impenetrable barrier above the line where they had once been brashed.

Listening, trying to identify the sounds, unable to place them right away. Not the soft cooing of a wood-pigeon digesting its early-morning feed, not harsh enough for the cawing or chattering of a corvine. An alarm call certainly. Beware, Man the enemy approaches. Stay hidden.

Jon stepped forward, Sylvia still clinging to his arm. She wanted to go back, maybe wished that she had taken his advice and stayed behind in the first place. Maybe next time she would listen; she had learned a valuable lesson even if it had almost cost her her life.

Something above him moved, a backward shuffle along a thick bough which took the bird closer to the trunk of the tree, framed it in a shaft of bright sunlight which somehow managed to penetrate the dense foliage, the principal actor in a who dunnit play spotlighted for the surprise of a hushed audience, the ultimate climax.

Jon Quinn saw a thick bunch of light-brown feathers, a huddled form which was both familiar and unfamiliar, his brain slow to reach a conclusion because something just wasn't quite right. Not an owl seeking refuge from daylight; it could have been a roosting pheasant except that pheasants don't perch in trees except during the nocturnal hours. Its size fooled him for a moment, and then he knew, saw three or four more birds close by on the next branch. Warren hens!

'It's the missing hens!'

And again something wasn't quite as it should be. Huge birds which had gained at least a couple of pounds in weight since he had last collected the eggs in the hen-house a few days ago. Birds which normally flew no more than two or three feet up on to their perches now sat five or six yards up in the trees. Alert, wary, no longer clucking a welcome and coming to him in expectation of

a handful of corn. Birds which were wild, feral like that damned goat on the other side of the hedge. You found yourself instinctively cowering, throwing up your hands to form a shield in case they suddenly flew at you and tried to peck your eyes out.

'They're . . . not like hens,' Sylvia Atkinson muttered and clung on to Jon's arm. 'They look . . . sort of wild'

It was true. The birds on the branches above regarded them with hostile red-eyed glares. Their plumage was no longer the sleek light-brown feathers belonging to the Warren variety, instead thick and ruffled, matted with dried mud, evidence of scaly-leg on their legs. Bewilderment, edging back into the foliage, clucking softly in alarm.

'They're scared to hell,' Jon said. 'So scared they don't even recognise me. Like those goats.'

But there was more to it than that. The poultry had undergone some kind of drastic physical change, lost their accustomed domestication during the short time since he had last seen them, were virtually game birds of the wilds.

'Well, they're not going to come down while we're here,' he sighed, 'and we can't waste any more time standing here looking at them.' They're repulsive, frightening; they won't ever come back to the buildings and I don't want them to. 'Let's go and take a look at the calves in the other field.'

He didn't want to go and look- Right now he would have seized upon any excuse to retrace their steps back to the house, return to the safety of that claustrophobic cellar. It would have been only too easy. But he would not be able to forgive himself if he did that, not just because he had yielded to sheer cowardice but because some kind of morbid curiosity drove him on. Everything out here had changed, even the fresh growth of grass and foliage had a different look about it, a coarser tough texture, throwing off Man's concerted efforts at cultivation, the use of sophisticated husbandry. A reversion to primitive wildness. He shivered, held Sylvia's hand tightly and wished again that he had brought the shotgun along. Next time he would.

Walking slowly now, eyes scanning the ground ahead of him. The belt of firs was petering out, the hawthorn hedge on their right tall and straggling. It had always been rough; he had been meaning to lay it ever since they had come to live here but it was one of those jobs which he had never got round to. Gaping holes had been plugged with cut-off tin sheets or pieces of left-over wire-netting, improvisation sufficing, but there came a time when you realised that you were fighting a losing battle. This place had got in a shit-awful state. Now it seemed that it had won.

Another gate, a loop of binder twine holding it to the rough-hewn post. Jon Quinn rested a hand that trembled slightly on the top bar, had to make a conscious effort to look into the field beyond.

Charolais calves, four of them grazing just inside the tract of rough pasture. He knew they would not be normal, steeled himself to run a glance over them. Coffee-coloured beasts but their smooth coats no longer had that silky eye-pleasing look about them. Rough and mangy, plastered with mud where they had chosen to spend the night out rather than return to the shelter in the far corner. Nervous, ears flicking, sensing an enemy, as wary as highland deer even before they saw the two humans by the gate.

Heads tossed, hind legs kicked in the air, and then they were stampeding, a headlong flight in the opposite direction, bellowing their terror as they ran.

'I thought as much,' Jon muttered, clutching the gate with both hands. 'It was too much to hope for ... hey . . .' his eyes narrowed and he felt his pulses beginning to pound again.

'What is it, Jon? For God's sake what's wrong now?'

'Four of them,' he whispered, 'but there should be five.'

Calves invariably stay together. We'd better go and look for the fifth.'

'No!' She was pulling at him now, using every ounce of her puny strength to drag him back. 'It isn't safe to go in there. I don't want to. They might attack us, like that goat did'.

'He was a billy, the male of the species.' Jon did his best to smile reassuringly, knew that he made a hash of it because he felt his lower lip trembling. 'The nannies didn't bother us so there's no reason why these heifers should. We don't have any bull calves and these are only youngsters anyway, no more than three months old. You can see how scared they are. I'm going, but you can stop here, if you want.'

'I'm coming with you.' She began to climb after him, her torn overalls snagging on the rusted bars of the gate. No way was she going to be left here alone. That mad billy goat was only in the adjoining field and suppose he found a weak part in the straggling hedge. And those hens in the trees behind, they were wild and fierce like birds of prey. Sylvia Atkinson was determined not to let Jon Quinn out of her sight.

The fields sloped down to a dip that was hidden from their view. Uneven tussocks that had had the butt grazed out of them by generations of livestock over the years, sour ground that would never be lush again without reseeded, but that wasn't Jon's way; a natural pastureland was his ideal but right now there was nothing natural about anything.

The four calves had run down into the dip, splashed their way through a patch of boggy ground and were cantering up the other side. They stopped, turned back to look. Calmer, moving away at a walk. Uneasy but their panic had subsided now that they had put some distance between themselves and the intruders in their field.

Jon slowed his pace, he did not want to alarm the calves any more than was necessary. Beyond his own boundary hedge the land sloped sharply upwards, Bill Gwyther's fields, always dotted with peacefully grazing sheep except during the winter months when the flock was moved lower down close to the farm buildings. The sheep were still there but today they were huddled together in a corner, a bunch of plaintively bleating frightened animals that sought safety in numbers.

What the hell's got into them, Jon thought, they can't even see us from up there. Something's frightened them. Up above Gwyther's land the skyline terminated in a line of dark even firs, the beginning of some five hundred acres of Forestry Commission woods that followed along the ridge and down over the other sides. Artificial woodlands, symmetry that was not consistent with this wild landscape, thousands of rows of trees with only the odd self-set seedlings out of place. A dark forbidding world where it never got properly light, no undergrowth able to grow below the branches. You could get lost up there if you forgot your bearings. A world of silence virtually devoid of wildlife.

That fifth calf could not have got out of the field, Jon was sure of that. Only this last spring he had blocked up every patch of sparse growth in the hedges; unsightly but effective. It had to be down in the hollow, possibly stuck in the cloying mud or else just after water. Either way . . . Sylvia Atkinson screamed, a piercing shriek that the echoes immediately took up and magnified, starting those four nervous calves running again, tearing blindly back along the hedgeseide. And in that instant Jon saw why she had screamed.

Out of the dip came a grey-black fearsome brute, long pointed ears lying flat along its head, bushy tail streaming out behind it as it ran. Only once did it turn its head to look back and the watchers saw slobbering open jaws, and eyes that seemed to glint redly in the sunlight. A rough coat, bare in places as if it had been devastated by mange. Even as Sylvia's scream died away the waiting echoes took up the bestial howl, a bloodchilling sound that was filled with hate and anger but not fear. The creature fled because its instincts commanded it to but in no way was it afraid of Man, 'Gwyther's Alsatian.' At least Jon thought that that was what it was, the resemblance was vaguely familiar although he was sure that the dog had never been quite as big as that. He shivered, recalled the goats and the hens, how they had once looked; the calves, too.

'It's. . .like a. . . a wolf.' Sylvia was trembling violently and for one awful moment Jon thought that she was going to pass out. Every vestige of colour had drained from her face and only by holding on to him did she manage to remain upright. But it had to be Bill Gwyther's dog, it couldn't be anything else, there was no other feasible explanation. At least, none that he could come up with.

His narrowed eyes followed the Alsatian's flight, now an easy loping stride that carried it up the far bank to the right of the cattle, through a gap in the hedge and into the sheepfield beyond.

The sheep milled, their frightened bleating filling the still air, pressing back into that corner, oblivious of the cruel strands of barbed-wire. By some miracle the fence stil! held firm, posts and wire taking a tremendous strain.

The fleeing dog halted momentarily. Again its instinct was offering it a choice. Flight or those sheep, the latter easy prey, pull one down after another, run them until they were incapable of running any further. It bounded, heading right towards the flock, then for some inexplicable reason altered course up towards the forest on the horizon.

Jon and Sylvia stood watching until the animal was out of sight, lost to view in those acres of darkness up on the skyline. Like the sheep, they were trembling with relief.

'Never did take to Gwyther's bloody dog,' Jon spoke at last in a hushed whisper as though he was afraid lest the Alsatian might hear him and come back to take its revenge on them. Because it hated Man, no other reason. The thing always was wild, kept caged up all the time. Old Bill's got a persecution complex, lives all on his own, too mean even to have the electricity put in, and the bugger's worth a fortune. Doesn't believe in banks either, and there's rumours that he keeps his money buried in coffee jars in the garden. I never liked calling there in case the Alsatian happened to be loose. Perhaps that's why he kept it, to deter visitors. Well it's loose now and . . . oh Jesus!'

They had stepped forward a few paces and now they saw down into the hollow which had previously been out of their view. A thick muddy patch chewed up into a sloppy mire by the hooves and droppings of cattle. A putrid stench wafting up at them but it was only too obvious where the smell was coming

from.

Below them in the mud lay the missing Charolais calf. At least Jon presumed it was because he couldn't think of anything else which the mutilated remains might belong to. The head lolled back exposing a gashed throat which had stained the surrounding morass a deep crimson as if there was a sandstone element in the soil. The underside of the creature had been ripped open, hide and skin shredded into bloody strips so that the intestines had spilled out, a mess of offal that had been partially eaten. Wide staring dead eyes looked up at them, frozen in death at the peak of terror. You wanted to clap your hands over your ears to shut out its death cry, thought you could still hear the dying echoes of it across the distant range of hills. Sylvia turned her head away, almost threw up. Jon felt the bile rise in his own throat, a mixture of fear and anger engulfing him. Gwyther's fucking dog had done this, turned sheep and cattle killer now that it was on the loose. If only he'd brought the gun he could have rolled the bastard over as it fled up the bank. As it was, it was free to kill again. And again.

If the animal was Gwyther's Alsatian. It had to be. Not necessarily, he could not have sworn positively in a court of law that the dog was the culprit; it was much bigger and stronger, only a faint resemblance to a domestic guard dog. More like ... a wolf.

You're letting your imagination run wild. It was Bill Gwyther's dog, different, just like the goats, the calves, the hens, but Gwyther's dog all the same. A feeling of futility, helplessness. There was no law left to award him damages or to order the creature to be put down. No damages because money didn't count for anything any more. You'll have to shoot the bugger yourself if you want it destroyed.

'Let's get back.' He turned away, let Sylvia lean her full weight on him. 'We can't do anything here.'

That was right enough. A week ago he would have reported the matter to the police, rung the hunt kennels to fetch the dead beast or else buried it himself, cried at a funeral that had cost him a hundred and fifty quid. But there were no police, no kennels, there couldn't be. So Nature would take over, the buzzards and ravens would strip the flesh, leave the bones to whiten in the sun, gradually sink out of sight into the mud. And that would be that.

Sylvia managed to stop herself from saying 'I can't go on any longer, Jon' because you did not have any choice except to go on. There was no alternative. Maybe those who had got caught by this holocaust were the fortunate ones, they weren't left to witness what had happened. But at that moment there was no way of knowing just what had happened to the rest of civilisation; she and Jon had only explored a few acres of the whole world. And what they had seen was enough.

The cottage looked forbidding, its windows frowning at them as they approached it. Go away, you don't belong here. You're aliens, freaks.

Jon kicked open the door, saw that the twelve-bore was still leaning up in the corner of the porch. It looked good, a piece of driftwood floating in reach of a drowning man. But it would not solve the overall problem.

'Well, I don't think there's any point in going back down to the cellar,' he said, peeling off his overalls.

Thank God for that.' She leaned back up against the wall as a wave of vertigo hit her. Exhaustion, despair, you couldn't go through the last few days and

come out unscathed. 'I think I'd go stark raving mad if I just had to go down those steps once more.'

'Me, too,' he laughed. 'Except that most of our food's down there.'

That goat and that dog.' She closed her eyes. 'I'll have nightmares about them every night for the rest of my life. But they can't be the only animals that have gone wild, there must be thousands up and down the country, maybe over the whole world, just like they've never ever been domesticated.'

'That's something we've got to find out.' He went through into the kitchen, without thinking switched the electric kettle on. Almost before he realised what he had done they heard the element beginning to heat up. 'Hey, just listen to that, we've got electric!'

'Maybe not for long,' she replied. "Don't forget, it's not like a nuclear attack which knocks all power out. Things just grind to a halt. We'll either run out of power or else there'll be a fault and with nobody to repair it that'll be that.'

'I guess you're right.' He found some coffee and a tin of powdered milk. There was a stack of frozen goats* milk in the freezer but it would take time to unthaw a pint. 'Our first step is to try and find out what's happened elsewhere.'

'Maybe we should light a beacon on top of the hill or something. If the phone's still working we could ring a few numbers.'

'Not just yet.' He pursed his lips. 'I think it's best that we try and find out about fellow survivors before they find out about us. Don't forget, law and order will have gone to the winds. We're back to the jungle, survival of the fittest. There would be mobs on the rampage and we don't want to be taken unawares. The less they know about us, the better.'

'Surely we're safe enough right out here in the sticks.' She raised her eyebrows.

'Not necessarily. It could be that people have deserted the towns, headed for wild places like this. That's something we just don't know, so we'll have to be on our guard until we find out.'

'So when do we make our first reconnaissance trip?' She watched him carefully, her expression determined. Don't try leaving me behind, Jon Quinn, because no way am I stopping here on my own. Not after what we've seen this morning.

'I'm going to take a ride across to Gwyther's place this afternoon,' he said. 'I'll use the Land Rover.'

'We are, you mean.'

'No.' He shook his head. 'I want you to lock the door after me, sit tight and don't open up until I get back. I won't be long and I'll be OK in the Land Rover, neither wild dogs nor goats can get at me. I'll take the gun too. When we start making trips further afield then we'll go together.' Damn it, it sounded lame. If it had been Jackie here instead he would have taken her because she would have adapted, been some help; he could have relied on her. Grit, that was what it amounted to. One girl had it, the other didn't. In bed it didn't matter much but when your back was to the wall you realised an awful lot of things, things you'd been blind to before, like why things had not worked out between himself and Jackie. They'd work out now but it was too

late, she was gone for ever. A tinge of sadness almost had his eyes watering but with an effort he threw the feeling off. This was no time to start feeling sorry for himself. He had to fight all the way and now he could not let Sylvia down. In effect these last few days he had been widowed and remarried. Sylvia was his mate, his responsibility, whether he liked it or not. And he wasn't going to risk her on the first trip out.

'We'd better get something to eat,' he smiled, and reached a tin down from the shelf. 'Sausalatas, vegetable protein sausages in brine. They're delicious cold.'

'I guess right now I don't fancy meat or poultry.' She managed a smile. 'In for a penny, in for a pound. I'll give the Jon Quinn diet a try. Starvers can't be choosers.'

Jon wasn't listening. In his mind he saw Bill Gwyther, small and wizened, never seen without his faded brown 'cow-gown', torn cap pulled well down over his eyes to shade them from the sun whether it was shining or not. Hollowed cheeks, retracted toothless gums that had hardened enough to hold a pipe. Bright blue eyes that sized you up and often discovered what you were thinking.

Patched Wellington boots that let the wet in, the tread worn down so that the soles were smooth, all part of the uniform.

Bill didn't trust 'outsiders' and you were an outsider if you hadn't been born within a five-mile radius of the Hill. The Hill was his world, a kingdom which he ruled over in his own stubborn way. You called him a bloody old fool but as often as not he proved you wrong. He'd never married, never had time to go courting, and you got used to being called 'boy'. Bill Gwyther had aged when he was thirty and had remained static ever since. You cursed him for a lot of things but you had to admit grudgingly that the Hill wouldn't be the same without him.

Which was one reason why Jon Quinn was going down to Gwyther's place that afternoon.

CHAPTER FIVE

ERIC ATKINSON stood and looked at his naked body in the full-length hotel bedroom wardrobe mirror, puffed his chest out, pulled his stomach in, indulged in a few moments of self-admiration. One big con, and deep down he knew it. He was getting fat, a slow but sure middle-aged spread taking over. He told himself he'd lost a pound or two lately and knew damned well he was lying. At thirty-six you were only just coming up to your peak.

A once fine physique had run to fat, a combination of six hours a day behind the wheel of a car and five nights a week on average hotel board. The best hotels, the best food. Whisky, too, sometimes brandy according to how his

expenses account was running. Rep's disease - overweight.

No, not really, but he'd have to watch it. He towelled his damp hair into a fluffy blonde mop. He was starting to get a double chin; no, it was a trick of the light, or the mirror, one of them anyway. A little on the plump side, he had to admit. What was the term that girl up in Anglesey had used? Cuddly. He grimaced, flexed his biceps; they bulged but he didn't test their hardness, didn't dare.

He looked down and a sly smirk crossed his face. Well, there was nothing wrong with that, anyway; that compensated for everything.

He had no need to stop over in Shrewsbury tonight. He could have made it home easily. Except for Marlene. What a bloody awful name for such a lovely girl, but what was there in a name? He'd be getting poetic soon, Marlene did that to you, had you showering and checking yourself over like a Ferrari before an IROC.

He turned back to the bed, meticulously began to choose his clothes for the evening. Tonight was something special, the climax to the whole week. He had worked for it, earned it.

Sylvia crossed his mind, a slight twinge of guilt, but it was gone immediately. She wouldn't care even if she knew because that guy up at the organic farm would have been fucking the arse off her all week. It was a kind of mute arrangement which they didn't mention because that would have spoiled everything. Screw with who you like in the week and then we'll get together at the weekend. Funny, it didn't make him jealous, in fact it was one helluva turn-on. The time to worry was when no guy wanted to lay your wife. She really was getting past it then and so were you.

He found himself basking in a kind of erotic nostalgia as he dressed. Sylvia was a cracker and a real nympho but it was like eating the same kind of exotic food every day of the year. You didn't actually come to dislike it but it got boring, so you decided to try a change and then came back to the original refreshed.

That had happened to himself. And Sylvia. Thirteen years ago, two years after they had married. It had had a most unlikely beginning, like taking a seemingly harmless drug and then before you realised it you were hooked on it.

Alan had been the root cause; if it hadn't been for Alan, he and Sylvia might have spent years struggling to stay faithful to each other and then broken up. As it was they were still together and the relationship did have its rewards. Tonight was one of them.

Alan's wife had left him for another guy and poor old Alan had been pretty cut-up. That was why they had started inviting him over on Saturday evenings for dinner. Maybe it was the drink that triggered it all off, had them casting their inhibitions overboard and telling dirty stories. Sylvia was the worst, Eric winced, wondered where the hell she had heard them all, but after a bit he didn't care. None of them did.

Alan began bemoaning the fact that he hadn't had a woman for three months, almost cried. So frustrated that he was toying with the idea of having a week in London and spending his nights in Soho. That was when Sylvia had come up with her offer, straight out with it like she might have been asking Alan to go to the club with them next Saturday night. 'How would you like to screw me, Al?' She was deadly serious, a genuine offer. 'I know Eric won't mind, not just this once, will you, Eric?'

Suddenly everybody had sobered up into a stunned silence, all eyes on Eric. Well, Eric, you won't mind, will you?

No, I don't mind, not at all. You fuck her, Al, leave her lying up there on the bed ready for me when you've finished. Sylvia and Alan drained their glasses, went out of the room. Eric poured himself a stiff brandy with a shaking hand, found himself listening to them moving about in the bedroom directly above the dining-room, pictured the scene. Sylvia couldn't wait to get everything off, she was always like that, Al maybe nervous and losing his initial erection, having difficulty getting it up again.

It wasn't fair to eavesdrop on them. Eric heard the bed creak the way it always did when you got in, stood up and walked unsteadily across the room, switched on the stereo. A slow rhythm on the first track, speeding up on the second, just like those two upstairs.

God, this was the ultimate in eroticism, everything he had ever fantasised about coming true in one electrifying session. He wondered if Sylvia had ever done it with anybody else since they had been married. He told himself she had, she must have; he wanted it that way. Those nights when he was away . . .

He thought maybe the clock on the mantelshelf had stopped, stooped and put his ear up against it but couldn't be sure over the music. 12.10. Christ, they'd been up there an hour and a half, Al was really giving Sylvia a banging, making up for everything he had been forced to go without over the past months.

It was 12.35 when he heard Alan go, footsteps in the hall, the front door closing softly, a kind of guilty click. In a way it was a disappointment, his best mate slinking off, not wanting to face him. Sorry, Eric, I've screwed your wife and I feel pretty bad about it. Don't, Al, it's been a great evening. For me, too.

Sylvia hadn't had enough whatever had gone on, that much was plain. When Eric entered the bedroom she was lying on top of the quilt, legs lewdly spread, a small damp patch on the material between them; eyes closed, ecstasy not guilt.

He went straightway to her, no preliminaries, pushing right into her, feeling the liquid warmth of adulterous seed. God, what a night, he made it twice, almost a third time. If ever he needed a fantasy for the future then this was it.

Three or four times after that Al came round and it got to be a Saturday night routine. Too much of a routine probably, too clinical, and nothing could ever match that first night. Then Alan found himself a girlfriend, moved in to live with her and that was the end of that. But Sylvia had had a taste of the grass on the other side and she wasn't going to let it drift away like that.

He wondered to himself now as he sat on the edge of his hotel bed just who had set up that relationship with the Joneses. They had known George and Marie for two or three years but it had never been more than a casual dropping in on each other at infrequent intervals. Then one Friday when Eric returned home Sylvia seemed more vivacious than usual, told him that they had been invited over to have a few drinks with George and Marie the next night. Nothing to get excited about but Sylvia certainly was. He sensed then that something was in the air. No, it couldn't be, the Joneses were far too conventional, even went to church some Sundays. Unless Sylvia was casting her line for George; Eric wouldn't put it past her. But he was curious enough to want to find out.

It was damned funny the way that evening had trickled on into the early hours before anybody (Sylvia) made a positive move. Half-innuendoes became innuendoes fired by a cheap bottle of Scotch. The Joneses couldn't really afford drinking on this scale; George was on the dole and he wasn't the type to go moonlighting. Too honest, too bloody conventional. Except when Sylvia and Scotch got to him.

Sylvia engineered it all, nobody actually came right out with it and said, 'Shall we swap, then?' Somehow she got herself on to George's lap in the armchair and left Eric and Marie together on the settee. A lot of couples change over for a bit of snogging when everybody's had too much to drink, Eric decided, didn't dare try for a feel. It would all fizzle out before long, and then the party would break up; he didn't want to make a fool of himself.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw George and Sylvia slipping out of the room, heard them going upstairs. There couldn't be any further doubt, Marie was expecting him to play his part in this sexy foursome.

She was OK, a bit nervous at first, then he broke through the barrier and she exploded. In fact, she couldn't get enough, unbottled every inhibition which she had ever had during the next hour. But it wasn't her that was turning him on like this, had him achieve that elusive third orgasm. It was the knowledge that Sylvia was upstairs revelling in another session of red-hot infidelity.

It was funny how they never swapped with the Joneses again after that night, never even called round for a quick drink, didn't even get a card from them at Christmas. Something had gone wrong somewhere along the line. Maybe Marie had had a fit of jealousy in the cold sobering light of a November Sunday morning.

And Sylvia seemed to lose her enthusiasm for the way-out scene too. Just like that, a marital screw at weekends but she didn't even try to lure Eric into anything else. He even got to thinking that she'd had her wild fling and had decided to resign herself to the dull routine of a straightforward marriage even though they were apart five nights of most weeks.

Then rumours trickled back, a muddled jigsaw that needed a lot of piecing together. In remote rural areas, it was true, the last person to hear stories concerning one's wife is oneself.

It was that nut up at the organic farm who was shagging Sylvia. It figured. It was funny how Eric experienced a pang of jealousy the first time he found out for sure. If it had been Al or George it wouldn't have mattered. They were ordinary guys who just wanted a fuck, nothing more, a thrill to boost their own marriages the same way that Eric needed one now. It ended when you came, as simple as that. But this fellow was different. His wife was a flighty bit of stuff, if all the stories about her were true, going off on her own at nights to nightclubs and doubtless getting herself shafted. The ice was dangerously thin in that quarter.

Jon Quinn needed more than sex, he needed to fill a gap, companionship. And that could be dangerous. The guy was one of these food-freaks who thought everybody else should be also, so he was marketing organic produce and preaching that chemicals were poisoning half the population of the world.

Then Sylvia had started dishing up these funny meals at weekends; no longer proper salads with lettuce, tomato and cucumber, but all sorts of fruit mixed up with nuts. Just weaning her husband on to nuts. A nut-roast next. Jesus, she was really going nuts!

Gradually Eric Atkinson was aware of his marriage slipping away from him, an

erosion that revealed itself in a number of ways. Sylvia's personality was changing, becoming morose. Because her mind was on Jon Quinn. When she prepared a vegetarian meal it was for him, not Eric, regardless of who ate it or slyly tipped it into the waste-bin.

Eric had wondered what to do about it. Should he tackle her outright? No, she might lie to him and whatever else she had done she had never lied. If she did that then he would lose his respect for her and then it would all be over. That he didn't want, oh Christ Almighty no. A sudden realisation, in spite of it all he loved Sylvia. God yes, and he missed her like hell. Which was why he had other women whilst he was away from home. Substitutes; each and every one of them was a Sylvia.

So he had let her carry on with Jon Quinn, afraid to detonate the affair into something he couldn't handle. Each weekend he went home with the same nagging fear, his mouth dry, his guts in knots. I'm sorry, Eric, I'm leaving. Really, I'm sorry, please believe me, but I need a husband not just a weekend lover. Or maybe just a note left on the mantelshelf, the easy way out.

But it hadn't happened and he had come to the decision that just by letting the affair continue, it wouldn't. It might go on for years. Basically it boiled down to this bloody job. Reps were married to their firms. You gave them everything or else you were out on your ear. They bought your marriage, your life, months and years which you could never retrieve, all for a pittance of a salary offset by reasonable expenses.

So he let it go, just like that. Every weekend he came home to an organic diet that had a distinct Quinn flavour about it, got a thrill out of screwing Sylvia in the same way that he had that night when Al had first had her, and it would be this way until he retired at 65. Fuck the firm, they didn't even offer him a redundancy when they had drastic cut-backs three years ago. No golden handshake for him. Maybe it was as well, though, because if he fouled up Sylvia's little game she might take off and go and live with Quinn. Don't poke the sleeping lion, as the saying went.

Marlene was the nearest he'd found to Sylvia yet. Sophisticated, sexy, her husband was an 'area manager', an up-market rep. He sometimes stayed away weekends too; it was a vicious circle, they were all on the same roundabout. Sometimes you lose, sometimes you win. You paid your money and gambled your luck.

She wore a long evening gown tonight that showed off every curve, didn't leave you with much to guess, the kind that gave you a hard-on under the table and you hoped that the other diners thought she was your wife. She was class and she gave you class. Yet tonight she was strangely sombre, long periods when she concentrated on her food and didn't speak at all. There was definitely something on her mind but he knew her well enough to know that if she wanted to tell him she would do so in her own good time. If she didn't want to, she wouldn't. You knew where you stood with Marlene, no bullshit. That compensated for a lot.

She played with the stem of her wine-glass, regarded him thoughtfully. Shall I tell him or not? Decision time. Finally she decided to tell him.

'Joey's left me.' She said it just like that. She might have said 'I'm going to mow the front lawn tomorrow.'

'Oh!' For once he felt incredibly stupid. His vision swam, something clutched at his heart and stopped it for a second, restarted it almost immediately. 'I'm sorry.' He didn't know whether he was or not; if he was, he was sorry for

himself.

'He's had a woman down in Lampeter for a long time.' She talked easier now that she had made her decision. 'I knew about it, of course, but there was nothing I could do about it even if I'd wanted to. I just let things take their course, it's often the best way because they generally work out. I'm not sorry because our marriage as such was finished three years ago. Divorces are easy, don't take long these days, but I guess right now I'm a free woman, Eric.1 The bail's in your court.

Suddenly his Kentucky fried chicken tasted sour, the dry white wine so bitter that he grimaced. Sylvia, darling, I love you. This is only a game like yours. Our marriage isn't over, it's just gone into a recession like everything else in this damned crazy world. Given time it'll come back. It has to.

'Oh, I see.' He did, only too well. 'What . . . what are your plans then?' Don't answer that because I don't want to hear, I don't want to jettison my fantasies. I don't want reality.

'Do you really need to ask?' The twin candlelight had her dark eyes glistening and because he couldn't meet her gaze he found himself looking down at her cleavage. Small perfectly shaped breasts that had never been suckled by a babe; just himself. And others. But he topped the poll at the moment.

'No, I suppose I don't.' He tried to laugh but it came out wrong. False.

'That's fine then.' She didn't appear to notice. 'I've been married to a right bastard for more years than I care to remember and you've been hitched to a bitch who goes and screws with any guy who gives her the eye.'

He felt himself cringe, wanted to leap to his feet and yell, 'No, she's not like that at all. It's me. I've screwed another bird already this week. That's all I'm after. Sex. I don't want a permanent relationship with any woman except my wife.1 But he didn't because he was too scared.

'You've told me often enough that you're in love with me,' she went on. 'Well, I'm in love with you too, Eric, and at last it looks like we'll be able to share each other for ever instead of continuing with this nerve-racking affair, wondering ail the time if somebody who knows us will see us.'

'Yes, it'll be nice,' he said politely. 'For both of us. I'll talk to Sylvia about it this weekend.'

'Will you, really?' Euphoric relief in her tone, her slim fingers coming across the table in search of his. 'I knew I hadn't made a mistake about you, Eric. I confess that at one time I thought that maybe I was just your once-a-week woman, a bit on the side and then shelved for another week. I know now that I was wrong. Let's treat tonight as a celebration because everything's working out. When we go upstairs tonight I really will feel that I'm Mrs Atkinson at long last.'

Mrs Marlene Atkinson! There was a glisten of perspiration on Eric's forehead as they went up in the elevator after dinner. Mr and Mrs Atkinson! Jesus Christ, he wouldn't be able to stall this one for long. I've spoken to Sylvia, Marlene, and she says that's fine but we've got to straighten a few things out first. It won't take long. Marlene wasn't the kind to hang about. Everything was going to blow up in his face, one way or the other, very soon.

Her naked body didn't look so alluring tonight and he knew he had got to put on another act, the clandestine lover who has finally got his woman for keeps.

She was eager for him, helping him off with his clothes, her sensuous fingers straying all the time, then pulling him down on the bed with her.

'Just think, Eric, it'll always be like this with us from now on. And maybe you can get another job so that you won't have to be away from home all the time.' Not that I don't trust you but I want you all to myself.

She was good, very, very good. Any other night it would have been sheer ecstasy but tonight he had to struggle to keep up with her. You are getting fat. So he let her do all the work but she did not appear to notice because she was doing everything she wanted to do. Astride him, gyrating like an eastern belly-dancer, teasing him, tiring both of them so that finally they sank down exhausted, not bothering to retrieve the sheets off the floor because the night was too warm, anyway.

Eric Atkinson was dimly aware that it was light, a kind of guilty feeling that it was time to be up and doing. Sitting up, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

He didn't know where he was, didn't even try to work it out, just accepted the fact that he was in some strange place with four symmetrical walls around him and a hole through which the daylight shafted in. Frightening, suddenly.

Then he saw the woman, She was lying on her stomach, head buried in the pillow. Sleeping. He grunted, forgot his claustrophobia, reached out a thick coarse hand and touched her buttocks. She stirred slightly. His head hurt, a throbbing pain behind the eyes which distorted his vision but he fought against it. An urgent need had to be satisfied, a priority in any situation.

The woman was not fully awake but he had no reason to wait. His hands slipped beneath her thighs, dragged her up into a kneeling position, her head still resting on the pillow. She seemed to understand, parted her legs without disturbing her position, half-kneeling now, gave a kind of low whine which was interpreted as willingness, not that it would have mattered to him anyway.

He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the long mirror, almost shied away from it; not because he saw his own naked body matted with coarse fair hair like some subtropical tree-dwelling species but because for a moment he thought that a rival was contesting for his mate. Then he seemed to understand, did he not see his own features when he stooped to drink from a clear pool? He did not investigate further because he had other things on his mind.

He pushed hard with his thighs, thrust fiercely to penetrate her, pulling her back on to him as he found her entrance. A minute, possibly two, and then he was arching his back, shuddering, coming out of her because it was all over and there was no point in remaining coupled.

He sprang from the bed, rushed to the window. He saw towering bare brickwork interspersed with windows that had the misfortune to look out on to the rear of these buildings. An untidiness thirty feet below, an array of dustbins and empty cardboard cartons, litter everywhere.

Eric stretched out a hand, jerked it back with a cry of surprise as he touched the glass, an invisible barrier which frightened him. His teeth were bared in a snarl of defiance, glancing back towards Marlene as though she had the answer. She cringed, whined, would have offered herself to him again for he was the male of the species and it was his right. But he was satisfied in that respect, his uppermost desire right now to find some means of escape from this terrible place which he did not understand, a prison which denied him the freedom of the open spaces.

Throaty noises: 'What is this place and why are we here, woman?'

*I do not know.1 Cowering. If he flew into a rage he might strike her.

He prowled the room, knocked over the flimsy bedside table and stooped to examine it, half-afraid of an obstacle which he did not understand, backing away. His bulk caught against the door handle, sprung it. With a howl he leaped away, stared in disbelief as the door swung slowly open. Through the gap he spied dazzling white walls, the long carpeted corridor. Hesitating, again looking to his mate for support. There is a way out.' 'Where you go, I go.'

He nodded, aware how fast his heart beat, realising for the first time that his skin smarted. He held out his hairy arms, examined them; the thick hair was patchy, uneven, and he saw toe redness of his flesh, how it burned, itched in places. The discomfort angered him, but the need to escape from here dominated his limited instinctive powers of thought.

Stealthily, a stalking beast of prey, he crept out of the room, Marlene close behind him. A fluorescent tube flickered badly, hurt his eyes, decided him upon which way to go,

And then he saw the other woman! She was old, her blotched flesh wrinkled, her hair grey and sparse. Her breasts sagged, empty milk bags that were of no further use, legs skinny and weak. The head was almost bald, the mouth shrunken and toothless, gnarled hands clutching a stick, an extra artificial limb upon which she had been leaning to support her frail body.

She saw them and her eyes widened, toothless mouth opening to emit a scream of terror, the stick raised to protect herself.

Eric went into a crouch, saw a weapon which threatened them, this hag barring their escape route, one of the old ones seeking to strike them down. Fat had tautened into muscles, his reflexes were as sharp as any animal of the wild for his life depended upon them.

Powerful short legs springboarded him into action, had him airborne, mouthing unintelligible hatred for the old woman, spittle frothing down his shaggy beard. A killing cry, an arm brushing aside the wielded stick, clattering it against the wall so that it thudded to the floor. A clenched fist raised, coming down.

Just one blow, that was all that was necessary. He scarcely felt the impact, heard only the sharp snap as the brittle skull cracked, the head jerked right back. Something broke. His adversary was dead even as she fell, never felt the weight of his feet as they landed on her abdomen, ballooned her intestines into a tight ball so that the stomach wall split and spewed them out, blood and matter spraying the ceiling. He slipped in the slimy mess, fell headlong in the human offal. One bound and he was upright again, a stinking hairy thing fleeing for the stairs with its mate close behind. Steps going down, not knowing where they led but it was dangerous to remain here. A landing; down another flight, then stopping as he saw people below him in the halt, slippery bloody fingers clutching the stair-rail until the wooden struts threatened to snap. His wide nostrils flared, smelled death and fear in the stuffy indoor atmosphere.

Marlene moved close to him, whined her own terror softly. A bunch of men and women prowled the ground floor area restlessly, skin-festered fingers examining mundane objects with the gleeful enthusiasm of young children. A

brass handbell clanged as its clapper swung, was dropped to the black and white marble floor. Rolling in a half-circle until its momentum ran out, the watchers scattering, chattering in alarm, circling it warily as though it might suddenly come to life again and spring up at them. When it did not it was ignored, forgotten.

The swing-doors leading out into the street spun crazily, banged one who sought to enter, had him jumping back with a howl of anguish. Outside the street was crowded, everyone going his or her own way with urgent purposeless gambolling movements, arms hung low, some even moving about on all fours. Backwards and forwards, a few dashing for no other reason than that they got in one another's way; not a mob because they were mindless individuals who had not yet succumbed to the gregarious instinct. Confused, afraid, screaming whenever blue lights flashed and sirens blared. But neither ambulances nor police cars were going anywhere, the early-morning traffic already shunted into an immovable tangle. All transport ground to a standstill.

Screaming, there was always somebody screaming but nobody took any notice. Here and there a couple mated openly but their copulation was ignored because it was acceptable to ensure the continuation of their kind. Corpses lay on the pavements and in the road.

Eric Atkinson descended the remaining stairs cautiously, Marlene following close behind; he knew she was there because he could smell her fear. Nobody was interested in them, they did not even seem aware that strangers were in their midst. Because everybody was a stranger.

He tried to work out how to pass through the swing-doors, plate glass rotating every time anybody pushed at them; then somebody fell, perhaps was pushed, sprawled headlong and jammed the doors, pinned securely, struggling and yelling. Eric Atkinson seized his chance, squeezed through the narrow gap, pulling Marlene after him, treading heavily over the unfortunate youth who shrieked in agony; his abdomen bulged but it was stronger than that of the aged woman on the second floor and did not split.

Outside, breathing in the fresh air, hustling and being hustled. Some of the passers-by were still clothed, struggling to rid themselves of clinging garments, tearing at material, pulling blindly. Frustrated, wondering how their bodies came to be obstructed by these inexplicable things which overheated burning skin and restricted their movements.

Futile flight in a strange land; roads that were circular and brought them back to the place from which they had started but they were not aware of this because the landmarks were all the same, buildings that looked identical wherever they went.

The crowds were swelling as more and more poured out into the packed streets, clambering over vehicles, some examining them with interest, overcoming their fear of alien objects, chattering excitedly.

A large van was pulled on to the pavement close to a bank, a black chassis with a green trim, barred windows on the side doors and at the rear. One of the side doors was open so that you caught a glimpse of the interior. Two men, naked except for their helmets, of which they seemed totally unaware. Money everywhere; packets of notes, the polythene wrappings split so that the currency had showered out, a carpet of giant confetti, blue, green and brown spilling across the floor, down the steps, wafting along the road. A fortune in street litter that was being trodden and shredded by an army of feet, ignored because nobody realised and even if they did they weren't worth anything. A gust of warm summer wind stirred them, swirled them, swept them

further away.

Eric Atkinson pulled Marlene along with him, hurrying, almost dragging her; not knowing where he was going only that his instincts screamed at him to be away from this place of artificiality which stank of death and fear.

Run. Hide. Anywhere, but not here.

CHAPTER SIX

JON QUINN sweated as he pushed the starter-button on the Land Rover. On the fifth attempt the engine coughed into life, emitted a cloud of black smoke, threatened to die, but he jammed his foot on the accelerator and just caught it in time. During those few awful moments he thought that it had packed up on him in his hour of greatest need. He sighed his relief audibly, let the engine tick over, the rattling vibrations of the meccano-like bodywork sweet music in his ears. When he got back he would park it on the slope facing downwards, jump-start it next time if he had to.

He checked the petrol gauge. Half-full; five gallons averaging 18 mpg. Ninety miles before he ran dry. There was an old-fashioned garage in the next village that still had a hand-operated pump; probably the majority of electrically-powered ones were out of commission by now. Tomorrow he would have a run over and fill up, take as many empty five-gallon oil drums with him as he could find, stock up before everybody else got the same idea. If there was anybody else left.

He didn't relish the prospect of venturing into civilised parts, not even remote villages. He was scared of what he might find. But he would have to do it sooner or later. Oh God, if only Jackie was here. There had never really been anything wrong between them, just a steady drifting apart that neither of them had made the effort to check. And now it was too late.

The engine was ticking over steadily, sounded smoother than it had done for months. He let in the clutch, reversed slowly out into the lane. It was about a mile and a half to Gwyther's farm, the road following on round the hill, barely the width of the Land Rover. In summer you drove cautiously in case you met an oncoming vehicle, the straggling overgrown hedge restricting your vision. But there was no chance of meeting anybody today. Or ever again, if you were pessimistic. Realistic.

A half-grown rabbit scurried across his path, jumped to safety in the long grass. It looked perfectly normal. Maybe the rabbits were all right because for most of the time they lived below ground. Foxes and badgers would probably be OK, too.

The lane rose sharply. Down into second gear, only when there was ice about did he have to resort to bottom. Not hurrying, letting the vehicle take its time because he didn't really want to go to Gwyther's at all. The twelve-bore

was in the back, both barrels loaded- He didn't like carrying a loaded gun in a vehicle but this was an emergency. He wouldn't feel safe without it.

The Land Rover made the sharp incline, its revs urging him to change up a gear now that the lane was level again. High up, virtually on the top, slowing to look back down and seeing his own place. One day he must bring the camera up here and take a photograph of it. Every year aerial photographers flew over and then tried to sell you their work for extortionate sums. He'd do just that one day, a D-I-Y job, for kicks. Jackie would have liked that. You couldn't quite see Gwyther's yet because it was further on, beyond the Knoll, and when you did see it you could almost convince yourself that you had stepped back in time. Nothing had changed since Bill's father's day and probably wouldn't now. A slow process of decay, timbered outbuildings patched up, moss growing on them; mud and cattle dung so deep that in winter you needed four-wheel drive to get in and out of the yard.

The lane was starting a downward slope now, the final run-in to Gwyther's. Jon let his foot rest on the brake, slowed up more than he needed to. He didn't really have to call on the old man. Damn it, he didn't bother in normal times, avoided it whenever possible, only went there when it was necessary. It was necessary now, oh Christ, it was.

He rounded the bend, saw the farm; just as it had always been except that part of the big cowshed roof had finally caved in. More than likely the storm the other night had been responsible for that. Slowly he eased the Land Rover into the yard, eyes scanning the rectangular tract of hard baked mud with only the odd puddle or two showing below the outbuilding walls. Dereliction at its worst, stable doors tied up with binder string, a heap of scrap, outdated broken machinery that should have been cleared a quarter of a century ago littering one corner. But no sign of life.

Jon came to a halt in front of the house, switched the engine off and prayed that it would start again when he wanted it to. Sitting there, watching and waiting, aware that his pulses were pounding. He was sweating and it wasn't just because of the heat.

He didn't like coming here, always felt ill at ease. The old boy hated you, you could see it in those bright blue eyes as they bored into you. What right have you coming here from the town and buying a place? There are plenty of farmers' sons who were forced to move away to find work who ought to have your holding. They've a right to it, you haven't. It's heritage that counts, not deeds and fancy title papers. You won't do any good here with your daft ideas. Sheep and cattle are farming, nothing else. You're playing at it.

Jon took a deep breath, reached over in the back for the shotgun. What are you bringing a gun here for, boy? He almost drew his hand away. No, he'd take the gun because he might need it. That dog could be around, or the bull might be loose.

His gaze was drawn automatically towards the end stone building, the one where Gwyther's bull lived. The door hung wide, a T-hinge broken so that it dragged on the ground. He could see inside; it was empty, no sign of the bull!

Another twinge of unease. Well, the bull had to be grazed sometimes, left to run with the cows. Probably that was where it was now, in one of the lower meadow fields down by the river.

Slowly Jon Quinn slid out of the Land Rover, grasped the gun in his right hand, stood looking about him. The place always looked this way, it had never been any different. Old Bill spent 365 days a year working in the fields the

hard way because he didn't know anything else. Out at first light and back in at dusk. Oil-lamps instead of electric lights. But he did have a telephone! It had caused a stir amongst the other hill-farmers when word got around that a Telecom van had been seen there, two men running out a cable from the Elbow. Old Bill surely wouldn't be having the phone put in because even if he did he wouldn't know how to use it. Bill Gwyther didn't, he only took incoming calls in his own inimitable way and his quarterly bill was never more than the cost of the rental. Another unsolved mystery, but you didn't ask because his answer wouldn't enlighten you any.

Jon sized up the house. The door and window frames probably hadn't seen a coat of paint since before the war. Most of the frames were rotten but they would only be replaced when they fell out, A couple of panes were cracked, maybe deliberately left uncleaned so that nobody could see in. You were never asked in the house whatever your business.

He walked slowly towards the front door. Usually the dog barked a warning but not today. Total silence except for the distant bleating of sheep and a buzzard mewing somewhere up on the Hill.

He reached the door, paused; a schoolboy about to tap on the door of the headmaster's study. I'm awfully sorry to trouble you, sir, but. . . Swallowing, nervous. What is it, boy? What brings you round here?

It's your dog, Mr Gwyther. He's killed one of my calves, turned feral.

Not my dog, boy. He's been chained up here all the time, hasn't been loose. Somebody else's dog. The door dragged shut, end of conversation.

Anger gripped Jon Quinn. No bloody fear, Gwyther wasn't getting out of this just because he thought he owned the Hill. It was his dog and he'd have to pay. The dog would have to be put down. If necessary he would call the . . . no, there wouldn't be any police now and even if there were they would have more important things to do than to chase after killer dogs. He'd bloody well shoot it himself!

He rapped the woodwork, winced at the pain in his knuckles. The door looked as though it was rotten like everything else around here but in fact it was solid oak. He stood back and waited.

A couple of minutes and he was convinced that there was nobody here, not in the house anyway. Logically that wasn't surprising because Gwyther worked all the daylight hours. He had to be around the buildings somewhere, or else out in the fields. Jon Quinn would find him wherever he was.

He checked the outbuildings. A long cattle-shed that hadn't been mucked out for a year or two, fresh straw constantly spread on the oid in a continual deep-litter system. Flies swarmed, huge bluebottles bloated with the filth they had eaten. They settled again, continued feeding.

An implement shed that would have been an exhibit in a farm museum, an array of horse-brasses hanging from nails knocked in a rafter. The floor was a carpet of rat droppings.

But no sign of Bill Gwyther. Jon stood there in the yard wondering what to do. Should he go and search the fields? Or should he go back home and come again later? Both would, in all probability, be a waste of time, and he did not want to leave Sylvia alone longer than was absolutely necessary. Neither did he want to have to come back here again. The only time he was likely to find Gwyther at home would be after dark. After dark! His spine tingled at the

thought. No way; once dusk came he was going to lock himself in his own cottage with Sylvia and . . .

A footfall, so soft that it was barely audible, some sixth sense warning him before his ears picked it up. He turned, stared; told himself that it could not be, that nothing like (hat could possibly exist. It was his imagination. But he had not imagined the goats and the hens; unbelievable as they had seemed, they were real. And so, therefore, was this . . . thing that stood only a few yards from him, frozen into immobility now that its furtive stalk had been discovered. It had been in the act of creeping upon him with a broken rusted pitchfork, its intention to plunge the sharp twin prongs into his back as he stood there unaware of its presence.

Jon Quinn's first thought was that the creature was some' kind of ape, a zoo specimen which had escaped and taken to the hills. It had happened with other animals in the past, not too far from here. The body was covered by sparse hair, sandy coloured but greying with age. No more than five feet in height, arms and legs ridiculously short in proportion to the rest of its body. The face was squat, lips pouted then drawing back to show a toothless mouth, close-set eyes narrowed into an expression of curiosity, turning to animosity. A balding head.

Recognition came slowly to Jon Quinn because even when he realised he still refused to believe. The blue eyes, the toothless mouth, the stance stamped with arrogance. In the end he was faced with the possibility that the thing standing before him might be none other than Bill Gwyther! A possibility that merged into a probability. Then a certainty.

Oh Merciful God! Then this is what has happened to the human race; reduced to this!

Gwyther, and it surely was him, was giving a series of low grunts, unintelligible animal noises that were obviously not intended to be friendly. Their interpretation was anybody's guess. 'What're you doin' here, boy?' Advancing another step, stopping again, the pitchfork lifted so that it rested at hip-level, its wicked points trained on Jon Quinn's stomach.

'Mr Gwyther?' Jon felt incredibly stupid, but somehow he had to say something. 'Mister' because he always called the old man 'Mister'. Everybody round here did, even the older generation of farmers. Just as Gwyther called them all 'boy'. A mark of respect in a way, underlining the generation gap because Gwyther had always been 'Old Gwyther' even in their fathers' days.

They stood looking at each other and in those few seconds a picture flashed across Jon's mind, one that he had seen only comparatively recently. His brain had absorbed the image, thrown it out now like a computer processing relevant data. An artist's impression framed on a local museum wall, captioned 'A Stone Age Man'. And with a feeling of uneasiness Jon Quinn reflected that that unknown artist had done his homework pretty thoroughly; the shape of the head in relation to the squat body and short arms and legs, tiny eyes, pouted mouth. Like one of those police identikit pictures.

And it had come up with Bill Gwyther! Jon Quinn took a deep breath, drew himself up to his full height, tensed every muscle in his body. There was no way they could communicate, no compromise. Modern Man faced primitive Man, enemies because it could not be any other way.

Jon knew exactly what the other had in mind, what he was going to do. No warning. Foe had met up with foe and one of them had to die. They both accepted the fact. Slowly he eased the gun up into the crook of his arm,

pushed the safety catch forward with a faint click. He was not even trembling now that he had made his decision. There could be only one outcome and he must be the one who finally walked away; the victor.

Again that inexplicable sixth sense precipitated the action. He saw the wicked double prongs start to move, coming towards him spear-like, balanced for the final thrust. And in that instant he pushed the gun forward, found the triggers and fired a double blast from the hip.

The shotgun bucked in his hands, threw him back, but he scarcely noticed the recoil. He didn't want to see, wished that he had missed, maybe fired a warning shot over the other's head but it was too late for recriminations. Concentrated balled shot at a range of three yards disintegrated Gwyther's head, put a gaping bloody hole where the face had been, embedded bone splinters in the barn door directly behind him, sprayed ribbons of flesh up the stonework so that it dripped grey matter like an old man's phlegm, pink with blood from a diseased lung.

The pitchfork clattered to the ground, the hairy body swayed but still remained standing, tottering in defiance, nerves still working. Quinn smelied the powdersmoke, coughed. Drop, you bastard, for Christ's sake drop!

The bloodied morass which had once been Bill Gwyther's features still had an expression if you stared at it long enough. A jagged hole, twisted into a snarl of fury. You haven't finished with me yet, boy. A gaping orifice spouting crimson hate, eyebrows twitching, arms jerking like a hen's wings preparatory to a clumsy attempted flight.

I'm coming to get you, boy!

Jon flung up the gun, remembered it was empty. Two spent cases still trickling smoke up the tubes. A roaring in his ears, mocking laughter. Bare calloused feet with blackened broken toenail claws moved one more pace. A pace nearer.

Backing away, screaming something because he couldn't hold it back; fear, an apology, I didn't want to kill you, Mister Gwyther.

You haven't killed me yet, boy.

And then Gwyther fell, arms outstretched as though he was making one last despairing lunge at the one who had done this to him, spraying blood from where his mouth should have been, falling full-length and sending up a cloud of dust out of a dried-up puddle.

Jon Quinn just stood there looking down at him. He wanted to laugh, to cry, both at the same time but he did neither. Seconds that might have been hours then he was walking towards the Land Rover, climbing in and putting the gun in the back.

The engine fired first time but he never thought it would do otherwise because it was still warm. A U-turn that took him back out through the gateway and on to the road, reminding himself that he had to park on that slope, facing downwards, so that he could jump-start the Land Rover tomorrow. Some strange protective brain mechanism had pushed the bloody killing to the back of his mind.

Otherwise he might have gone mad.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PROFESSOR REITZE irritated the Prime Minister; he irritated the other senior cabinet ministers. In fact he irritated everybody in the top security shelter in the Hertfordshire countryside. But that was his prerogative for without his awareness, his knowledge of the perils of germ warfare, there was a possibility that the entire population of Western Europe would have been wiped out. It was he who had alerted them to the danger, recognised what was in the atmosphere.

Close-cropped hair, it was difficult to judge what colour it was, an inch of growth would have been necessary to be sure. Rimless glasses that gave the impression of owlish eyes in that angular face. Always the white smock, you didn't even know what he wore beneath it or whether he wore anything at all. Characterless, even his American accent was lost in his dull monotone voice. The perfect scientist, a human machine.

He sat at his low desk, blinked in the brightness of the strip lighting, thumbed through sheafs of typewritten paper and made occasional notes in his sprawling handwriting on a jotter pad. The glass ashtray by his elbow was piled with Camel stubs, the fingers of his right hand stained brown, the one indication that the man was actually human, he did have a vice.

The Prime Minister took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Anxiety, exasperation. He had said repeatedly that 'we must remain calm but there was a limit. And Reitze went beyond that limit.

Caldecott was in his fourth year of office. Next year he had to face an election; he had considered calling one earlier before inflation and unemployment figures began soaring again but now all that was forgotten. There might well never be another government or even a next year. In his early forties, he had a deceptive boyish appearance, one that a lot of people had underestimated, including the Opposition. Forceful, disliked in many quarters, he was finding it difficult to curb his impatience with Reitze. He glanced across at Rankine, the Defence Minister, read exasperation there, too. But both of them knew the Professor well enough not to try to hassle him.

The reports are still coming in.' Reitze leaned back in his chair, shook another Camel out of a crumpled pack, flicked his lighter. 'We are now beginning to form an overall picture of what has happened both in the United States and the European countries.' Slow expressionless tones, he might have been discussing the latest trade figures. He drew on his cigarette, scribbled something else on his pad. 'The timing of the release of these microorganisms into the atmosphere was meticulously synchronised so that all major areas of population in America were struck simultaneously with the UK. Of course, it was easier to conduct an intensive attack upon Britain than a vast area such as the United States.'

'Which means that we've suffered a far higher casualty rate,' Caldecott cut in.

'Proportionally.' Reitze did not alter his tone. 'But it will be weeks before any true figure can be arrived at. Communications have now broken down in most areas. Fortunately we still have a direct line to the White House, but they can only supply us with the information that reaches them.'

'What type of germ is it?' Rankine asked. 'What are the long-term effects likely to be?'

'At the moment our laboratory is working the clock round to come up with the answer,' Reitze replied, 'We know that the micro-organisms released into the atmosphere are mutants, possibly the results of years of research and experimentation. They affect the skin, adulterate the pigmentation, cause it to become hard and coarse and promote a hair growth which can only be compared with

the growth-rate of certain subtropical plants, growing as much as an inch in twenty-four hours. The brain is also attacked, reducing it only to basic thinking, the victim relying almost solely on instinct, much the same as an animal, perhaps slightly more advanced, the equivalent of primitive Man.'

'In effect,' Caldecott's voice was hushed, a frightened whisper, 'the majority of the' population of the western world have become . . . throwbacks'.

'That's it, in layman's terms.' The Professor crushed the remains of his cigarette in the ashtray. 'Man has been reduced to a primitive being. Of course, there will be individual reactions, some will be affected worse than others and vice versa. Some will escape for a variety of reasons. Micro-organisms do not have the resilience of radiation in the atmosphere. Filters in fall-out shelters will be more effective against them but unfortunately there was no chance to issue a warning. Germ warfare is far more insidious than nuclear warfare; you can't hear it, smell it or see it, and before you know it, it's got you.'

'Is there ... no chance, whatever, for the victims?' The Prime Minister asked the question which none of his ministers had dared to voice so far. Perhaps it was better not to know, just to hope.

'I can't answer that at this moment in time,' Reitze answered, and for once those eyes behind the rimless lenses flickered uncertainly, perhaps nervously. 'At the moment my team of scientists is trying to isolate the microorganisms. There may be several, but until they are isolated and we know exactly what they are, we don't know if anything can be done. Certainly the atmosphere is now clear. We do not know whether the victims will die in a short period or whether they will live a normal life-span.' 'And the whole world suffers because of Lebanon and Syria.' Rankine spoke bitterly, showed his personal feelings for the first time. 'Damn the Russians, they've threatened us with nuclear war for three decades and it was all a blind. Missile bases and counter missile bases, protests on Greenham Common and a lot of other places, and all the time we never guessed where the real danger lay. Now it's too late. They haven't even had to raze the western world to the ground! They can just walk in and take over whenever they like and we can't do a damned thing to stop 'em.'

Thank you, Professor.' The Prime Minister rose to his feet, brushed flecks of dust from his suit. He still had to maintain the image he had created as the best-dressed man in Britain, according to a recent media poll. He had the job of inspiring hope and confidence however he felt personally. 'We'll let you get on with your work- If there are any significant developments please notify me immediately. In the meantime we have an urgent cabinet meeting upstairs.'

A crisis meeting. Eight government ministers all looking to Caldecott to come

up with the answer because that was what he had been elected for. Another Churchill, except that World War II was a skirmish compared to this.

Large-scale wall-maps showed every town, village and hamlet in Britain. Red drawing-pins denoted areas which were known to have suffered heavy casualties. Blue pins showed where there were pockets of survivors trying to maintain law and order, fighting for a return to normality. There were an awful lot of blank spaces awaiting a red or a blue pin.

And the Russians still had not come. They weren't in any hurry, there was no hurry. Next week, next month, next year, it would all be the same.

'Let us take the major cities first.' Caldecott used his wooden pointer, was reminded of those far-off days when he had lectured at Oxford; golden days which would never come again. You were lucky if you were left to indulge in nostalgia. 'London, Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham, the pattern is much the same. Wild mobs are on the rampage, their only interest being food and . . . rape!' He shuddered. The food targets seem to be basically butchers' shops and abattoirs, whole carcasses being lorn apart, the meat devoured raw. Their hunger appeased, the men turn to women, any women with whom to satisfy a carnal desire. The remnants of our law-keeping forces are stretched beyond their limits, outnumbered by thousands to one. Our only hope is to withdraw them totally to a place of safety and plan a definite strategy. We cannot win back the cities at present so we must abandon them.'

Murmurs, not dissent, but horror. Men who were accustomed to facing up to unpleasant truths found themselves backing off.

There are survivors.' Caldecott's voice quavered slightly. "Somehow we must communicate with them, reorganise them if our country is not to be annihilated by mob rule, the law of primitive Man, for our enemy is our own kind, our own people robbed of their minds, reverted to their ancestors by a cruel and unscrupulous foe. Almost every means of communication has now failed.' Don't ask me right now how we are going to reorganise because I don't know. It might be an impossibility. 'At the moment we are waiting upon Professor Reitze and his team of scientists. They are working the clock round to find a way to combat this vile and despicable means of war.'

Silence.

There wasn't anything else left to say, nothing to argue about, a government that was suddenly devoid of politics, their only manifesto one of survival. They could only wait.

Reitze checked through his notes again after the PM and the Defence Minister had left. A hint of a worried frown, his forehead creased and smoothing out, Reitze becoming his old emotionless self again. It wasn't an act, this was how he was, what made him tick. If he died tomorrow he wouldn't know anything about it so what was the use of worrying? Slight concern that perhaps they had overlooked something somewhere, something just too obvious. They would check again. And again. But he had to admit that it was a hopeless task; not conceding defeat, just accepting facts. That was the hardest part of all, admitting that you were beaten.

He lit another Camel, pressed the buzzer on his desk. A few seconds later a sliding door opened and another white-coated scientist entered, A younger man than Reitze, tall and fair-haired, eyes red-rimmed as though he hadn't slept in the last thirty-six hours, just the odd catnap on the couch in the rest-room adjoining the lab.

'Brian,' Reitze looked up, almost smiled but not quite, 'we're gonna name this one the Evolution Bug. I don't reckon we can come up with anything else now. We've just gotta check in case we missed something, but I think we've gone as far as we can go and I'll have to tell them that soon. The ultimate in mutation. If we had lived in the Stone Age that's how we would have been, immune to diseases which would destroy mankind today and these throwbacks are just the same. Immune to anything we can give them because their body cells will resist everything. Evolution is the only answer, civilisation will have to start all over again! In a million years' time they'll be finding skeletons and scratching their heads, wondering how the hell civilisation reached its peak and went back again. I'm wondering whether those who have escaped can survive, even the bastards who started all this. We will be the ones without body resistance, diseases developing which modern medicine has never come across.'

'I see.' Brian Newman nodded. 'As a matter of fact that occurred to me but I kept it to myself.'

'We'll have to do just that. There's no point in panicking everybody and if we're right there's not a goddamn thing you or I or anybody else can do about it. In the meantime we just keep on working, hoping. And if you're a praying man, pray.'

Reports came in slowly over the next few days. The Continent had suffered badly, West Germany, France and Italy in chaos. Switzerland seemed to have fared better than most due to government legislation that all new houses had to be fitted with fall-out shelters. No warning except that strange and terrible things were befalling the French and Italians so the Swiss had dived for cover.

Nothing at all from the eastern-bloc countries. No communications. They might have been wiped out, they might be lurking safely below ground. There was no way of telling. The Kremlin was silent.

Rankine studied the large-scale maps in the operations room. The number of pins was increasing hourly, most of them red ones. The majority of survivors in remote rural parts had no way of contacting the authorities, probably did not even realise that anybody except themselves had survived. They would be fighting their own battles, rabbits living in warrens, isolated pockets of sanity until madness prevailed.

Fires were going unchecked, raging through towns and cities. The injured suffered and died agonising deaths because there was nobody to help them. But there was a pattern of behaviour amongst the new semi-human race. Like rats leaving doomed ships, they fled the built-up areas. Buildings were foreign to their nature, their in-born fear of anything beyond their basic understanding driving them out to the few wild places that remained in Britain.

The first step of a new evolution was beginning.

JACKIE QUINN followed where the man she knew as Kuz led. Through the night, along a main road, not knowing what it was or why it was there, making detours when they approached a village or hamlet.

In their wake came some twenty or thirty men and women, some of whom had started the journey with them from First Terrace, others they had picked up on the way. From the mists of time civilisation has always bowed to leaders, sought the security of another's decisions. And Kuz was one of those leaders.

They travelled at a fast walking pace, not slowing, not showing any signs of tiredness, and when dawn came they saw the rolling range of hills beyond. Kuz changed direction slightly, heading towards those bracken-covered slopes, and Jackie sensed the eagerness of the others, experienced the feeling herself; that of a traveller returning from a very long journey, weary, but on sighting his home in the distance is at once refreshed, hastening his arrival, that last mile seemingly ten, a mirage that you thought you would never reach.

The hills were home, nobody questioned that as they followed a narrow winding track through the new growth of bracken and heather. The sun climbed higher, beat down on them with a sadistic mercilessness, clouds of black flies swarming, settling on the thick hair of the travellers. Bees hunted relentlessly for pollen, and once a single grouse whirred up from beneath their feet, planed down the long slope and alighted when it thought it was safe.

They were high up now, 1,500 feet at least, below them the long valley with its wide main road littered with crashed and abandoned vehicles, a set of traffic lights that winked red, amber and green reflections in the bright sunlight as though they carried on working in defiance of everything around them. Moving dots signified people, others returning to the wild after a foray into the brick and concrete jungles of an unknown world, not knowing why they had been there in the first place.

Kuz had smelled the stream, then heard the trickling of clear fresh water, tearing his way through a thick barrier of brambles to reach it, throwing himself down full-length on the shallow bank and slurping noisily. The others followed, would have done so whether they were thirsty or not because it was expected of them. Animals at a watering hole, all else forgotten.

Suddenly Kuz sprang to his feet, roared at them, his squat features black with fury. They cowered, understood, whimpered their apologies. Two cut away, walked up a small grassy mound and shaded their eyes in every direction whilst the remainder returned to their interrupted drink. Their leader's message was only too clear: a guard must be mounted at all times so that they were not surprised by a lurking enemy.

Kuz rose and they all rose, shaking the water from themselves, their hair glistening with droplets. Then they were moving on. There was to be no respite.

Once they came upon another bunch of their own kind, the two groups regarding one another suspiciously from a distance of twenty yards. There was no exchange of greetings, just hostile stares and a mute agreement to go their own ways.

The climb was becoming much steeper now, Jackie felt her leg muscles beginning to pull but the idea of resting was dismissed; so long as Kuz kept going so

would she. Travelling on all-fours for the last hundred yards or so, grabbing tussocks of coarse grass to pull themselves up by. And then they saw the caves.

The place had once been a human habitation, dwelling places chipped out of the overhanging rock face on the eastern side of the hill, sheltered from the prevailing winds. Lichen and moss grew on the stone, feverfew sprouted from the stony ground. There were a dozen caverns at least, large and small, dark shady places that yawned back into the hillside, cramped spaces by modern standards but roomy enough to live in if you didn't have many possessions.

Kuz had already chosen the largest cave, one on the right set fifteen feet or so from the others. He leaped to his feet, shambled towards it, Jackie still following. None of the others disputed his choice for he was their leader. They squabbled over the other caves, a blow was struck and then they set about preparing their new homes.

Jackie squatted on the floor watching Kuz's every movement with amazement. He was accustomed, obviously, to a nomad existence, clearing the floor space, hurling loose rocks outside. He grunted, pointed to a low shelf at the rear; this was to be their bed. Rest, woman, for the journey has been a tiring one.

He went outside, returned with an armful of dry, dead wood and piled it just inside the entrance. Fire was a good servant but a bad master; Kuz would be the master. Two pieces of what appeared to be stone were rubbed together, sparking; rubbed harder. Within seconds some of the smaller twigs were glowing faintly red. Kuz stooped, puffed his bearded cheeks, blew. The kindling burst into flame, crackled, a thin spiral of smoke beginning to drift upwards, a grey lazy serpent finding the way out into the open, dispersing; smelled sweet.

Kuz grunted his satisfaction, turned to face Jackie. He had done it all before, that was why he was the leader of this hill tribe. She nodded, smiled. She was proud to have him for her man. He would protect her. And far away somewhere in the surrounding woodlands came the baying of wild animals.

Within a matter of a few weeks it seemed to Jackie Quinn as though she had always lived here in this upland settlement. Indeed, her memories of that place with tall, symmetrical, frightening buildings were fading fast. A fevered dream perhaps; she did not want to think about it any more.

Others drifted in to the encampment, sometimes a group, other times singles or couples. They saw the smoke from the fires and being gregarious came to investigate. None disputed Kuz's leadership; they showed their allegiance together with a willingness to work for the food of the community. And there was plenty of work to be done.

The caves were only temporary residences, ancient homes of a much more primitive race but by no means permanent enough for these newcomers. The first task was to build strong comfortable dwelling-places which would be warm in winter and withstand the blizzards that would surely rip through this exposed range of hills.

Stone was in abundance, landslides which had showered down over the years and only needed sorting. The building began, square houses rising at an incredible speed, the boulders knitted together with clay which the women kneaded in the bed of the nearby stream. Except Jackie. She wanted to help but Kuz forbade it; she was privileged, the chiefs wife, and as such her duties were to supervise the female workforce and to cook her man's food over the wood fire.

A woman apart, proud but . . . lonely.

The worst times were when Kuz and the men were away hunting. A few of the younger ones stayed behind to continue with the building but for most of the day her company was female and she sensed the bitter jealousy of the other women, felt their hostile glares, their defiance which they dared not show for fear of their chief's retribution. And the way their eyes sought out Kuz when the hunting party trooped back into camp, enthralled by his powerful figure as they indulged in their individual primitive fantasies. Each and every one would have traded him for their own man, given everything they possessed for the privilege of sharing his hide bed once darkness fell. And only Jackie stood in their way and they hated her for that.

The hunting trips yielded prolific results for there was 'game' in plenty. Farm livestock had reverted to its former wild state, in many cases breaking out through the hedges and seeking their freedom away from the environment of domestic farming. Where the fences were secure the creatures found themselves still imprisoned by wire surrounds, easy prey for the roaming band of men from the upper regions.

Raids on farm outbuildings had yielded an assorted supply of weaponry, from pitchforks to scythe blades, the latter improvised into deadly spears; knives, axes, mallets which were ready-made clubs. Sheep bleated and ran blindly but in the end they were cornered, brutally slaughtered. The carcasses were flayed, the meat cut up for easy transportation; an abundance of food and clothing.

Jackie busied herself during the daytime making clothes for Kuz and herself, sheepskin garments which would keep out the bitter winter cold. The other women fashioned crude pottery out of the surplus building clay, rolling it into long cylindrical shapes and then moulding it and smoothing it; baking it hard. Pots to cook in, beakers to drink from, even plates on which to eat their food. Gradually civilisation was taking shape. Jackie even took to decorating some of these earthenware vessels, making patterns on them with a slim shard of stone.

It was Racel she feared most during those hours whilst Kuz was away. A slim young girl with no man of her own although sometimes the other men took her to satisfy their lust, a nymph who spent most of her time alone down by the stream. Jackie feared lest one night Kuz might go to her, her own status would then be in jeopardy. Her own hatred towards Racel simmered, she even considered killing the girl, holding her down in the water where she would not even be able to scream, leaving her there for the others to find. An accident, a drowning, none would be able to prove otherwise. But she hesitated, hoped that it would not come to that. As yet Kuz had shown no more than a passing interest in the younger girl. Jackie would keep a close watch on the situation. She would lose her life before she relinquished her mate.

Then one evening the hunters returned with a prisoner. An excited chattering from the other women brought Jackie to the door of the new dwelling-place, had her shading her eyes from the blinding last rays of the setting sun as she gazed in a westerly direction across the rolling heather and bracken slopes. She made out a file of some twenty or thirty men, the 'bearers' laden with the carcass of some huge animal, probably a bull or a cow, which they had slaughtered and jointed. She recognised Kuz's powerful shape in the lead and in front of him shambled a stooped and cowed form, one whose hands and arms were bound with ropes, being prodded along by a vicious pitchfork in the hands of the chief. Her mouth went dry and she trembled slightly.

The women flocked to the edge of the camp, clustered together, jabbering and

pointing. What was this that the hunters had caught? It looked like a man, yet the features were hairless; the approaching column was now near enough for them to discern details. Strange clothing that virtually enclosed the entire body as though the tender white flesh had to be protected from the elements. Their cries of wonderment turning to fear, they huddled together in case this strange creature suddenly broke free and attacked them.

But there was no way the captive was going to escape from Kuz and his followers. The rope which bound him was pulled so tightly that his hands were numb from loss of circulation and there was a discoloration on the side of his head that was still swelling, a blow from a club having knocked him unconscious.

Phil Winder's head throbbed and his vision was distorted; blurred moving shapes around him, threatening creatures that might have come straight out of some weird fantasy movie, celluloid images taking on 3-D perspective. A swift jab to his buttocks from those needle prongs had him crying out his pain and fear aloud, guttural laughs mocking him. He almost blacked out; maybe it would be better if he had done so because when he came to these creatures would have disappeared, and if he didn't regain consciousness then at least he would be spared all this. But he didn't faint, just stumbled, the rope jerked taut preventing him from falling. And he knew then that it was all really happening.

At twenty his figure was still boyish, possibly ungainly but not when compared with this lot! His mother used to say repeatedly to her friends, 'Our Phil's got his dad's bum and my short legs.' Which was true but it didn't matter any more. He had come home on vacation from college, a week's courtesy stay really at his folks' farm out in the sticks because if he didn't show his face occasionally there was always the possibility that they might cut his allowance, and then he'd be left to manage on his grant which would be a well-nigh impossibility. Staying around the farm was just asking for trouble; Dad would rope him in for the hay harvest or else his mother would make the most of having a driver available and think up all kinds of shopping trips that her husband was always too busy to take her on. 'Now you go and park in the multi-storey and wait for me there - I shan't be long. And on the way back we'd better call and see the Mitchells. I haven't been there since last Christmas and they'll be thinking that I don't want to see them any more.' Mother would fill his days all right if Dad didn't, so he'd gone pot-holing. Well, not real pot-holing because the old mine shafts were artificial. Dangerous, too, but if you were careful you were safe enough. The locals called them the 'treacle mines', lead mines which were played out now, but there were a few shafts still open if you could find them, hidden in the moorland heather.

That was when Phil Winder's first nightmare had begun. He had found a deep shaft, had winched himself down. There was water in the bottom but only an inch or so, it drained away somewhere down one of the passages that led off from the main one. Using his torch he had followed that first passage, come to a fork and taken the left-hand one. Fascinating, exciting; the roof was sound enough even if it did sag in places and he had to crawl sometimes for ten yards at a stretch. Possibly nobody had come down here since the mine had closed at the turn of the century. There was no knowing what he might find. His spirit of adventure spurred him on oblivious of the obvious danger until it was too late. He was lost!

Panic at first, wanting to scream, to run blindly down every opening he came to. Help me, for God's sake somebody! But nobody would hear him. To give up, to slump down on the wet floor and sob. There's no way out, you'll die down here; they won't even find your body to give you a funeral. This is your

grave, your own private tomb. You're here forever. You'll go mad before you die.

After the initial shock he had managed to pull himself together. He wouldn't get anywhere either by panicking or giving up, either way he would die. First, he had to rest, get his strength back, conserve his torch batteries as well. Then later he would embark upon a systematic exploration of the mine tunnels until he found the shaft that led up to the world above. It had to be here somewhere, it was just a question of stumbling on it. He could only hope. He didn't pray because he did not believe. Even in this sort of desperate situation he wasn't going to yield to that religious indoctrination that it had taken him all his college years to get rid of, like a child convincing himself that there isn't a bogey in the stair cupboard.

Fatigue forced him to sleep and when he awoke he embarked upon the search again, got the distinct feeling that some of the tunnels doubled back on themselves. It might have been his imagination, he was so disorientated that he couldn't be sure. He had lost all track of time, regretted not having brought a watch with him; didn't even know how long he had been below ground. It was impossible to hazard a guess. Hours, days? Eternal blackness whenever he switched the torch off, using it sparingly now because the battery was running out. Soon he would have to face up to life without even that dim yellow glow.

He was hungry, too. Nausea that had him retching, tasting his own bile and smelling his own sweat. Once he almost got round to praying, that was how bad it was.

He was glad he had not yielded to the temptation because shortly after that he spied a sliver of weak daylight up ahead of him and knew he'd found the shaft. If he had prayed his mind would never have accepted that those prayers had not been answered; he might even have started going to chapel again on Sundays. Sorry Mum, Dad, you were right after all. Sorry God. One coincidence could have changed his future life.

It took him some time to get back up to the surface. At one stage he thought he wasn't going to make it because he was so weak, like that time he had had the measles when he was sixteen. But he got there in the end, lay prone in the scorching sun a few yards from the shaft entrance and promised himself he would never go pot-holing again. Not ever. Let's go on that shopping trip to Shrewsbury tomorrow, Mum. I'll wait for you in the multi-storey. Take your time, I don't mind how long you are. And maybe the day after I'll give Dad a hand with the hay harvest. But I won't ever go underground again.

Eventually he got to his feet, swayed unsteadily as a fit of dizziness engulfed him. An awful thought; suppose he fell and toppled back down there. Walking wasn't easy, he could have flopped down into the soft springy heather and just gone to sleep. But he had to get home; they would be searching for him, maybe even the police were out with tracker dogs, lines of civilians scouring the hills. He was not even sure if he had been below ground overnight, whether this sun which sweated him was the same one that had been rising upwards on its morning journey when he had left the farm.

A feeling that something was decidedly wrong but he couldn't place it. The silence. Even out here you always heard a tractor or a Land Rover in the distance, the constant hum of rural activity so much in contrast to the city clamour. That was what he hated about the country, so bloody quiet it gave you the creeps. A little shiver prickled his skin. This was just too bloody quiet, even for the country.

Walking down a sheep track that flattened out into a bridle-path, overhanging boughs lush with full summer greenery, the grass thick and strong. Everywhere smelled sweet, sickly sweet. That was because his stomach was empty, blackmailing him; give me food or else I'll throw up.

The silence was starting to get on his nerves. You always heard something. But not now. The path widened and he came to a stile, the beginning of his father's land. Wasn't anybody out looking for him, hadn't they even missed him?

Sheep; normally he would not have given them a second glance because they didn't interest him. In-bred, unhealthy, non-thinking, stupid animals. His head jerked round again and he stared in surprise. They were his father's white-faced Suffolks all right with a black 'W stamped on their fleeces, doing exactly what you would have expected them to be doing; grazing like they were starving, hadn't seen food for a week. Only they were grazing a field of growing barley!

He could not see where they had got in because the field was large and undulating; one weak place in the hedge adjoining the long stretch of pastureland would have been enough and they would have trotted through in single file, following the sheep in front like they always did. OK, everybody's stock got out sometimes but he knew his father well enough to know that the sheep wouldn't be out for long before John Winder discovered them and came post haste in his pick-up with Flook to round them up and drive them back. But there was no sign of anybody.

Phil stood watching for a few seconds and then he broke into a fast trot. Personally he didn't give a fuck about the sheep in the barley but he knew that something had to be wrong back home. Maybe they were too busy out looking for him. It was a logical explanation, but somehow it didn't ring true, even if it did make him feel guilty. You bloody selfish bastard.

He took a short-cut across the big grass field, saw the farmhouse when he topped the brow. Something about it added to his unease. Sure it was summer and there wouldn't be smoke coming out of the kitchen chimney. But there would be activity of some kind. The red pick-up was in the yard; there was no sign of the bantams which virtually lived by the back door. He started to run.

Breathless, he went in through the yard gate and that was when he first saw his parents. They were in the big dutch barn which still had a few bales of last year's hay in it and ... oh Christ, it wasn't really them . . . was it? No, for fuck's sake, you aren't my parents!

His logic tried to throw out all sorts of answers, tried to make him believe them. A couple of tramps, filthy dirty and with no clothes, they'd hidden in the barn. But these weren't tramps. Facially they resembled his mother and father, the man looking like his pubic hair had run riot and grown a widening path right up to his stubble of a beard. Instead of the old-fashioned short back and sides his hair curled greasily down to his shoulders. Phil kept his eyes elevated; it was too embarrassing to look below the waistline of your own father.

On to his mother: she had lost her false teeth so that her cheeks were hollowed, her mouth shrunken. Again an excess of hair but it was not so prolific on her body as on her husband's. Unsightly baggy breasts that sagged with age, a roll of waistline fat that she had hidden from him for years with a pair of corsets. A V of hair; he jerked his head away, saw their expressions of fear, the way they backed away from him. It was them.

'Father, mother.' He whispered the words, tried to will them to shout back, 'We're not your father and mother.' They huddled together pathetically, whined like a pair of collies that knew they were in for a good larruping. For maybe ten seconds parents and offspring stared at one another and then with a shrill shriek the two hideous caricatures broke into a shuffling flight, scrambling over hay bales, dragging each other in turn, out through the other end of the bay and into the fields.

Phil Winder stood and watched them go. He did not pursue them because he did not want to catch up with them again, did not want to have to look upon their wizened animal-like faces and have to convince himself once more that they were his parents.

He didn't need any more convincing, didn't look for reasons, accepted that some terrible change had come over everybody and everything. Except himself? Fearfully he smoothed his hands down his body, felt at his skin. He seemed OK.

It was a long time before he finally plucked up the courage to go into the house, kicked open the back door and almost shouted 'Is anybody there?' Of course there was nobody there. Then the stench hit him, a foul putrefying odour that would have had him spewing if he hadn't had an empty stomach. He retched and it hurt, recognised the smell even before he saw the mess on the red quarry tiles, patches of semi-solid excreta crawling with bluebottles. They lifted, settled again almost immediately, fed ravenously.

They've shit on the floor, a voice inside him gasped and he wanted to cry. Oh Jesus, who's done this to my folks?

Apart from that the house was much the same as it always was, working-class tidiness reminiscent of his mother's upbringing in a farm labourer's cottage in the days when people really were poor. He checked himself in the mirror, didn't really care now whether anything had happened to him or not. Physically he looked the same. But I'm going slowly fucking mad.

Looking back he could not really remember how he had passed the rest of that awful day. He had shovelled up the mess on the kitchen floor, thrown it out into the yard and the flies had followed it. After that he had just sat about, lying to himself that his mother and father would be back later and everything would be all right.

But they did not return and everything wasn't all right. Dusk merged into darkness and he still sat there in the old wooden rocking chair by the dead Rayburn. He was still there in the morning when the sun's rays gently eased him awake and everything came flooding back to him. I'm glad I don't believe in you, God, because you wouldn't have let this happen. He ate a tin of cold beans and cut his finger opening the can so that he spottled blood on the working surface. Eventually he stopped bleeding and made himself some coffee, tried to work out what he was going to do.

He needed help; he'd take the pick-up into the village and tell the police. The police always knew what to do, didn't get in a flap. His mind made up, he went outside, noted absent-mindedly that it was going to be another scorcher. He had completely forgotten about his experiences below ground; this was far more terrifying.

As he drove into the village he knew right away he wasn't going to get any help - because there wasn't anybody here to help him. Like a trained burglar sussing out prospective houses he could tell that every one was empty, whether the front doors hung open or not.

He might have been a century too late, the inhabitants dead and gone. A cat jumped off a stone wall and fled at his approach. A mongrel dog barked at him from a distance then turned and ran with its tail between its legs. Apart from that there was no sign of life.

He pulled up by the triangle of rough unmown grass that was fondly termed 'the Green' and saw at a glance that the telephone in the kiosk had been vandalised; the receiver and dialling mechanism were torn away, left smashed and bent on the floor.

He sighed his despair, glanced at the Mazda's petrol gauge. Almost empty, just about enough juice to get him back to the farm. And he was only going back there because it had once been his home.

He made it to the yard gates before the engine stuttered and died, free-wheeled the last few yards. It was only later that he asked himself why he hadn't tried some of those parked cars in the village; almost surely he would have found one with the keys in and some petrol in the tank. But he hadn't and that was that. He wasn't going back there again.

Days stretched into weeks and still he hung around the farm doing nothing. When the fridge was empty he started on the freezer; the generator out by the buildings would keep it going for some time yet because it was not running anything else. When he ran out of food he would think of something but not until. His parents would not be coming back, the sheep were still in the barley and there wasn't a goddamned thing he could do about it. For the time being he would sit it out.

The initial terror had numbed him but gradually it was wearing off. Acceptance came in stages but reasoning was a different matter. The eternal 'why'. Why had everybody just up and gone? It was some sort of nuclear attack, of course. He had escaped because he had been down the mine but soon radiation would take its toll of him. When he felt really ill and started throwing up he would know that he had radiation sickness, the beginning of the end. Cancer, really. And once he was sure, he would do something about it; he'd read somewhere that it could take you months, even years, to die depending upon how exposed to it you had been. He wasn't going to wait and suffer that long.

What he needed to do, he decided, was to get away from this place, move further afield and maybe meet up with some other survivors - if there were any.

And it was on his very first trek beyond the boundary stile on the bridle-path that he met up with that party of hunters from the hills. They must have heard him coming, had lain in wait for him along that overgrown path, some of them up in the trees above.

Something hit him. Ape actors in a jungle movie coming right out of the screen, sending him sprawling, surrounding him, jabbering. Breathless, he looked up, found the twin prongs of a pitchfork only an inch or so from his throat. He tried to swallow but couldn't make it, let his eyes roll because he couldn't move his head. There were a lot of them, maybe twenty or more, others standing just outside his range of vision. And every one of them bore a strong resemblance to how his parents had looked the last time he had seen them.

His captors forced him to his feet. He read the malevolence in their expressions, the curiosity as they fingered his clothing, stroked his smooth skin with their rough hands, chattered in low tones. What creature is this with soft flesh and clothes that stifle his body?

The pitchfork remained at Phil's throat, the threat of impalement more real than ever. They pulled his hands behind his back and he felt the roughness of a rope beginning to bind his wrists, pulled tight, thrown around his arms so that they were pinioned to his body. A dog on a leash, being dragged along, prodded from behind with those devilish prongs.

He didn't know where they were taking him, didn't care, wished he had died of radioactive poisoning or anything that would spare him this. Wondering if his parents were amongst this band of barely human beings, claiming their son for their own. No, they wouldn't see him treated this way.

So in due course they arrived at the encampment in the hills, the women streaming out to greet them, gazing in awe at the live prey which their menfolk had brought home from a hunting trip.

Phil's lips were blistered, his throat crying out for water. A blinding thumping headache like wild horses cantering around inside his brain. Now they were all fingering him, ripping at his shirt, tearing it away from his body, pointing in amazement at the hairless flesh beneath.

Oh God, they were shredding his corduroy trousers now. Embarrassment mingled with his terror, his natural inhibitions screaming at him that there were women here. Closing his eyes; if he could have backed away he would have when they began feeling at his flaccid genitals and laughing in that frightening monkey-like whickering, squeezing him so that he was doubled up in agony, the pain stabbing right into his guts.

A grunted command and they fell back. Kuz has demonstrated his prize exhibit and now there was work to be done. Phil Winder opened his eyes, saw the female who was obviously their leader's woman by the way she stood close to him. By any standards she was beautiful, her features still retaining a civilised look about them. Her gaze centred on the prisoner for a second and in her eyes Phil read compassion, pity. If I had my way you would be set free. You have done us no harm. But I dare not speak out.

A guttural snarl from Kuz and those behind Phil began pushing him forward again, digging the points of the pitchfork into his buttocks so that he gasped with pain. It was difficult to walk, the remnants of his trousers having fallen to his ankles and restricting his movements. Yet he had to keep moving for at the slightest hesitation his nearest captor jabbed him again, gave vent to sadistic delight by sucking in his breath and expelling it noisily every time he thrust with the pitchfork.

Through the cluster of buildings, along a hard-trodden track which was these people's main village street, crude stone dwellings constructed of uneven stones giving them an unstable look, the roofs cut tree boughs with heavy boulders preventing the elements from dislodging them. So primitive but none the less effective.

Winder did not see the hole in the ground until he was a yard or two from it, a huge yawning grave with a rickety ladder protruding from it. The sweat on his body went icy cold as those behind him slashed through his bonds. There was no misunderstanding what was expected of him as they shoved him forward. That is your prison, stranger. Go to it!

He was prodded again even as he reached for the ladder, saw down into the hole for the first time. Just a hole, not even squared sides; twenty feet deep at least, soil and rock, nothing else. His hands were numb, he could not grasp the rungs, relying on his feet and his body to maintain his balance. He tried to kick the remnants of his trousers free but they caught, twisted.

That pikle threatened him again. Hurry. For Christ's sake I can't go any faster! Faces peering down at him, grinning. They were enjoying this, every damned one of them; except maybe that pretty girl who looked out of place here.

Suddenly Phil Winder felt himself start to totter, the ragged trouser bottoms tearing at his foothold. Flailing the air with hands that had no feeling, were just starting to tingle painfully.

Toppling backwards; he couldn't check his scream. His body hit the side, seemed to bounce off it, hands scraping the sheer wall, a futile grab for a hold. It was like being in an elevator that had gone out of control, a snapped cable plunging it down the shaft, the walls hurtling by, giving you an optical illusion so that you had the crazy feeling you were shooting back upwards. Dizziness, your guts turning over, any second you would spew them out. Anticipating the awful bone-shattering impact . . .

Then he hit the bottom and for a second everything went black, the wind knocked right out of him so he was gulping to fill his lungs. Groaning, wanting to weep. You bastards! He was aware that the ladder was moving, being pulled up. He almost grabbed for it but they would only have wrenched it from his grasp, maybe stoned him for his defiance. Then the ladder was gone, probably laid on the ground at the top, well beyond his reach.

Sheer terror, his brain a jumble of ideas of what they might do to him. Perhaps they were going to bury him alive, shovel back that mound of soil and rubble. No! Oh Christ, no please!

Or leave him here to starve and die of thirst in the hot sun; day after day growing weaker, willing himself to die but death cruelly eluding him. And if it rained heavily the hole would fill up quickly, the water slow to seep away through the rocky sides. Swimming, treading water until his strength gave out and he drowned.

Maybe they would just stone him to death for sport! Shut up or you'll go mad! He glanced up, saw that they had gone, returned to their chores in the knowledge that he could not escape. He would still be there when they came back, more frightened than when they had left him, He leaned his back against the side, bit his lip as his circulation began to flow again. His shoulder hurt from the fall but he was sure no bones were broken. He was alive, comparatively unhurt except for those damned pitchfork pricks in his back and buttocks, and the lump on his head where they had felled him in the first place. He was lucky. Every minute of life now was a bonus. Or was it? What was the point in going on living in a land of savages, civilised people turned into creatures like those up there? When it came to that you were better off dead.

Suicide occurred to him. If the means had been available he would have gone through with it. But they weren't. Not even a shard of rock sharp enough to slash his wrists. He had no choice except to live and his life-span would be determined by his captors.

He thought about his parents again. Could it be that they were amongst the throng which had imprisoned him in this hellhole? Surely not. Father, Mother, don't you recognise your own son? It was doubtful if they would.

Irony that brought a cracked mirthless laugh from his blistered lips. He had survived the holocaust because he had taken refuge in a deep hole, and as a result he was now cast into another one. If he had been above ground at the

time then he would now be one of them. Holy Mother!

The evening shadows began to darken the bottom of the pit, Phil Winder's body temperature lowering so that he shivered. It was going to be bloody cold in here tonight.

But it was the thought of tomorrow that worried him most as he gradually slipped into an uneasy doze.

CHAPTER NINE

JON QUINN had not told Sylvia what had happened down at Gwyther's farm. There was nothing to be gained by telling her; the countryside around them seethed with horror. She would find out soon enough what was going on.

'Don't you think you ought to try and contact somebody?' she asked him the next morning, chewed on a spoonful of muesli with obvious disdain. 'I mean, we can't go on living like this week in, week out, can we? There are bound to be others like ourselves somewhere. Why don't we go into the village and fill the Land Rover up from that hand-pump like you suggested?'

Tomorrow.' He avoided her gaze. 'I want to spend today lugging firewood. We're going to need every stick we can find.'

'But just how long do you think we're going to have to stay here?' She dropped her spoon into her bowl. The way you're talking we're going to be here forever!'

That's a strong possibility. If Gwyther was a typical specimen of what mankind has reverted to then we're going to be holed up here for the rest of our lives like a pair of rabbits down a warren with a hungry fox's earth right on top of us.

'Well?' Sylvia was insistent. 'If you won't do something positive then /will. I'll take the Land Rover myself. And I might not come back!'

You probably wouldn't. He sighed. Damn her, if only Jackie was here instead.

'OK, we'll go to the village tomorrow,' he told her, 'but today I want to get some wood in. Also I want to see if I can round up those nanny goats.'

'Another boring day for me loafing around the house,' she groaned. 'And if I don't get a proper meal soon I'll waste away. I might even die of starvation.'

'Once we've got wood we can cook. I'll maybe shoot a rabbit or something, and I guess we may as well start eating the vegetables. We'll have to risk contamination sometime but personally I think we'll be OK. It's certainly not radioactive fall-out.' We just might end up like old Bill Gwyther instead!

'You haven't told me what happened at Gwyther's farm?' She asked the question pointedly now. Don't lie to me, Jon, because I can tell that something was dreadfully wrong there. You can't hide it from me.

'Much the same as here.' He did his best to meet her gaze. The animals had gone wild, broken out. Old Bill's gone, too, I guess.' He had that; Jon Quinn felt his stomach churn, relieved that awful moment when Gwyther's head had exploded like a ripe tomato thrown at a wall. I'll go and make a start on the wood.' He scraped his chair back. Then tomorrow we'll go down to the village.'

She accepted his decision reluctantly and he went outside. Tomorrow they would definitely be going into the village.

He walked across to the tractor, an old Ferguson which had seen better days back in the sixties. Rusted and battered it had given him good service. Today was probably its most important day since it came off the assembly line.

The trailer was hitched, he climbed up into the seat. The engine fired first time, belched thick black oily smoke out of its upright exhaust. He revved the engine, thought about the shotgun in the porch. Maybe he should take it. No, he would not be gone long, he could pick it up for the next trip if necessary. If he went back for it now it might alarm Sylvia still further. She was getting to be a real pain in the arse; there were going to be problems with her shortly. I'm bored. I don't like the food here. I'm lonely. That was the difference between a wife and a mistress. The latter you mostly saw the good side of because you didn't have to live with her, the former was the devil you knew and you could compromise with. Except that he hadn't compromised with Jackie.

There was a lump in his throat as he pulled out of the yard on to the rutted track. Oh God, Jackie, if only you were here. But she wasn't and she wouldn't be returning. That was something he had to face up to.

He headed for that strip of pinewoods where the poultry had been perching. Beyond it was a tract of silver birch, part of the Winders' farm. Scrub that was no good to anybody, not even a useful shelter belt. Winder had told him months ago to help himself to any wood he wanted out of it because he was going to get some contractors in to clear it and plough it. Jon hadn't had time to bother up until today. Now he could have taken wood from anywhere he chose and it wouldn't have mattered a damn but he still thought of it as stealing. Maybe in a few weeks he would have got over that psychological hurdle but for the moment he would cut his firewood legitimately. Live for today because there might be no tomorrow. That was a very strong possibility.

He skirted the tall pines, slowed up and tried to look up into their branches but the dark green foliage was too dense to afford him a proper view. He didn't have time to go and see if the hens were still up in the branches. In a far corner of the adjoining field he spied the nanny goats browsing the hawthorn hedge. Later he would try and catch Rosie, maybe milk her by force if necessary. The longer he left it, the more difficult it would be.

The strip of scrub was an untidy two or three acres, silver-birch which had reached their allotted span of a half century, died, rotted, and conceded to the gales. Trunks lay half buried in the bracken; an hour or so with the chainsaw and he would fill the trailer. Two or three trips would last them up until Christmas at least.

He swung round in a half-circle, backed the trailer up as near to the spinney as he could, switched off the engine. He sat there listening. A wood-pigeon was cooing softly in the tall pines, a peaceful summer sound that transcended

anything mankind did. A bird that was at peace with the world. Some distance away a carrion crow was calling, magpies answering with their harsh ratchet noises; corvines conversing over what had befallen Man?

Jon climbed down, lifted the chainsaw out of the trailer; so many windblown trees that it was a job to know where to start. Even as he grasped the cord, was about to jerk the saw into life, something caught his eye, made him hesitate. A patch of white showing starkly through the green fronds of bracken, artificiality spoiling the natural scenery.

He almost ignored it. It could have been an empty plastic fertiliser bag blown off Winder's fields (damn the man, he would never understand that he was polluting the environment with his chemicals). Or a discarded bedsheet dumped by selfish Jitterbugs. Or ... he didn't have to go and see, it wasn't even his wood, but he found himself laying down the chainsaw and walking in that direction. A hunch, a very uneasy one.

Realisation came slowly because it took him several seconds to identify the remains of the dead animal. His first thought was that it was a ewe that had wandered in here, got caught up in the briars and died. But the fleece was not woolly enough, the patchy white hairs coarse and strong. A broken neck had twisted the head round at an unnatural angle so that the empty eye sockets watched him. Skeletal, just the hide remaining, the scavengers had done their task well.

Those magpies were still telling the crow all about it, how they had feasted from first light to dusk, and then the foxes had come and taken over; rats, too. Now the meat was all gone.

Long curved horns. Jon tried to tell himself that it was a ram, lied to try and avoid accepting the fact that what was left of the carcass was indisputably goat. Billy goat. Gilbert.'

He wished again that he'd brought the shotgun. Damn it, he's dead, he can't hurt you now. No, but whatever killed him might still be around, lurking in the undergrowth, creeping up on you . . .

He glanced back to where he had left the chainsaw, began edging towards it. A hellish weapon in the right hands. Pull yourself together, Gilbert was probably killed soon after we last saw him, jumped by that dog of Gwyther's in the same way that it killed the calf. It ran before and it'll run again, like a desert jackal. It won't attack a human.

All the same he fetched the saw, kicked it into life and began cutting up a thick trunk, a deafening whine that showered sawdust everywhere. Chainsaws were noisy things, they let all and sundry know exactly where you were . . . and you wouldn't hear if anything crept up on you.

Nervous, working fast, wanting to get the job over and done with. But you're coming back for another load. And a third.

Within an hour the trailer was full of neatly sawn cylindrical birch trunk. He climbed back up to the wheel, started on the bumpy journey back home.

If only Jackie had been there awaiting him.

He was starting to get depressed, a gradual erosion of his positive thinking. That stemmed from spending too much time alone. Maybe Sylvia was right, they had to go and find other survivors, //there were any others. There had to be.

He backed into the yard, tipped the trailer, watched the logs showering out, bumping into a sprawling heap, one or two bowling away as though they sought to escape the splitting axe and the Rayburn. Now it was time to go back to the wood again and . . .

'Jon!' Sylvia appeared in the doorway and his first glance told him that something was wrong. Her features were whiter than usual and she glanced continually about her, 'Jon, there's been somebody here!'

'What! Who?' His mouth went dry and the sweat inside his T-shirt was suddenly cold. 'What on earth are you talking about?'

'There was somebody here about a quarter of an hour ago.'

'Yes, but who? A man? A woman?'

'I ... I didn't see them.'

He closed his eyes momentarily, almost yelled 'Then how the fuck did you know they were here?' Instead he spoke calmly, knew he had to reassure her. 'How do you know then?'

'I heard them. They went in the shed over there, rummaged around, then came out again and left the door swinging open, just like it is now.'

He turned, saw that she spoke the truth. He knew the door had been closed when he left because he had fetched the chainsaw out of there before breakfast and had replaced the stout gate-hook in the 'eye'. It fitted tight, too tight, so that more often than not you had to jerk it free to open the door. It was beyond anything other than a human being to open it.

The shed was not in full view of the cottage windows, a bare stone wall facing in this direction. Without going outside Sylvia would not have been able to see whoever had been in the shed and . . .

'Christ!' He saw the debris on the floor, the spilled contents of his workbench, boxes of screws, nuts, nails scattered over the whole floor so that they overflowed out into the yard. 'Some bugger's been stealing my tools.'

Jon Quinn had a tidy mind, Jackie used to call him obsessional. If you put everything back where you got it from as soon as you've finished with it, you'll know where to find it next time, he used to tell her. Consequently, within a couple of minutes he knew which of his tools were gone, a process of elimination from those still hanging from the nails above the bench. Two screwdrivers, a hammer, a hacksaw, a chisel. . . The Black and Decker toolset Jackie had given him for Christmas was still there, so was his spare chainsaw. It didn't add up. Or did it?

'A thief,' Sylvia's tone was low and frightened.

'It looks that way,' he muttered. And everything they've stolen is something that could be used as a weapon. In addition to that it means that they've now found us, they know exactly where we're holed up.'

'I heard somebody in the shed so I locked the door.' She clung on to his arm. 'I didn't dare go out to look.'

'Just as well,' he answered. Because if you had you'd probably be dead now like Gilbert in the wood. 'We've got to keep a watchful eye out,' Trite, an understatement. If you're not on the alert the whole time you're likely to end

up dead, just like Gwyther would have killed me.

He kicked the nails and screws back inside, closed the door and flipped the hook back into place. 'I'm not going to bother getting any more wood today, I've got a pretty good load.'

'Shall we go into the village this afternoon then?' 'I'm just too bloody knackered.' He squeezed her hand, wondered if he'd have to come up with an additional excuse but she did not press the point. Possibly she was not as anxious to make contact with others now that there had been a prowler in the yard. 'Let's have something to eat and then I'll try and think of a way of catching those goats and bringing them down here to the goat-house.'

'I wonder who it was,' she said as they went inside. 'Gwyther?'

Christ no, but maybe it's a good job you didn't set eyes on him if it was anybody like old Bill. 'It could have been just anybody,' he replied casually. 'Like I said before, there are bound to be bands of vagrants roaming the countryside after a holocaust of this nature and well do well to keep out of their way, not advertise our presence.'

But he knew Sylvia wouldn't be satisfied until they had been to the village. Sooner or later she was going to have to witness for herself what the terrible micro-organisms had done to humanity, see these throwbacks with her own eyes.

Rounding up the nanny goats was a comparatively simple operation, an idea that Jon Quinn had hit upon whilst they ate a salad lunch. For once Sylvia did not complain about a plateful of sprouted seed salad and some hard goat cheese. A cheese that Jackie had made; on occasions Jon had difficulty in swallowing.

'I want you to help me this afternoon,' he said, putting his plate in the sink, noting at the same time that she had not yet washed up the breakfast dishes.

'How?' She tensed, was already thinking up a feasible reason to refuse.

'Well, our priority is to get the goats down into the shed in the yard so that they can be milked,' he said. The kids will be a lot easier to catch than the goals and where the kids go, their mothers will follow. Get me?'

'I see.' She pursed her lips and a worried frown creased her forehead. 'But suppose that billy . . .'

'I don't think he'll trouble us,' Jon told her. 'I reckon he's gone off into the woods, myself.'

Within the hour all the goats were safely shut in the shed by the house. The young kids had shown no fear of the approaching humans even though their mothers kept their distance, had come skipping towards Jon and Sylvia. They had been grabbed, carried home, the nannies following reluctantly. Just as Jon had said, they would not desert their offspring.

Now he leaned on the stable door studying the animals at close quarters. Certainly they had undergone a change, the white Saanen hair growing long and coarse, restlessly pacing quarters which had once been familiar but now they appeared not to recognise their surroundings. They eyed Jon Quinn with distrust, no spark of memory showing in their eyes. Distrust. Milking them wasn't going to be easy but he consoled himself that he had successfully got them down here. He was anxious about the calves now. Gwyther's dog . . . no, one dog alone could not have killed and eaten Gilbert like that, the billy was

strong and vicious, as dangerous as a bull when he was angered. It would take more than one canine predator to do that.

The electricity was gone now so they had to resort to candles for indoor lighting, small flickering flames casting dancing yellow light, creating shadows that hovered in the corners of the rooms and could have hidden anything depending upon how far you let your imagination run riot. 'We may as well go to bed,' Jon said. 'There are some old oil-lamps out in the shed somewhere. I'll hunt them out tomorrow and you can have a go at cleaning them up. Then we'll have to get some paraffin from somewhere.' From the village garage. Tomorrow.

Sleeping in the same bed as Sylvia was becoming a strained affair. Only a few weeks ago, Jon reflected, it had been exciting, erotic. That was because they hadn't gone to bed to sleep, the difference again between wife and mistress. You stripped off, made love, got dressed again and went your own separate ways, back to another way of life. Just a sexual relationship and now it was falling apart because something more was being asked of it.

He tried not to watch her undress because that in itself was a rejection of himself, the way she pulled her nightdress on before she slid her pants off, her back towards him, easier by candlelight than by the harsh glare of an electric bulb. He found his own reactions the same, pulling his pyjama trousers on under the protective shield of his shirt. Strangers, that was what it amounted to. Under the same roof the chemistry didn't mix. They would have to work at it because they didn't have any choice; no marital partners to go back to, no way they could split up. They would have to talk it over but not tonight because they were too tired.

He knew what was on her mind; that prowler. Thank Christ she hadn't set eyes on him. If he was anything like Gwyther she would have had hysterics. Jon couldn't get Gilbert off his mind, found himself visualising the fight to the death, wild shaggy dogs circling warily, snarling and slobbering, then bunching for the final kill.

'I can't stand much more of this,' she whispered out of the darkness, lying facing away from him. 'Every day brings new terrors.'

'I guess it's the same for everybody else maybe the whole world over,' he answered. 'You just have to learn to live with it. We're not doing so bad really. Tomorrow we'll bring those calves home.'

'All you think about is goats and calves and organic food,' she sneered. 'I'm beginning to believe that you want it this way, Jon. That's why Jackie was on the point of walking out on you. I saw a play once on the telly, this guy had kidded his family that there had been a nuclear attack, had kept them living in a shelter for a whole fortnight, even removed the fuses so that they thought the electric was gone.'

'We'll go to the village tomorrow.' Jesus, he hated her for saying that. 'And then you can see for yourself that I'm not conning you.'

A strained silence. He almost considered getting up and going downstairs, sleeping on the sofa in the kitchen. But they needed each other whether they liked it or not. He found himself thinking about Jackie again, a kind of defence mechanism when the going got tough. He almost laughed aloud when he became aware that he had an erection, and it was nothing to do with Sylvia Atkinson. If she had rolled over towards him now he would probably have softened up, turned away.

He recalled the first time it had happened with himself and Jackie, back in their courting days when life was nice and boring. They had been parked up in a field gateway one autumn night, had almost been scared to go the whole way but eventually they had gone too far to back down. Both of them scared, tense, in case they proved to be a disappointment to the other. Let's fuck and get it over with, for Christ's sake.

He always reckoned that she had faked an orgasm that night. He'd nearly had to do just that himself, had to make a concerted physical effort to achieve his climax. Hard work for both of them. That was what marriage was all about, working at everything to make it work. Crazy, but it was no good on your own.

Sylvia was asleep, he could tell by her heavy rhythmic breathing. He started to feel sorry for her. Sooner or later she would find out just what was going on out there and then she'd really need him. It might serve to bring them together.

Suddenly he was aware of something outside the workings of his own grasshopper mind, a noise that infiltrated his fantasies, wilted his erection. A distant baying sound, rising to a wailing pitch, so that it vibrated the night air like an electric storm, brought with it a lowering of the body temperature as your terror began. Dogs, at least Jon supposed they were canine, beasts of the chase running down their prey just as they had pursued Gilbert, pulled him down, torn the flesh from the goat's bones whilst it still lived, its screams growing weaker and weaker until death finally released it from its agonies. Then silence.

A silence that revealed a far more insidious noise, one that was closer than the forest on the skyline, one that chilled his blood almost to freezing point. He stiffened, listened and tried to relate the sounds to those who made them. Padding bare footsteps, a snuffling of breath like a jungle hunting beast trying to scent its prey. A metallic click, following by the creaking of rusted hinges; the shed door opening, another foray amongst the tools on the workbench.

He almost got out of bed, went to the window, tried to see these creatures of the night. No, he didn't want to see! His brain conjured up a vision of old Gwyther, those mad eyes, the killing look. Enough to drive a man right out of his mind because they had no right to exist on this earth.

Lying there, forced to listen, trying to make out how many of them there were. It was impossible to tell, a bunch of them certainly, maybe as many as a dozen. Bestial intruders.

Another click, a rattling: the latch on the front door. Please, Jesus, no, Jon remembered that the twelve-bore was still down in the porch, cursed himself for not bringing it upstairs. His reaction was to pull the sheets up over his head, shut himself off from the outside world, just himself and Sylvia. We don't belong here, they won't see us, won't harm us.

They'll kill you if they find you.

He could still hear them at the door, scraping the woodwork with ragged fingernails trying to find some way in, one of them wheezing as though he had asthma. Sylvia was still asleep, thank God. If they got inside then there was no hope for either of them, just brutal death. Jon wanted to clasp his hands over his ears, didn't want to hear them when they came up the stairs.

And suddenly he couldn't hear them at all, no stealthy footfalls, no stertorous breathing. Total silence. Even those animals up in the forest had

stopped howling; a total cessation of those awful nocturnal activities.

It was some time before he realised that those semi-human beings had gone. He lay listening but there were no further sounds; nothing at all.

A reprieve, no more. They had discovered this place, knew that survivors were hiding out there.

And sooner or later they would return.

CHAPTER TEN

ROD SAVAGE had one regret and that was the fact that there was no newspaper still running which could print his feature article. When one is a leading freelance journalist, and has managed to escape from a London seething with primitive fury and death, then it is a major disaster to have an eye-witness account of happenings with nowhere to publish it.

Tall and lean, with sparse hair, balding faster now that he was past forty, he was rarely seen without a pipe in his mouth, most of the time unlit, the tobacco juice in the bowl bubbling every time he drew on it. A loner, he devoted his life to coming up with unusual and sensational articles, acquiring inside information which had on more than one occasion raised the eyebrows of officialdom.

Had he been a religious man he would have been convinced that God had spared him so that he might chronicle events which had, in fact, thrown Britain into a state of civil war. But he was an atheist and attributed the fact that he had been spared to coincidence, but he was determined to capitalise on it. One day things had to return to some kind of normality and when that happened there would be a paper somewhere only too eager to publish his story. He might even stretch it into a book.

Rod Savage had no permanent residence outside his cottage in Wales, a little two-up, two-down stone building to which he retired at infrequent intervals. Usually he rented a bedsit or small flat in the metropolis on a six-month lease and then moved on. No ties, he often quoted, was the secret of a successful journalist.

The basement flat in Finchley had been vacant for over a year, which was hardly surprising when one viewed its state of dereliction. The landlord was biding his time, waiting for the flats on the upper storeys to be vacated by their dissatisfied tenants and then the whole building would be renovated and put on the market. In the meantime he was not prepared to spend money on either repairs or decorations. But he was not averse to letting the basement on a weekly basis for cash.

Savage had wrinkled his nose at the smell of damp, noted that the only two windows had been broken and boarded up so that it was necessary to keep the

electric light on the whole time. Unfit for human habitation, it might even have been condemned had its state been brought to the notice of the authorities, but the rent was less than half what he would have paid elsewhere. A sleeping bag and something to cook on were all that Rod Savage required; there was no lease involved for obvious reasons and the rent was paid in cash on a Friday. Convenient, he could come and go as he pleased, did not even have to give notice when he was moving on elsewhere.

A month later he went down with flu. Nothing to do with his living conditions, damp and airless, he told himself, just a virus he had picked up, possibly on the crowded undergrounds; nothing to get worried about, all you did was go to bed and let the fever run its course.

It was a bad attack all right, several days of feverishness, lying in that darkened basement flat, followed by a week of resting, noting a gradual improvement. Once he had almost made the effort to go outside and ask somebody to call a doctor but he didn't because he had no faith in GPs. All they did was to pack you with drugs which could produce very nasty side-effects. He also had a fear of hospitals and some well-meaning doctor might order him to be removed to one. He would fight the illness his own way.

So he just sweated it out, felt his strength returning, and by the time he was able to go outside the city was caught up in a frenzy of destruction and looting, tribal warfare that went back at least four thousand years to the days when London was no more than a cluster of stone-built huts.

Rod Savage began to piece the story together with the aid of his transistor and CB radio. The CB had served him well in the past, you could listen in to-all kinds of conversations, and he had been the first reporter on the scene of those macabre Muswell Hill murders simply because he had picked up a snippet from a police radio. Illegal, but in Rod's book of rules the end justified the means. You only got the top stories by sticking your neck out.

Radio broadcasts continued for a few days, national and local. There was a lot of confusion at first, the general opinion being that the western world had suffered a Soviet nuclear attack but there were no fireballs, no total destruction of populated areas. Just civilisation gone berserk.

Rod began to compile his notes systematically, sellotaped a large-scale road map to the wall, and using red and black ballpoints formed an overall picture of the state of the UK.

The centre of Birmingham had been gutted by fire and the inferno was still raging unchecked, mostly spread by exploding petrol tanks in abandoned vehicles. Casualties were virtually ignored because the rescue forces were primarily intent on saving 'survivors'. Mobs clashed and fought using weapons that created hideous injuries, shards of glass from broken shop windows and steel girders used as battering rams. No petrol bombs; gunsmiths' shops were ignored because the significance of firearms was not realised.

Gunfire from the small army patrols threw the rioters into a state of terror, had them fleeing and trampling their own kind in their stampede to escape the hail of lead. Yet the armed forces were so outnumbered that artillery counted for little; they were not bent on wholesale slaughter, only killing in self-defence. It transpired that there were more survivors than one would have thought possible; underground workers, miners, and those who had escaped for no apparent reason. The unprecedented storms and gales had been the one reason why the casualty rate had not been close on 100 per cent. Freak weather of the kind which brought about catastrophes in tropical countries had swept across the Atlantic, wreaking havoc but dispersing the micro-organisms out into the

North Sea. Otherwise the poisoned atmosphere might have lingered for days, even weeks. Now it was gone, leaving behind it a civilisation thrown back to the state of its early ancestry.

Vehicles littered every street, fresh food stores were looted, but the rampagers were ignorant of canned or processed foodstuffs. Livestock were slaughtered in rural areas. Disease would follow surely, for decomposing corpses lay in their hundreds in every town and city; it was to be seen how resistant this new species of mankind was. Starvation was inevitable. Would they then turn to cannibalism?

The Royal Family had been safely transferred to the top-security underground headquarters in Hertfordshire. Helicopters were being used to air-lift survivors from urban areas, and 'safety regions' were being set up away from the towns, mostly fairly remote villages taken over by the army with defences erected to repel primitive hostile forces. Modern man had to be protected from the 'throwbacks' at all costs if civilisation was to survive.

Gradually, painstakingly, Rod Savage pieced together an overall picture. After radio transmission had petered out, and his CB went dead, he had to rely on forays into London itself. A fugitive, he dodged both the hate- and fear-crazed crowds as well as the rescue patrols. The last thing he wanted was to be forcibly hauled out of here. He would go when he was ready and not until.

Returning to his basement refuge at night he typed up his notes by candlelight, developed the photographs which he had taken. One bulging pseudo-leather briefcase contained the whole inside story and he slept with it in his sleeping bag.

The crowds were gradually leaving the city, dispersing into the home counties, an exodus from the concrete battlefields where flies swarmed on the bodies of the slain, where the stench of death and blood was overpowering.

The night he heard them rattling the door of his basement hideout, Rod Savage knew that it was time for him to be leaving, too. He left the next day, moving cautiously along deserted streets, a fugitive who would become a beast of the chase if he was spotted, clutching his briefcase to him for he owed its contents to the remnants of a civilised society. It was also worth an awful lot of money.

It was towards midday that he spied the low-flying helicopter, managed to attract the pilot's attention. Half an hour later he was gratefully breathing in the fresh sweet Essex air of Roydon, a picturesque village that now resembled a fortress, surrounded by barbed-wire fortifications and electric fences, the houses rehabilitation centres for the rescued, shocked men, women and children who were faced with the task of rebuilding society. It was going to be a long process, perhaps generations, always under the threat of attack from the wild tribes which inhabited the fields and hills.

Rod Savage had no intention of remaining here. The information he was busily gathering was far from complete. There was very little news of what was happening in Wales and he was determined to go back to his cottage and find out. It would be a long and dangerous trek, almost two hundred miles across terrain as it might have been thousands of years ago, with death an everyday occurrence.

He checked his roadmap again; the area to the west of the Midlands was virtually blank, terra incognita. The borderlands, hills and tracts of moorland which would surely be teeming with squat hairy people who had gone

back in time. But he would go all the same.

A week later Rod left the Roydon camp, a POW making an escape bid, for nobody was allowed to venture outside the perimeter. He cut a strand of barbed-wire, crawled on his stomach for over a hundred yards, dragging his briefcase with him. He had had second thoughts about taking it along; he might be killed, it might get stolen, but nevertheless it was unfinished work, his work, and, unlike his Falklands mission, there was nobody he could entrust it to. In all probability he would never return to Roydon. So he took it with him.

A warm moonless night, reaching the motorway and following the hard shoulder, ready to dive into the undergrowth at the first sign of anybody approaching. Multiple crashes, the stink of rotting flesh from the victims who had not been taken away. Carnage, prowling foxes slinking in to feed on the bodies under the cover of darkness; rats scurrying in and out of the battered vehicles.

This was Britain in the eighties, the start of the apocalypse, the New Stone Age.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JACKIE COULD not get the prisoner out of her mind that night. She listened to Kuz's breathing; knew that he slept heavily. Instinctively she edged away from him, afraid of him. So fierce, so possessive, she had witnessed his anger amongst the others, seen how he had frightened them into subservience. They all lived in dread of him, not so much for what he had done but because of what he might do. There was no way of guessing that until it happened, and when it did she hoped she wasn't around.

A new side of him had emerged today although she had long been aware of its existence. Cruelty! He was more than cruel, sadistic; enjoyed inflicting pain on others. He hadn't needed to jab the prisoner with the sharp fork but he had done it because he liked doing it, had laughed behind his thick beard when the other had winced, half cried out. And she knew now that he liked hurting her too. He had done so only a very short time ago.

There was no gentleness in Kuz's advances. When lust was upon him he took her, neither expected nor accepted any response. His personal pleasure was all that mattered to him, she was an object to fulfil his primitive desires, nothing else. Her body screamed for orgasm but all too often he cast her roughly to one side seconds after he had climaxed. Let me sleep, woman, for I am tired. I will tell you when I need you again.

That was how it had been tonight. Kuz had sat up late by the dying embers of the fire, his clouded expression that of a man who needed to be alone, to think his own thoughts to the exclusion of everything else. So she had retired to bed, was almost asleep when he came for her.

He jerked her into wakefulness by her long hair, pulled her up into a sitting

position and by the glow of the last embers she saw his expression, twisted animal lust that transcended fury. She choked back a scream as he dragged her down on to the floor, threw her forcibly over into a kneeling position. My pleasure, not yours, woman!

She hadn't been ready, tensed herself as he stabbed at her, knew it would hurt. It did. It could have been a roughly hewn wooden dildo that bored into her, drew back, thrust again. And again.

She would have fallen forward had he not been supporting her, his arms around her from behind in a crushing grip, his fingers twisting and gouging her soft breasts, pinching and scraping, screwing up her soft nipples. But she dared not cry out aloud for he would surely have beaten her, perhaps worse.

Jackie felt the thick warm liquid filling her up, knew that Kuz was almost finished. His withdrawal was followed by a vicious thrust, the force of it throwing her against the side of the stone bed. Blinding pain as her forehead took the impact, red spotted blackness. His hands sought her again; roughly, angrily pulling her up, hurling her back on to the pile of hides. She rolled, bounced off the stone wall, lay still.

Then he was beside her, stretching out, turning away from her. Another need had to be satisfied - sleep.

Kuz was sleeping very deeply. Her pain simmered to a dull ache and then she found herself thinking about the prisoner in the pit again. A strange creature, so different; flesh that was white and soft, hairless. An absence of muscle. Clothes that stifled his body, barely allowed it to breathe. And yet she found him fascinating. So ... gentle, harmless.

Something flickered in her brain like a spent torch bulb trying to reignite itself. A dim flash, then it went out. A spark, a faint memory stirring for a fraction of a second, showing her a face then cutting out before she could recognise it. Her pulses raced, her heart speeded up a beat. Features similar to those of the one the menfolk had brought home from their hunting trip, deep blue eyes that pleaded with her, lips that moved, formed words she understood. / need you, Jackie. Please come back to me. Disturbed, she jerked back into full wakefulness, thought about the captive again and her eyes filled with tears. Pity was a new experience for her, one that she had had no use for before. Strength predominated amongst her people, one did not show weakness because there was no place for it. She had never cried before, the threat of tears made her afraid because she did not understand them, only her feelings. That man down in the deep hole meant more to her than any of those around her, more than Kuz. Fear, in case her slumbering man so much as guessed her thoughts. He would do more than just beat her, she was certain, he would kill her!

And she knew that she had to go to the prisoner. The idea set her whole body trembling and she inched even further away from Kuz. Her heart was pounding wildly and sensations which Kuz had failed to arouse within her were making themselves known. An instinct beyond her comprehension was calling her, and she had no choice other than to answer it.

She moved slowly, fearfully, her eyes fixed on the sleeping form by her side. She already had an excuse in case he suddenly awoke; I need to squat. Maybe he would believe her, grab her again by the hair, drag her back, shake her until her brain slopped from side to side. You're lying, woman, you're slinking off to fuck with one of those men out there, aren't you? I'd sooner kill you than have you mate with one of them. She knew he would, too.

But he didn't stir, not even when she straddled over him, eased her trembling right leg clear of the bed, dropped to her knees. She was trembling violently, opened her mouth to stop her teeth chattering. If he sees me now, I'm done.

She crawled, drew back when an ember brightened, burst into yellow flame then died down again, eyed her redly, wickedly. See, Kuz, your woman sneaks off on a mission of infidelity; awake, and beat her.

Kuz half-stirred, grunted in his sleep, then his breathing lapsed back into its former rhythm. Jackie scuttled like a crab surprised by a rock-pool fisherman, a desperation about her ungainly movements. If he wakes now I shall flee into the darkness, hide from him. I would sooner be dead than let you take me again, Kuz.

The settlement was still and silent, the stone houses starkly silhouetted against a quarter moon. The inhabitants slept, had no need to mount a guard. She kept to the shadows, ran from building to building, glancing back fearfully, but there was no pursuit. How long before Kuz's instincts warned him that he was alone in his bed?

Before her she saw a patch of shadow that was blacker than the rest: the pit! New fears assailed her. The strange man who lay in its depths might resent her visit, might shout a warning that would bring the others. She was an enemy, he might attack her, kill her, if she went to him. No, he was not strong enough, her own strength was greater than his.

She lay full-length, used her elbows to propel herself forward. Her arm brushed against something and she recognised it as the ladder; to free him would be simplicity itself. No, first she must look, see him again. She had to be sure.

Nervously she edged her head and shoulders over the rough brink, narrowed her eyes, tried to adjust them to the dense blackness below. Nothing but darkness, the pit might have been empty, the prisoner somehow having scaled the sheer sides and fled. Despair; even if this was so then she was not going back to Kuz. She would die first, by her own hand if necessary.

Wait! She could just make out a shape huddled in the bottom, pale flesh, a curled-up sleeping form. Her acute hearing picked out his breathing, soft and regular. She continued to stare, waited for her eyes to become accustomed to the blackness as they surely would, felt her body tingle with anticipation.

A noise which she identified at once, a dislodged pebble sliding, bouncing, rolling; hitting something, coming to a standstill. Jackie caught her breath, knew that she had knocked against a loose stone, that it had struck the slumbering captive, was stirring him uneasily. He sat up, glanced about him, then looked upwards. And saw her.

'Who's there? What do you want?'

Incomprehensible words in a strange tongue, but fear rather than anger. His face was upturned and she saw the hopelessness in his wide eyes, a hand flung up to protect his head as though he expected to be stoned.

Jackie rose to a kneeling position, wished that in some way she could communicate. See, I am a woman, naked because I have just left my sleeping man's bed. Do not be alarmed because I mean you no harm. I ... I ... she could not express her own feelings even to herself, but something inside her seemed to say, 'I have met one like you before, I know I have.' But she could not be sure . . . that face with the blue eyes had been only a dream and now it was

gone forever.

He stood up, and they looked at each other uncertainly, warily. Phil Winder thought, Is this some kind of a trick? He recognised her now, the girl who had been the chiefs woman, too damned attractive for this lot of gorillas. What was she up to, though?

She drew back, disappeared from view. He sighed, leaned back against the side, told himself that she had probably only sneaked down here out of curiosity. God, I wish I'd got some clothes. He sensed that he might be blushing which was bloody silly considering the predicament he was in.

A scraping noise had him jerking his head back upwards; she was here again, struggling to drag something along the ground. He gasped as he saw a criss-cross of uprights and rungs: the ladder! Christ, she was strong, that thing must have weighed several hundredweight, huge boughs cut from growing timber, crosspieces roped on to it. It could still be a trick, though; let the poor bastard think he's going to escape then chase him like a pack of beagles after a hare, set him up for some sport.'

He didn't have much choice, though. The ladder was being eased slowly over the side and now he could reach it, take the strain and help her to lower it. If I stop here I'm at their mercy, at least in the open I do have a slim chance, better than dying like a badger in a baiting pit.

The ladder was down, resting firmly on the bottom; all he had to do was to climb up it. He grasped the rungs, looked up at her again, the reflection of the faint moonlight showing pity and . . . pleading. Please climb up because I need you!

He moved slowly, uncertainly. It could still be a trap, they had forced her to lure him up against her will. Somewhere in the distance dogs were howling, their eager primitive tongue sending a chill up his spine as though they had already scented him and were straining at their leashes.

Phil Winder scrambled out of the deep hole, knelt there looking at his rescuer. She was beautiful all right, but why was she naked? These people wore rough clothing so she didn't have to come to his aid in the nude. Again his inhibitions troubled him as her gaze ran over his body, her eyes wide with amazement. I've never seen anybody quite like you, mister, but I like what I see.

She glanced around, raised a finger to her lips. He listened, heard only the pounding of his own pulses (or hers) and that constant canine noise that reminded him of the howling of wolves in those north-west movies which they showed on TV periodically. She pointed away to the skyline where he saw a black uneven outline that could only be a forest. Pointing again, grasping his arm urgently. We must flee to the woods before they find out that we are missing. Both of us, I'm going too. They'll kill me if they catch me. You, loo.

He followed in her wake, the firm outline of her body, buttocks that wiggled seductively even in primitive flight, moving as lithely as a hunted deer. He would go where she led, unquestioningly; she wanted to leave this place for some reason and he would go with her. He didn't want to think beyond that.

The eastern sky was beginning to pale when they finally came to the fringe of the big pine forest, another world, dank and evil-smelling. A stench like that of rotting corpses; stinkhorn, a fungus that crawled with flies perhaps even fooling them that they were feeding on decomposing flesh.

A magpie chattered a machine-gun-like early warning and a jay screeched its acknowledgement, set a carrion crow cawing. Man was abroad, he had infiltrated one of Nature's fortresses. Beware!

Phil Winder held back a second, hesitated. He would not have ventured in there under normal circumstances, still pandered to his childhood fear of the dark which he had never really overcome. It was the sort of place where your imagination could run riot and after what he had already seen and experienced . . .

The girl turned, grabbed him by the wrist. Come on, we've got to go this way because if we don't they will catch up with us. They will have missed us by now, be on our trail.

He did not resist, allowed her to pull him gently along. Winding paths through towering dark green trees, an occasional clump of grass or some ferns in those places where the sun found a way through. You got the impression that this coniferous monster was slowly swallowing you up and there was no way back. Ever.

Phil noticed his companion glancing behind her every so often, once stopping to listen. Total silence, even the corvines weren't calling any longer. Probably they had flown out to the fields for their morning feed, found death in a variety of forms and scavenged hungrily. A train of thought that led back to himself; Phil was aware how dry his mouth had gone, a sour taste on his furred tongue. He and the girl could end up like that, maybe not even dead when those filthy birds flew in, not enough strength to ward them off. Feeling your flesh being gouged by claws, sharp beaks ripping it from the bones. They always went for the eyes first . . .

The sun was up. Occasionally they glimpsed it through the dense fir branches, felt its heat. Next came the flies, black swarms which had possibly grown tired of feeding on stinkhorn. His companion seemed oblivious of them even when they settled on her, crawled over her face. Phil swatted at them ceaselessly, futilely. A kind of game which you couldn't win, like a rigged fairground gallery; you hit one but it didn't drop, buzzed angrily and came in at you again.

They had to emerge from the wood soon, surely. Phil knew the place vaguely although he had never ventured up here before, a skyline view from his parents' farm. Once his father had gone up there looking for missing lambs but Phil had stayed behind with his mother. The wood couldn't be all that big. If you kept walking you had to come out at the other end eventually. He wondered if the girl knew where she was going or whether she was just running blindly. He wished he could talk to her, make her understand things beyond the simplicity of sign language. No sign of life, not even a rabbit or a grey squirrel; a dead, dead place. A host of fears. Perhaps they were going round in circles, would still be in here when night came again. Their pursuers must realise where they had fled, might be in here now searching for them, crouching in the trees, listening for soft footfalls on the thick carpet of dead pine needles. Phil Winder found himself watching the uppermost branches of the trees as they passed beneath them. When he had been captured the attack had come from above.

Suddenly the fugitives were out of the trees. The path veered sharply to the right, then a left-hand bend, and before them were the familiar bracken- and heather-covered hillsides sloping steeply downwards. The other side of the Hill.

They stood there just looking at the scenery like a couple of holidaymakers who had spent the day climbing to the summit of a fell just to look back on the panoramic view. A patchwork of green quilt untidily stitched together with ragged hedgerows that had been mutilated by modern flail-cutters and which Nature was doing her damndest to hide with lush new growth, farm buildings which had stood for a century or more, sheep grazing peacefully. Nothing untoward about it from this distance, you might even have kidded yourself that everything was perfectly normal, that the wood behind you had conjured up some awful nightmare but you were fast getting it out of your system.

But it was the sheer silence that told you everything wasn't all right, told you that it wasn't just a dark dream brought on by that forest. It was real.

A familiar scene viewed from a different angle. Phil Winder noted the farms and holdings, found himself working out their locations, their ownership. Gwyther's in the hollow, and if you followed the Hill right round you came to that new chap's place. He tried to remember the fellow's name. It eluded him. And then he found himself staring directly down on his own folks' farm, identification slow to filter through because he had never imagined it would look quite like that from above. The house, the yard, that dutch barn with just a few bales of last year's hay left in it whilst the growing crop was already starting to spoil in the fields. Sheer waste, but it didn't damned well matter any more, did it?

Jackie was pulling at his arm, the brief respite in her urgency over. We must not delay, they are surely not far behind us. Let us follow the valley; pointing, stabbing the air with a finger in an easterly direction.

'No,' he snapped, pointed at the Winder farm insistently. 'We can go there. That is my home.'

She didn't understand, was becoming frantic, pulling at his arm, making little grunting noises. We must hurry.

And that was when he hit her. A stinging slap across the face that jerked her head sideways, brought a yelp of shock and pain from her lips. Anger had him yelling, 'That's my bloody home down there and if I want to go back I will and you can go your own way. I don't want to go home, I walked out because of what happened there, but since I found out about the outside world I'm running back. To hide. To die.'

Guilt and remorse came fast on the heels of his unleashed fury. 'Oh Christ, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit you.' I did, I just wish I hadn't.

He saw the tears in her eyes, the way her body trembled.

She was trying to cry but it didn't come easy because out here crying was a weakness that your own kind took advantage of. If only he could made her understand; point down there to that farmhouse, tap your chest. My home. It might get through.

He didn't need to because her hand had found his again, a squeeze this time instead of an insistent tug. I'm sorry, it was not my place to protest against your will because you are now my man.

It was settled then and he knew that she would follow him down the Hill.

He had to keep reminding himself that it was only yesterday that he had left the farm. It seemed an age, like returning home for the summer vacation, wondering what had changed in his absence.

Jackie's grip tightened on his arm but she wasn't trying to dissuade him from going into the house, only showing her own fear of an unfamiliar dwelling-place. He saw her amazement at things like doors and windows, the smoothness of the stonework on the walls. Starting in alarm as the latch clicked, clinging to him like a child.

Phil glanced around, thought perhaps his mother and father might have returned. But they hadn't. Once you turned feral you didn't come back.

Jackie stood there watching him as he went to the kitchen cupboard, reached down a can of beans and a small square tin of corned beef, began to open them. He filled the kettle, discovered to his relief that there was still power coming from the generator. Jackie backed away a step as the kettle began an increasing hum up towards the boil. He gave a little laugh, the first time he had seen the funny side of all this since he had come up from the mine. How the fuck do you explain coffee to an Ancient Brit?

His first task was to work at putting her at her ease. After they had eaten he would look out some clothes for himself; he didn't need them but it would boost his morale. Then they would need to rest. He had not slept for thirty-six hours and he doubted if she had either.

Once again his inhibitions surfaced. Where and how were they going to sleep? There were three bedrooms upstairs, his own, his parents', and the spare room which was full of lumber. He didn't want to sleep in his parents' because . . . well, not after that, certainly. His own then, just a single bed.

'We'd better get some sleep.' He closed his eyes, made a pillow out of his pressed hands.

She nodded, took his arm again. Where you go, I go.

New fears troubled him as they mounted the stairs, Jackie viewing her surroundings with undisguised awe. They were going to share a bed, his own single bed, which meant that they would be crushed up tightly together. He should have been aroused, mankind's strongest urge taking over. Instead, his stomach rolled and he felt sick; perhaps she was aware of his trembling, misinterpreted it for eagerness.

Phil Winder had often wondered if he was gay. No, not really, he just had a very low sex drive, and he was naturally shy of girls. He had had only one real date in his life, Julie who worked in the cafe at Pontypridd, the one that most of the students used. It had taken him six weeks before he had been able to stammer out a request to take her out and it had been a real shock to him when she had nodded her assent and replied, 'Yes, that would be nice.'

Christ, it had to be his biggest anti-climax, an evening of embarrassment and overwhelming inhibitions. He hadn't even kissed her goodnight, knew she didn't want to see him again, knew it would happen again with any girl he dated. Later he got an erection but it was too late then.

Maybe he wasn't exactly gay, just bi-sexual. He hadn't had a homosexual relationship as such, just little things that had happened between himself and Hugh during the time they had shared digs. Two of a kind really, and there had to be an outlet for their frustrations somewhere.

It was Hugh who had begun it, and looking back it seemed relatively harmless. Or was it? Was it just the beginning of something which had never had the opportunity to come to fruition? The most thrilling moment of his life had

been that night when he had been disturbed from a doze by Hugh sitting on the edge of his bed. Phil knew even before the other's hand began to creep beneath the sheets exactly what was going to happen. A moment of electrification and this time there was no embarrassment, no inhibitions because he knew Hugh felt the same way.

It had never ever gone further than gentle mutual masturbation, had lasted for over a year until Hugh graduated. Then Phil's loneliness came seeping back. Now he had a woman and his fears were beginning all over again.

'I'm Phil.' He tapped his bare chest, wished that he could keep her eyes elevated. 'Phil. . . Phil' 'Jac,' she smiled.

He wondered why they had not got around to introductions before. It was the situation, of course. Names counted for nothing in a primitive classless society.

She crossed to the bed, lowered herself on to it, stretched herself out, eyes closed, legs slightly apart. Oh Christ, now it's me who's doing the looking, he thought, let his gaze sweep over her, come to rest on that slit of pink soft flesh. I'd better look out some clothes, some pyjamas maybe.

Her eyes flickered open, caught him staring at her; smiled softly. She had no inhibitions, only civilisation bred inhibitions. Society was gone, it was back to the basics now. He didn't need clothes because it was stifling hot in here. Right now they didn't need anything except each other.

It was fully dark when Phil Winder awoke, lay there and let everything come back to him in its own time. His parents, his capture and escape, the flight . . . Jac! He could hear her faint breathing, felt the warmth of her naked body against his own. So comforting.

Euphoria because they had made love. She had clung to him, wanted him, and now they were together. He did not ever want things to change and spoil all this. He didn't want his parents to come back; they wouldn't, he knew that. They might even be dead and he wasn't a bit sorry because they had made him like he was, given him a sheltered upbringing in every respect. They had sent him to a private school, not for his benefit but as a boost to their own status, wealthy farmers who bought only the best in life for themselves and their only son. Bullshit! They scraped a living, spent their money on building up a facade for the benefit of this scattered community, went without a lot of things that ordinary folks took for granted. And this is what they had done to him. God, he hated them for it, but he'd had the last laugh. This place was his now, every damned piece of stone, every field, every item of machinery. No bloody good to him but it was his and he still had his mind and body intact which was more than either of them had. It was bloody funny. He laughed to himself at the memory of his parents as he had last seen them, two mindless wretches fleeing from their own son because he was the Master Species and they knew it. He hoped they were dead, it would be better for them and for himself. That way a lot of problems were solved.

That just left himself and the girl who called herself Jac. They would live on here, build their own life, cut themselves off from the rest of the world and the remnants of its festering existence. Keep away, we don't need you.

Phil's euphoria took a nosedive. It wouldn't be quite as easy as that because he and Jac were the hunted, fugitives on the run. He had stolen another man's woman, enraged those awful creatures in human shape and they would track him down. They wouldn't give up.

Phil Winder's sweat chilled on his body at the thought. If they found him it would be a fight to the death. But he and Jac could not keep on running for ever.

Up in the hills the wild dogs were howling again. They, too, scented death in the sultry night air.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ERIC ATKINSON had never been the gregarious type, as he had frequently sought to impress upon Sylvia. He didn't like parties, dancing, mixing with people. And even in this reversion to his most basic existence this trait had not changed. He and Marlene had fled the town, headed for wild open countryside. On the way others had joined them, a mass exodus, but he had never envisaged it being this way once they arrived at wherever they were going. Safety in numbers now but later they would all split up.

He did not like community life, it was in contrast to his nature. A dwelling-place somewhere for himself and Marlene, away from the others. But suddenly they were caught up in village life, expected to play their part. You built houses, hunted game, fished the river.

He told Marlene that they should be moving on, was both surprised and angered by her reluctance. She liked it here> she wanted to stay. The other men liked her, too, and that worried him. But there was something else disturbing him, too. It came and went and once it was gone his limited power of reasoning was unable to recall it, creating an unease which unsettled him, made him moody, truly the brooding loner.

But whilst the feeling lasted it was veFy strong. Up until now it had always come upon him at night, waking him out of the deepest slumber, already fully aroused but Marlene by his side was ignored. Sliding out of the bed they shared, a naked hairy being that smoothed his hands over his own body, felt the pulsing that drove him like pistons hammering inside him. Alert, sleep forgotten, going outside and sniffing the night air with dilated nostrils. He smelled her, oh how he smelled her, her musky scent wafted to him on the breeze, filling him with a desire that transcended lust; the dog scenting a bitch on heat, two or three miles away, maybe even further. Inexplicable but compelling, a calling stronger than anything else that the forces of Nature could engender. One mate and one mate alone that mattered; and it was not Marlene.

The first time he had followed the scent, left the settlement and keeping the wind in his face had gone where it led. Steep and treacherous slopes, forced to travel on hands and knees in places, wanting to answer the call but not knowing whom or where, only that it was intended for him and none other.

Running, bounding, desperate for the mating. And then suddenly it was no more! The wind had swung round, taken it elsewhere. Frustrated, he circled the

knoll, tried to pick it up again but it was gone. Mad with desire, finally giving vent to his feelings in the only way he knew how and even then he was not satisfied.

The following night it did not come. He waited, sniffed the air, but there was nothing except the sour sweaty smell of the encampment. Eager to copulate, he ignored once more the woman who was his mate, for her days were numbered.

Somewhere . . . somewhere . . . but where?

He went outside, listened. Far away in the deep woods dogs were howling, not the frantic baying of hunting beasts but rather a frustrated wail. He knew how the animals felt. They would, in all probability, get an answering call. He would not. It was up to him to go out and find his mate.

He slunk away into the darkness, breathing heavily. His skin burned, there was a roaring in his ears. Travelling by instinct, stopping every so often and sniffing the air. He was on the right trail. Alert to every sound, once climbing up into the boughs of an oak tree because he heard one of the wild dogs close by; usually they fled at the approach of humans unless it was a hunting pack scenting blood, but one could never be sure. Down below him he saw the animal cross a patch of faint moonlight, a huge shaggy beast that bore a resemblance to an Alsatian, slobbering mouth wide. It did not even pause when it caught his smell for its mind was on other things. Just as his own was.

A long night that seemed an eternity, a lost soul wandering in the Stygian blackness of the forest, several times losing the scent he was following, then picking it up again. When eventually he emerged from the forest dawn had already broken.

Eric Atkinson rested, sprawled in the soft heather, his urge temporarily overshadowed by the need to sleep. His body cried out for rest; and momentarily the trail had gone cold.

Sleep came with the warmth of the rising sun's rays; a deathlike slumber that only the exhausted know but within him a dream was struggling to surface, a fleeting image that came and went in his dulled brain. A woman's naked body, soft and hairless, her dark eyes sad, searching for him. Finding him. Calling him to her.

His arms reached out for her but she twisted tantalisingly away, those eyes wet with tears. Wisps of memory, mists floated across her features, hid all but the eyes. Watching him, a mute plea. Come back to me, Eric, I need you. Eric? Eric?

The familiarity of it all tortured him, dragged him into realms beyond his power of thinking. A creature so lovely, not his own kind but that did not matter because they had copulated before. Where? When? He didn't know, only that she was desperate for him to come back to her.

And then she faded, drifted back into the darkness and the hot sun beating down on him awoke him, had him righting his way back into the only world he knew. He tried to remember but it hurt, like stones pounding on his skull. But the scent was still there!

The sun was directly overhead when he came to the smallholding on the Hill, crouched down in the hedge bordering the field where four calves grazed, but he had no interest in meat. Only . . . the bitch smell was very strong and he knew that she was here!

It was difficult trying to formulate a plan because his brain did not know anything except basic cunning. Stay hidden here until it gets dark then go in to her, drag her out if necessary.

An hour passed and he could stand the waiting no longer. The urge to mate was driving him crazy; twice his fingers had strayed to his pulsing erection, screaming at him for relief. No, it was a waste when a willing mate lay inside those four stone walls. She wanted him.

Go to her, then!

A frightening thought, one that posed problems beyond his comprehension. He trembled, nausea churned his stomach. That face from his dreams came back again, still partly enshrouded by fingers of mist. I need you, Eric!

He began a stealthy approach up the rutted track, kept close to the hedge, wicked thorns tearing at his rough hide clothing - go back, go back . . .
Eric!

He came to the end of the lane, saw the open yard, hard-baked clay that would turn back to mud with the first shower of rain. The house, a trickle of smoke coming from the chimney. He breathed in the sweet woodsmoke, something else which was musky and did things to him, had him starting forward into the open.

A door, he ran his fingers up and down the smooth woodwork, saw how the paint flaked off. He caught the latch accidentally; it clicked up, dropped back and he leaped away with a snarl in his throat. A strange place but she was indeed a strange woman.

I knew you would come, Eric.

He backed off; there had to be another entrance somewhere, one that he could just walk in through like his own house. Windows; he touched the glass pane, did not like the way they threw his own reflection back at him like still water when you stooped to drink.

A circuit of the cottage and he saw the outbuildings. Perhaps she was in there although his instincts told him otherwise. This time the door swung open at his touch and he stared in disbelief at the interior. A long table cluttered with all kinds of implements, sharp knives, knives with blunt spreading blades, a curved spear; he tested the rusty blade with his finger. It was sharp enough.

Weapons. He grabbed up an assortment of hammers, screwdrivers, chisels and the rusted sickle. With these he could break into this place . . . , no, it was dangerous. Surely she had a mate. The thought was disturbing, began to make him angry. A male lurking in there, knowing that Eric was here, why he had come. You killed for such a reason, because if you didn't it was you who ended up dead. No compromises, a fight to the finish. It was the law of the wild.

Eric licked his bearded lips. He did not relish an encounter, had avoided such skirmishes so far. His stomach did another flip. He was not strong enough to take on a rival, it was not his way. He had not challenged any of the other males when they had mated with Marlene, pretended he had not seen. Marlene did not matter, they could have her, do what they liked with her.

I need you, Eric. I'm waiting.

He drew back into the building, did not want her to see him skulking like

this, smell his sweat of terror. Then, in gradual stages, an idea began to form in his slow muzzy brain.

With help he could overcome his rival, take this woman for his own. He studied the various implements. The men back at the camp would relish the prospect of owning such an array of hunting weapons. Sharp blades that would pierce and slash, blunt ones to club with and shatter stubborn bones. They would follow him here, smash their way into the house for him, kill anybody who tried to stop

them.

Do not harm the woman, she is mine. That was the promise. You have the weapons, I have the female. But could they be trusted when the mating smell hung so heavy in the air?

It was a chance he would have to take. He would put it to the others, weapons and tools in return for the woman who was now taunting him day and night, sleeping and waking.

Reluctantly Eric Atkinson left the Quinn holding, heard her pleas echoing in his brain, driving him crazy.

Don't leave me, Eric. I need you. I shall be back, that I promise. Wearily he set out on the return trip to the settlement beyond the Hill.

That night they were back, a dozen of them eager to get their hands on weapons which would give them supremacy over the other tribes in the hills. If they smelled the bitch-smell then they gave no outward sign. There were plenty of women back in the camp, more than enough to satisfy their needs.

The house was still and dark, no smoke coming from the chimney. Deserted, like every other dwelling you came upon, the occupants having answered the calling and deserted civilisation. Except that Eric knew that she was in there and this time he scented her man, a sour, stronger aroma that was borne to him on the soft summer breeze, one that made him uneasy.

Eric laughed softly to himself; there were enough of them, there would be no problem.

They crowded into the workshop outbuilding, grunted and hissed their delight at what they found in there. Tools and weapons beyond the realms of their limited expectation, scrabbling for possession of whatever took their fancy, examining them with childish glee.

Eric watched them from the doorway, smelled the bitch-smell again. In there, she's in there. Help me break in, kill the male and take her. He clutched at one of them in his frustration, was pushed away. They had forgotten the bargain, were not interested in anything except what they found in this treasure cave.

Anger. He grabbed up a hammer, swung it above his head and as he did so a blow from behind sent him reeling, catapulted him against the solid workbench, an agonising blow in the small of his back. He fell, showered spanners and the contents of a small tool-box over himself, hit the floor. Somebody kicked him, doubled him up, had him clutching at his stomach.

These primitive burglars had what they had come for.

If they had made a bargain then it did not exist any more because they were

incapable of thinking beyond the initial haul. The one who had brought them here had obstructed them so they had struck him down. If he bothered them further they would kill him.

He lay there, watched them shuffle back out into the night, laden with their loot; he was already forgotten as though he had not existed.

Sometime later he followed them, but only as far as the fir spinney, skulking in the dark shadows and staring back at the outline of the house. She was in there. He didn't know who she was, not even sure what she looked like, just a shapely hairless body partly enshrouded by mist. Wanting him!

Don't leave me, Eric.

He heard her cry in his brain, winced because he had let her down. Because they had let him down. Guilt and frustration. He would go to her whatever, he did not need their help.

A plan, as far as his brain was capable of forming one. He would not return to the camp, there was nothing there for him anyway. Those who wanted Marlene could have her. He would remain here, live in these fields and woods, watch the house day and night. Sooner or later either she or the male had to come outside. If it was the latter then he would kill him, creep up on him and strike him down. If it was the woman then he would grab her, carry her off into the forest. She would not struggle for had she not called to him for help?

Eric Atkinson began to haul himself up into the boughs of one of the big pines, disturbed some roosting fowl which squawked their protest at this nocturnal disturbance, fluttered in alarm, hit the ground below with a thump and ran off clucking angrily.

He settled down, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on that door which had barred his entrance earlier. Before long it must surely open.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IT WAS late July before Rod Savage finally reached the Welsh borderlands. The going had been slower than even he had anticipated, involving many detours to avoid the settlements of wild tribes which had sprung up across the countryside. No fixed pattern, that was the danger, you might walk into them in places you least expected to find them. Once he had lain up in a dilapidated cowshed for three days because a number of travelling throwbacks had set up camp all around him overnight. Just when he feared lest their site might be a permanent one they had moved on,

You could not risk getting near them. Sometimes if they caught sight of you they fled with howls of anguish, other times they stood and stared in bewilderment, began to follow you. So you did your best to lose them as

quickly as possible. Once you had been out of their sight for more than a few minutes they seemed to forget all about you. But you couldn't trust them, so you kept out of their way.

Throughout his travels Savage had continued to compile his notes. He noted the behaviour of the 'enemy', watched from cover as they killed livestock in the fields, saw how they gathered wild fruit and raided vegetable gardens. Food was plentiful for both them and himself. Deserted village shops, the shelves laden with canned and convenience foodstuffs which these people had no idea how to open or prepare. He carried a small supply with him, replenished it every few days.

He steered clear of survivors too. From time to time he found people who for a variety of reasons had escaped the devastation of germ warfare, had barricaded themselves in their houses and were determined to repel any invaders.

Once he was fired at with an air-rifle, a .177 slug chipping the brickwork of a low stone wall only a foot or so in front of him.

'Keep moving, you bastard!'

Savage saw the face at the upper window of a cottage on the opposite side of the road, an old man struggling to cock his weapon, trying to reload it with a shaking hand. Senile, trusting nobody. He couldn't blame him.

There were isolated troop movements. Rod Savage lay and watched them from a steep hillside. Sporadic gunfire, driving the raiders out of a blazing tract of suburbia, a couple of Green Goddesses moving in and playing their hoses on the flames. Some of the mob came back to within throwing distance, hurled stones. More shots. Two or three of them dropped, the rest ran. Guerrilla warfare; Britain was likely to be this way for a long time to come.

Occasionally Rod spied a helicopter or a light aircraft. Reconnaissance craft, maybe locating the movements of the tribes, doing a count of numbers. The remnants of civilisation had the technology to fight this war, the enemy had the advantage of numbers.

In Herefordshire he witnessed some ruthless counterattacks, commando-style, that could only be SAS manoeuvres. Three or four attackers surprised an encampment, mowed the fleeing occupants down with submachine gunfire.

Rod Savage almost threw up. Pointless slaughter. The area reeked of death.

It was early August, according to the calendar in his diary which he meticulously ticked off daily, when he finally reached his cottage outside the small market town of Knighton. The building had its usual look of dereliction which wasn't surprising, the small garden a mass of lush weeds.

He struggled with the lock and eventually the key turned. At least they had not broken in. Funny, they seemed afraid of locked houses, only raided outbuildings and open sheds.

He spent the first day straightening the interior, preparing for a long stay. He could even be here for the rest of his life. He only wished he could find out how the rest of the world had fared. Had the States reverted to pre-Columbus days, the redskins finally taking back their land from the invading white man? Europe overrun by primitive man? Syria and Lebanon fighting a meaningless war as they had done for years, the Soviet Union paying the supreme penalty for their interference?

Questions that would possibly never be answered because survival was a priority and you didn't give a damn about anybody else.

He went outside, sensed a change in the atmosphere, the coolness of a late summer evening. Soon it would be autumn. Then winter.

Winter would be the big test for everybody. The hardiness of the new race of Britons would be put to the supreme test. Would their change enable them to withstand the rigours of winter?

Only time would tell.

PART TWO

AUTUMN AND WINTER

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PROFESSOR REITZE adjusted his rimless spectacles, surveyed the human-like creature which was chained to the wall of the small brightly-lit cell. No emotion showed on the Professor's features as he carefully checked the small syringe, plunged the long needle deep into the skin below the neck.

The victim mouthed a mute scream, tensed, but the manacles only allowed muscle movement, expansion and contraction. Reitze pressed the plunger, waited a second or two, then withdrew the needle, handed the instrument to the white-coated man at his side.

'We'll have to check him every hour.' He spoke flatly, a doctor perhaps concerned with a hospital patient's high blood pressure.

'Ugly devil, isn't he?' The second man could not disguise the revulsion he felt for the prisoner. 'The original missing link, if you ask me.'

'Maybe you're not far wrong.' Reitze stared into the throwback's eyes, saw how they rolled until the pupils virtually disappeared, egg-white without the yoke. The features were mongoloid, the body short and muscular. Water sprayed on to the tiled floor with force; the creature had emptied its bladder in its terror. 'It's like a kind of partial stroke, the brain stupefied but the body allowed full function. Just a change of skin texture, any surplus fat solidifying into muscle.'

'You reckon we can do anything?' Westcote's tone betrayed his own lack of confidence. He had spent five years at the animal research centre in Arizona. You took a cage of monkeys and injected them with drugs which, in theory, were supposed to give a certain reaction. They seldom did.

Most of the time you ended up with dead monkeys. The public protested so you were forced to keep your experiments under cover; you couldn't share success or failure with them.

*I don't know.' Reitze watched the eyes closely, saw the pupils click back down into focus. 'But it's worth a try. Anything's worth a try. In theory this should soften the arteries to the brain. These micro-organisms, and we still haven't been able to identify them, produce a kind of angina. Not fatal but slowing the blood supply to the brain. If we can open the arteries up, let the full flow of blood in, it should bring the brain almost back to normal. In theory! But of course we don't know what permanent damage has been done in the meantime.'

The victim's face was screwed up into a bestial expression of pain and fear, froth bubbling on the thick lips. Reitze wrinkled his nose. It was starting to shit itself, too. In future all specimens were to be given an enema before they were brought into the laboratories.

Westcote handed him another syringe and he moved on to where the female was pinioned. She was unsuccessfully trying to squirm; if she hadn't been given a tranquilliser a short time ago she would have been screaming. Screams were very distracting in such a confined space.

Reitze stood looking at her, almost gloating. By no means as hairy as her male counterpart there was less of a physical change in the female of the species, more a kind of coarseness as though she belonged to some hitherto undiscovered Amazon tribe. A predomination of the nipples, the vulva engorged like an animal on heat. Facially she was almost attractive, just a slight overall squatness of the features.

'It would be too much to experiment on both brain and body in the same specimen.' Reitze spoke expressionlessly, he might even have been talking to himself rather than to his companion. 'The female stands a better chance of body success. A skin softener and hair remover administered internally. It was tried in Mexico a few years ago and there was one fuck of a stink when a couple of women died. The drug was banned as a result. But I guess nobody's going to make too much of a shout if one or two of these died.'

This time he introduced the needle more gently, just a surface prick, watching her face the whole time. Teeth bit the lower lip, trickles of blood showed, dripped down on to the breasts. The eyes dilated, filled with tears. Why are you doing this to me?

You're the first of many. There'll be hundreds more, men, women and children, as fast as the security forces can bring them in. Most'll die but we'll keep on until we get some kind of a result.

She was strangely placid now, beautifully moulded features serene, a hint of nobility in her bearing even when she was hanging from that stark wall. Proud. Reitze stiffened, seemed to sense it and it made him angry. You scum, we'll kill you if we can't cure you. He turned away abruptly.

They've been hit pretty hard back home,' Westcote said. 'Virtually the whole of New York State is wrecked, mobs on the rampage the whole time. They even had to defend the White House with heavy artillery.'

This "change" is like a rebirth,' Reitze told him. 'At first they're just stupefied, virtually an unthinking species relying on basic instinct. Then they start to get "acclimatised", for want of a better word, learn to use their limited brains. At first they ran and hid in the woods and fields, now they're saying to themselves, "Why the fuck shouldn't we have those fine houses to live in instead of stone dwellings?" We don't even know how far they'll develop. Anyway, we'd better go, I've got another meeting with the Defence Minister at three. Don't forget, check this pair every hour.'

Westcote nodded, locked the door behind them as they left. Reitze gave him the creeps, you got the impression that he enjoyed injecting living things, delighted in unforeseen complications. These two wouldn't make it, he was sure of that. He only wished he didn't have to come back and check them out because he didn't like the thought of what he might find.

'It's going fine,' Reitze told Rankine. 'We're now working on a series of experiments on brain and skin tissue. We'll know in about an hour how it's going.'

'Don't forget,' the Defence Minister twitched unusually heavy brows, 'these are our people. They're not animals, you know.'

- 'Sure.' They're worse than fucking animals. 'But we've got to test 'em. Don't forget, winter's on the way, another couple of months or so and an awful lot of 'em could well die from exposure. We don't have much time.'

'Which brings me to our Emergency Operations which are now being circulated to the security forces.' Rankine glanced down, a hint of embarrassment. It sounded callous but probably Reitze would not see it that way; the American was devoid of emotions, compassion. 'Our forces are instructed to drive all these . . . throwbacks out of the towns and cities, scatter them to the hills and woods and keep 'em there; a lot of 'em seem to be doing that of their own accord anyway. Keep the populated areas free, stop the looting and burning and . . . well, after that we're relying on you to come up with something.'

Reitze smiled faintly, maybe a sign that he did have an ego and it had been touched. 'Sounds OK in theory, but there's one point I was discussing with Westcote only a few minutes ago. Are these people equipped to stand the rigours of a winter out of doors?'

'Their ancestors did, and survived.' The Defence Minister felt a little flutter in his guts; damn these bloody Yankee boffins, it would mean . . .

'We'll have to carry out some extensive tests on them,' Reitze confirmed the other's worst fears. I'll make a start within the next few days. In the meantime, get your guys catching a few more of them. We'll need males, females and children, in good health and poor. That way we'll be able to hazard a rough guess at the survival rate.'

Rankine nodded and refrained from repeating himself: They are our people, you know.' Right now they were in the hands of the scientists.

Westcote glanced at his watch, saw it was time to go back downstairs. He shuffled his feet under the desk, wondered if there was any delaying tactic which would be acceptable to Reitze. He could not think of one, would have to go whether he liked it or not. 'What the fuck were you playing at, can't you even tell the time?' Scathing retribution that was ten times worse when issued in the Professor's monotone; no raving or shouting, he just spoke the truth and you knew he was right. Westcote would have to go and check the specimens.

He descended the flight of metal stairs as if he did not ever want to reach the bottom, a step at a time, pausing, hoping that he'd hear Reitze coming, the meeting over earlier than scheduled. Passing him on the stairs, his own key in his hand. 'OK, I'll see for myself. You can come if you want to.' Westcote didn't want to but he would accompany Reitze all the same.

Another fuck-up but nobody would record it as a failure. Just a process, next time would show something more positive, or the time after that. One of the most important qualities a scientist possesses, Reitze had once said, was optimism. Positive thinking. But you reached a time when things aren't positive any more.

Westcote reached the bottom step, turned left along the corridor, his feet dragging, pulling back on him. Don't go, for Christ's sake don't go, remember that time you injected those monkeys to try and speed up their reflexes. They were clinically dead but their nerves, their muscles were still hammering away like fuck! Oh Jesus!

The door. He had the key. He could have looked through the tiny glass panel first but he didn't because what he saw inside might stop him from going in there.

Don't look, just open the door.

The key didn't seem to fit, that was because his hand was shaking, rattling the casing of the lock. He forced it in, exerted more pressure than was necessary; his heart missed a beat when he heard the tumblers fall. Oh God, he'd got to go in now.

He smelted them before he saw them. Westcote recoiled, would have fled back out of that door had his legs been capable of movement; he felt like one of those soft rubber 'bendy' toys they used to sell in the shops. He clung to the open door, hung on to it for support, let it swing with his weight.

The woman was clearly dead and it was from her corpse that the awful stench came; she sagged in her manacles, head forward, long coarse wiry hair falling out of her skull like feathers fluttering from a dead bird in a breeze, balding patches covered with red sores, oozing yellow fluid. Dripping treacly plops on the floor tiles.

He threw up, couldn't stop himself, spewing half-digested canned stew across the room. Her entire skin was festered, soft red blotches bulging with some kind of vile poison, visibly eating up the flesh, pulsing with its own venom, Instant putrefaction, malignant cancers gone crazy, fighting one another to devour the flesh on the bones!

Westcote gave a half-scream when he noticed the male, thought at first that the other still lived. The man's frame was rigid as though rigor mortis had claimed him and yet not killed him. Oh Jesus Christ Almighty, that face, that head! Possibly the skull had become engorged, it might have been an optical illusion by the way the top pulsed, visibly throbbing, a football being alternately inflated and deflated by a faulty foot-pump. The skin stretched almost to bursting point, retracted. Expand . . . retract . . . expand . . . retract . . . expand . . .

Morbid fascination, horrific amazement, spew trickling down the lab man's chin and staining his white overalls. The prisoner's features were a fixed snarl that depicted the ultimate in pain and terror, a scream that went on and on so that you still heard it even though it was long finished. The eyes had

bloated, burst, the dead sockets streaming white fluid like thick sour milk that was about to solidify into cheese; dilated nostrils discharging twin rivulets of mucus that still flowed fast.

Still screaming, the dead brain rebelling in awful palpitations, a creature that fought against what they had done to it even after life was gone from it.

Westcote almost fainted, wanted to look away but could not. Hypnotised. You did this to me; look at me, watch me. No!

Suddenly he was aware that someone else had come into the room, the waft of a white coat passing him, swift footsteps. Keep away, they're not dead yet!

It was Reitze. Westcote saw the scientist through a haze of revulsion, despised him because he didn't back off and throw up. Kept watching him.

Reitze pushed his face close to the vibrating skull, studied it intently for a few seconds. Oh God, he touched it, ran his fingers lightly over it in the way a GP might have examined a patient with ague. Felt the pulse, the heart, squeezed the penis and ejected a spurt of deep orange urine. Liquid excreta splattered on to the floor at the same time.

Then he transferred his attention to the woman, plucked some hair from her head as casually as though he was weeding couch grass from a herbaceous border, pushed the head back. For fuck's sake, Reitze, I don't want to see her face, too! He saw it all right, the expression similar to that of her companion except that the eyes had not burst. They seemed to see, a dead gaze that focused on Reitze. See what you've done to me, you bastard! The jaw clicked open, expelled a groan, a release of trapped wind coming out in one final curse and even from the doorway you smelled her fetid breath.

Reitze let the head fall, stepped back and turned towards Westcote. The latter read sheer contempt in his look, his eyes saying, 'You're no use to me if you're going to shit yourself and throw up every time an experiment goes wrong.'

It had gone wrong all right. That was something you accepted, didn't get all fired up about because there would be a next time. And a time after that. You lost a lot, you just hoped that somewhere along the line you might win one', the law of averages.

Watching, waiting. That skull beat was increasing, speeding up, you could see the flesh being stretched to its limit, starting to tear. Splitting!

Westcote threw up again as he saw the bone beneath the rent skin crack, a jagged gash that heaved up grey and green slime, spat it out as though the tortured body was rejecting it forcibly. And then the cranium vibrations ceased immediately as though somewhere they had been switched off. It was all over. Finis.

'What . . . went wrong?' Westcote spoke, maybe to see if he still had his power of speech, perhaps as an instinctive apology to Reitze because he had given way to his terror. Only Reitze was impassive, immovable; he expected everybody else to be the same.

'Nothing went wrong.' The same monotone, still staring at the hanging, drooping corpses. 'That was a phase one experiment to find out how the brain and the skin tissue reacted. We found out. Now we're ready for phase two.'

'Phase . . . two!'

'We need to discover how these throwbacks will react in extreme cold. They are being driven from the towns into the countryside where there will be sparse shelter. A few weeks and winter will be here. We don't have much time.'

Westcote swallowed. He'd seen a lot of Reitze's experiments in the past, probably the best man in the States; he knew that the Professor had been under close surveillance in case he defected to the Soviet Union. Not just a talent, a ruthlessness that put him at the top of his field. If somebody or something died as a result of an experiment it wasn't a failure, it was just a step towards the goal he sought. Positive thinking. Inhuman. These two who hung horribly lifeless from the whitewashed wall, they were just 'specimens'. A few weeks ago they had been normal human beings, maybe a professional man, an attractive housewife.

Now they were mutilated, festered corpses, no use to anybody. Not even a mourner. No dignity.

'Get these two incinerated and the place cleaned out.' Reitze was scribbling a few hurried pencil notes in his pocket notebook. Then tell Blaby that I shall be requiring one of the deep-freeze compartments for further experiments. He'll have to shift the food out of it to make space. And when that's done we'll see how many degrees below these apes can survive at!'

Westcote nodded, swallowed, hated himself for not protesting. But it wouldn't have done any good. Like the CND protesters a few years ago, voices in the wilderness that went unheard. When you had worked with Professor Reitze long enough you got to know that you either obeyed or you got your ass kicked right out.

Reitze was watching the other carefully, guessed what he was thinking. He heard Rankine's words again: These are our people, you know.' Not any fucking more, they aren't!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JON QUINN felt autumn in the heavy rainshower. The difference between late summer and the beginning of fall, as suddenly as that. He'd lost track of the days and weeks, regretted not having marked them off on that dog-eared calendar of Jackie's which hung from the knife rack over the working surface in the kitchen. It was too late to start now but he judged that they were well into September. The leaves would start to turn soon.

That guy was still watching him from the patch of thorn bushes up on that hillside opposite; even if you couldn't actually see him you knew he was there. He had moved well out of range since Jon had fired a barrel of the shotgun in his direction, knew what to expect if he came any closer.

It was obviously the same fellow who had been mooching about after dark, one

of those who had come that night and looted the toolshed. Hell, there were plenty of other places, deserted farms, why did he have to stick around here? Just having him in the vicinity sent little shivers up and down Jon Quinn's back. He couldn't understand it, the bastard wasn't out to steal anything now because he had had the opportunity; he'd been in the buildings again and hadn't taken anything.

Jon had stopped him for a time, used the electric fence which worked off an old car battery, heard him howl with pain and shock the first night after it was set up. But the battery had run down and he hadn't got another one. So he had taken to padlocking the toolshed but the buggie still came. Maybe he was harmless, just curious, but he was getting on Jon's nerves. No good going up there after him because he was gone the moment you set foot in the field, bounding up towards the forest skyline, hiding out

there. Still watching you. Well, he'd better keep his distance because Jon never went anywhere without the twelve-bore these days.

Sylvia had had her trip into the village and she had not pestered him to go anywhere since. The place had been deserted, everybody gone, or perhaps nobody had ever lived there in the first place. It was getting difficult trying to imagine a world where there was any kind of normality. Jon was getting used to it, accepting it now.

The manual petrol pump at the garage wasn't working. He had given up trying in the end, decided that he would have to keep his half tank of fuel for emergencies. They had called at the shop, found the door swinging open, and gone inside. The shelves had been raided, bread and cakes taken, cooked meat trodden into the floor, putrefying. The raiders obviously didn't like processed meats but the flies were enjoying a banquet.

Jon filled the back of the Land Rover with as much canned and packeted foods as he could find, emptied the biscuit rack. Then on down the narrow street to the hardware store. He had to smash his way in, found an abundance of tools, more than enough to replace the ones that he had had stolen. The law of the jungle, steal and steal again. He had often wondered idly what it would be like if law and order broke down; now he knew.

He thought about taking another vehicle, there were ample cars parked down the street, but he had decided he needed a Land Rover more than anything. Funny how so often you kick yourself for not thinking of something at the time; he could have syphoned some petrol out of one of them. Maybe next time, if they ever went to the village again. Since that day he had not had any reason to use the Land Rover. They were safer on the Hi!!!

The wild hill-dwellers knew that he and Sylvia were here all right but only that one up on the slope had persistently watched them. Doubtless, a spy. Maybe they thought the electric fence was some kind of magic and were keeping their distance but surely they had cottoned on that it wasn't working any longer. That guy gave him the creeps.

Jon had a harvest to get in and even though a lot of it would be wasted he decided to occupy his time reaping the rewards of work done during the days before all this happened. The peas they could dry, the potatoes could be stored in the old barn. He made a clamp for parsnips and carrots. The swedes could stop in the ground, he'd lift the remainder towards Christmas to feed the goats on. Christmas? How the hell would you know when it was Christmas?

Sylvia was co-operating now because she did not have any choice. There was nowhere to go and he was satisfied that she would not take her own life. If

there was a type then she certainly wasn't it. She was adapting slowly.

The calves had vanished one night about a fortnight ago; Jon had found where they had been killed, driven into a corner of the field and probably been clubbed to death. It didn't matter much because he did not have enough fodder to see them through the coming winter, and as he did not eat red meat himself there was no point in slaughtering them. All the same, he felt sorry for them that they had to die so brutally.

The winter was going to be the big test for all of them, mostly for the throwbacks. If they were going to attack the holding they would do it then when they were short of food and their crude houses were proving inadequate against the blizzards. In the meantime they just lived from day to day, tried not to think about tomorrow. He just wished he knew what had happened to Jackie though.

He found himself looking up towards the thorn bushes again. There was no sign of that guy and for some reason he felt more uneasy than usual.

Sylvia had finished her routine chores, put another boiling of beetroot on the Rayburn. Surely there wasn't much point in pickling any more; there was a limit to how much beetroot you could eat even in a time of food shortage. There wasn't and wouldn't be a shortage, though; eating would just become boring. Jesus, what would she give for a meal at a restaurant, served for her and the washing-up done by somebody else afterwards!

She crossed to the window from where she had a partial view of the smallholding and on up to those steep fields beyond, the rough one dotted with thorn bushes where they had spied that lurking figure day in, day out. He wasn't in view now but she shivered all the same, could almost feel his eyes burning into her.

Her train of thinking flipped back to Eric. For some reason lately they were much closer, closer than they had ever been. Which had to be a figment of the imagination because they had not seen each other since early summer. And were not likely to see each other again. Ever.

A feeling of sadness had her searching the hillsides with misted vision, felt a tear trickling slowly down her cheek. Oh Eric, come back, please, I need you. I'm so sorry for everything.

She couldn't see Jon any longer, he was somewhere up the far end of the holding working on that strip of Jerusalem artichokes. He could bloody well stop there for all she cared, Christ, she couldn't stick this for the rest of her life, chained to the kitchen. Give me a hand with this, give me a lift with that. We'll be glad of it when winter comes. Live for the bloody winter because it's going to be hell. Never mind the summer, winter's on the way. Bang your head on the wall because it'll be lovely when you stop.

The weather had certainly turned much more showery and Sylvia was keeping the Rayburn in all day. Jon had promised to lug another load of wood soon. (They'd need it because winter was coming.) Raining again, slanting spots on the window; just a shower because she could see a patch of blue sky behind the dark grey cloud formation.

Eric again. The best times had been the early days before they were married. Her parents had not liked him, they didn't like anybody who might just take advantage of their sixteen-year-old virginal daughter. You take a tip from us. Sylvia, don't get tied up with one boy, have plenty on the go. Safety in numbers. Sure, mother, I'd like plenty of boyfriends. Good girl!

Sylvia was sixteen and a half when she got pregnant. It had happened at the Jamiesons' twenty-first party, at least that was what she told her parents. True, it might have. She'd named Roy Patterson as the father. Again, it just might have been, and to be fair to him he hadn't cut and run, had stood like a man and owned up to it. Except that the odds were that it was Eric Atkinson who had put her in the family way.

The Jamiesons had gone away for the weekend which was why the party turned out the way it had. By 10.30 there were couples snogging all over the place from the conservatory up to the sixth bedroom. Slow smoochy music from the stereo and if you were a boy you grabbed the nearest girl and tried your luck, and if it was out you tried another. Sylvia reckoned Sue Ballon was the first one to get laid because she was always boasting about having it off with somebody and judging by the way she was squealing and giggling it wasn't just one of the lads having a bit of finger on the Chesterfield.

Anyway, that was none of Sylvia's business and it wasn't long before Roy Patterson was doing his best to have a feel at her under the guise of doing a very slow samba, a new version that you had to be slightly drunk even to contemplate. A circuitous tour of the corridors, up the stairs, and then they found themselves in Jerry Jamieson's bedroom; the bed was empty, still warm, and there was a damp patch on the bottom sheet.

By this time Sylvia was wanting it very badly, still remembering the loss of her virginity only ten days ago (with Billy Farr) and desperate to relive the experience all over again. Roy was almost too drunk to get aroused properly and she had to give him a helping hand. Then he fumbled and dropped his French letters on the floor and it took him five minutes on his hands and knees with his trousers round his ankles, striking endless matches and threatening to set the pile carpet on fire, before he finally found them.

She told him not to bother with one, even tried to roll it off him when she got really randy but he was adamant. Damn him! That was why it hadn't been such a good screw, that and the fact that he couldn't keep his hard-on.

So later, her appetite already whetted, Sylvia had gone in search of another screw, and stumbling about in the darkened house that now resembled a Soho brothel she had found Eric. Good old Ek!

He had confessed years later that a bird had gone cold on him and he was off to find a nice quiet place to jerk off and sod the birds! Sylvia had taken him upstairs and on the way they had passed a still-drunk Roy who had dropped something else and was striking matches again.

Eric had thought his luck was in when she told him not to bother using anything, didn't even ask if the time of the month was OK. God, he'd really pounded her that night, managed it twice, and it had been four in the morning when she'd got home. Her mother was up waiting for her. Girls who stop out till this time end up pregnant before very long! Not with Roy Patterson though. His name threw a better light on the scene; she didn't mention Eric.

Roy had stood by her but the baby had been adopted so it was really academic. She didn't want to go out with him again, just biding her time to produce Eric out of the conjurer's hat. Come back Eric, I need you.

Those early days had been really good. They could have kept them going if they had both worked at it. She could see his face now as clearly as though it was only yesterday, that cheeky smile, a quip when you expected a lazy draw!. A good lover, the best she had ever had. Jon Quinn didn't amount to much, he

fucked when he was in the mood but mostly he was too tired at nights to do anything other than fall fast asleep the moment he got into bed. Oh, Eric, I wish you were here, we missed out on such a lot. We were damned fools, both of us.

She saw his face again; she had to look hard to make sure it really was him because he'd grown a beard, his hair was long and matted and his features were much more squat. But it was Eric all right, the old flame of desire lighting up his eyes the way they used to. She closed her eyes. Opened them again.

He was stilt there, head and squat shoulders framed in the window like a 3-D painting, nose flattened against the glass. That was when she screamed and almost fainted, recoiled against the table, knocked over a jar of beetroot so that it ran blood-red across the scrubbed pine.

Her mind boomeranged, came back and hit her with stunning force. Realisation, so wonderful and yet so awful. Staring back at an empty window, only half-praying that it had been a trick of the mind; hearing the door click open, thud back against the wall.

Eric, I need you, but God I'm scared to hell!

He was in the kitchen. She could hear his stertorous breathing, smell him, a kind of indoor canine odour like a dog that has been curled up on its mat for most of the day. She closed her eyes, wanted to remember him as he had been that night of the Jamiesons' twenty-first party. You don't need to use anything, Eric, I'll be OK. Maybe we could invite Alan round again one evening. Or perhaps we could go look up the Joneses again.

She felt her eyes opening, couldn't stop them. It wasn't a shock because she knew what to expect, braced herself for it. He was kneeling over her, his face only inches from hers so that she smelled his breath. Spring onions, you've been pinching from Jon's garden at night, haven't you? Oh Christ, that's really funny. You always loved onions, Ek, even when we were courting. If I close my eyes I can go right back there only I can't get them shut.

She read a lot in his eyes, things that his brain was incapable of transmitting into words. Half-memories, recognition. He was struggling with it all but it was too much for him so he had to resort to a language he knew. Fingers explored her clothing, unfamiliar with how a blouse and skirt came off.

I'll help you, Ek. She fumbled, her fingers shaking so much that the buttons twisted in their holes and she tore at them in her frustration. You don't have to use anything, I'll be OK. If anything goes wrong we'll blame Roy Patter-son again, OK?

He couldn't wait, was helping her to tear off her remaining garments, grunting his delight as he fingered her, hurt her, but she did not cry out. Oh God, it was too wonderful to be true. You've been searching for me all these months, Eric. How did you find me here . . .?

Guilt; he'd known all along, guessed where she went to get screwed whilst he was away peddling his wares. She dropped her gaze, spread her legs wide, edged back on the hard quarries of the kitchen floor but they had the softness of a French quilt. I didn't want to come here, Eric, please believe me. Can't things be as they once were between us?

He wanted her from behind, lifted her bodily, turned her over, pulled her up into a kneeling position. His thrust took her by surprise, threw her forward

so that she hit her head hard on the table leg. Blackness and pain, then he was in her, shuddering her whole body with the lust of weeks of waiting. Mind-blowing, an erotic dream, soaring her to unbelievable heights and then leaving her writhing on the floor. Her strength was gone, her groping arms dropping back down. Don't leave me, Eric, I need you. Take me with you wherever you're going. Don't leave me!

And in those few moments of silence they both heard the sound of approaching footsteps, studded working boots on the yard outside scraping on pebbles. And in that moment Eric Atkinson was a beast of the wild again, primitive man obeying the strongest instinct of all - survival.

One bound took him to the open door. Sylvia glimpsed him from the rear, unfamiliar now, the hairy flesh rippling with muscle, short legs bracing him for the rush to freedom.

'Eric . . . don't leave me, please.'

He ran, low and fast, a direct course for the gap in the straggling hawthorn hedge. Aware of the man he had watched for so long from the hills above, the pale hairless features and strange colourful clothing, the stick he carried that made loud bangs and dropped birds dead in flight.

For a second, maybe two, Jon Quinn's reflexes froze, a snippet of time that meant the difference between life and death for Eric Atkinson. Seeing but not wholly believing, the terrible fear of what he might find back in the cottage.

Anger climbing into fury, remembering his gun and what it could do. He threw it to his shoulder, pulled twice, cursed because there was no more than a faint futile click from each trigger. The safety-catch was on! Valuable seconds consumed as he half-lowered the weapon, forced the serrated sliding catch forward; back to his shoulder, searching for his target.

The other was already in the hedge, scrambling through like a dog-fox to whom its escape route was second nature; screened from view. Right or left? He hedged his bets, fired one barrel a yard to the right of the gap, the other a yard to the left. No answering cry of pain. He could have killed the bastard stone dead. Or he could have missed.

Running, still carrying the smoking shotgun, in through the door. Oh my God!

At first he thought Sylvia was dead, the way her naked body was stretched out across the quarries, those weals on her flesh, the rape blood smeared on the insides of her thighs. My fault, oh Jesus, my fault, I shouldn't have left her. I killed her!

Then her head moved and her eyes opened, insistently asking questions as he knelt to examine her. 'You didn't kill him, did you? Did you?' Starting to scream hysterically.

'No.' He knew he spoke the truth, knew only too well that the fleeing throwback had flung himself flat once he was through the hedge; was now on his way back up to those thorn bushes where he could sit and watch them in safety, probably wanking himself and remembering what he'd done in that cottage. The filthy fucking bastard! Next time . . .

'You're sure?' Sylvia was crying, clutching at him. 'You're sure you didn't kill him?'

'I missed.' Jon was shaking. God, I'm glad I never told her what happened to

Gwyther. 'What happened? It was obvious but he had to ask just the same.

'I left the door open,' she said, calmer now, 'and before I knew it he was in here. He didn't hurt me, he . . .'

'It doesn't bloody look like it.' He winced at the sight of those nail gouges, the bruise on her forehead, pictured the intruder whipping himself up into a fury of lust, stabbing at her until he found the way in. 'In a civilised society they'd put a guy away for ten years for a rape like that.' Only we don't have a civilised society anymore.

'I . . . don't want you to kill anybody,' she sobbed, knew he couldn't see her expression at that moment because she was pulling her blouse back over her head. 'Whatever you do, Jon, you mustn't kill anybody. Now that you've shot at him and frightened him I don't expect he'll come back.'

'He won't go far,' Jon grimaced. 'He's been up there watching us for weeks, mooching about the place after dark. He's a threat to both of us and now you're asking me not to hurt him. Are you crazy?'

'I can't stand killing.' She turned her head away from him. 'I'm OK, there's no harm done, and in future I'll keep the door locked. I'm asking you is not to kill anybody.'

'So if they rush us one night we just open the doors and let them come in? Would you like me to arrange disarmament talks with them, unilateral, of course,' he sneered, regretted his sarcasm a moment later.

She leaped to her feet, ran for the stairs. He heard her sobs, the banging of the bedroom door. Jesus Harry Christ, this took some beating! He sighed, moved across to the doorway. It was raining again, splattering on the yard, melting the sun-baked summer clay into thick sticky mud. It was cold, too.

He found himself looking back up towards the hillside opposite, his eyes searching through the scattered thorn bushes. A hare was bounding up the slope, its powerful backlegs thrusting it upwards with an air of urgency; because something had disturbed it.

Jon Quinn narrowed his eyes, squinted, but he could not find what he was looking for, a hairy human shape squatting on its haunches, immobile as it gazed down on the cottage.

Jon could not see him but he knew he was there all right. Waiting again. He reloaded the gun, propped it up in the porch. I'm going to kill you, you bastard. She won't stop me because it's not because of her I'm going to blow your fucking head off like I did Gwyther's. It's because there's only room for one of us in these hills.

Autumn. The rutting season had begun when males fought to the death for their place at the stand. And Jon Quinn had made up his mind that he wasn't going to be the vanquished.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PHIL WINDER was aware that large numbers of these wild tribes were moving into the hills. He had spied them in the distance from the Knoll, the highest point on the farm, whole packs of them trekking purposefully, urgently. They must be crazy moving up on to high ground for the winter, he thought.

He was worried about Jackie, too. It was like taking a dog that had lived in an outside kennel all its life and expecting it to adapt immediately to a life indoors. She was constantly going outside; once he awoke in the middle of the night and found her gone. Panicking, fearing lest she had gone back to the wild he had run downstairs, seen the back door wide open.

A starlit autumn night with no moon, a distinct chill creeping into the atmosphere, some of the leaves beginning to turn now. He shivered, called softly, 'Jac.'

He heard a movement, saw something materialising out of the clump of cupressus firs which served as a windbreak across the front of the farmhouse. It was Jackie, shaking her head and smiling weakly in her own kind of apology. She couldn't sleep, she needed fresh air. Day by day she was becoming more restless. He wondered if the call of the wild was proving too much for her and one morning he would wake up and she would be gone for good.

'We'd better go back inside and keep the door locked.' He used sign language still, let her pick up her own scraps of vocabulary; if he didn't talk to somebody he would go mad. These hills are full of your . . . people. We can't take risks.1

She nodded, followed him back into the house. How the hell did you ask a woman who had virtually stepped straight out of the Stone Age if something was troubling her? It was a miracle that the throwbacks had not attacked the house. Perhaps they were afraid, although he doubted it. More likely all their time was taken up preparing new dwelling-places for themselves and when that task was completed . . .

Jackie was certainly disturbed. Uppermost in her mind was the fear that one day Kuz and his followers from the village might appear on the scene. She ought to persuade Phil to move on; they had not run far enough. Perhaps Kuz had another woman, had already forgotten her. Somehow her primitive pride refused to allow her to believe this. He would not let up until he found her.

And then there was this strange calling, something which she did not understand. The man called Phil was not truly her mate. They lived together, copulated frequently but . . . something was not quite right. She could not think of him in the same way as . . . no, not Kuz . . . she struggled to come to terms with her problem. A ha If-re mem be red face that slipped from her memory just when she thought she had grasped it, left her with a frustrating blank. Who?

Who?

Searching her mind, going out into the garden at night and just standing there listening. She heard the others in the hills, noises from encampments borne to her on the ! wind. The urge was becoming stronger, soon she would have to go out into the hills and , . . and what? She didn't know.

Phil Winder wished that he had a weapon of some kind, one that would give him superiority in the event of an attack on the farm. A shotgun, for instance. But his father was not a believer in guns, abhorred killing; he even refused to let the local hunt draw his land. He did have an old .410 though, one that had been his father's and had been used for shooting rats around the hayricks in the old days. Phil remembered it, determined to search for it and in due course found it hidden away on a shelf in the cowhouse. He grimaced when he saw it; the barrel was rusted, had a dent in it, the stock was split, and both hammer and trigger springs were broken. So he settled for the big wood axe, took it upstairs with them at night. Maybe, if the need arose, he could defend the landing in much the same way that Horatio had defended the bridge.

He did not go far from the farm these days, his furthest point the Knoll where he lay and watched the activity on the hillsides all around. There were more camp-fires than ever now, people coming in all day long, groups and singles, many of them hurrying as if there was some urgency to reach high ground. Fleeing from something perhaps . . .

Once he thought he heard gunfire in the distance, a sporadic burst of firing. If it was the army then they did not come this way. Phil half-considered taking Jackie and going in search of more survivors but discarded the idea. It was too dangerous, they were safer here.

It was inevitable that the throwbacks would come to the house one day. Phil just kept hoping that it would not be each today or tonight, for you did not plan as far as tomorrow. But some day or some night they would come.

He heard them that blustery autumn night down in the yard below. It was Jackie who gave him his first warning, a tensing of her body against his, her hand gripping his own. They are here!

He slid out of bed and crossed to the window. There was enough moonlight to see by, a weird scene below, furtive shapes that were barely human, slinking in the shadows; a dozen, maybe more, moving with a sinister stealth that left no doubt in his mind what they had come for.

He picked up the axe. Suddenly it felt puny, useless. The enemy would be suitably armed with whatever weapons they had stolen from farms and houses. He was one against many; his only advantage was the narrow landing with barely room for two people to pass. They could only come at him one at a time.

He heard them smash down the front door, a splintering and tearing of woodwork, a heavy beam crashing. Low snuffling noises, a snarl. Then silence except for their heavy breathing.

They were in the hall, waiting whilst their eyesight adjusted to the darkness, Phil Winder could hear the beating of his own heart, his pulses pumping blood as hard as they could go. His mouth was dry and he understood where the proverbial likeness to the bottom of a parrot's cage came from. He tasted his own terror, the fetid flavour of fear.

There was no sound from Jackie, she was lying on the bed, listening just like he was. There was no way out; they had lived for today too long and now tomorrow had caught up with them. He heard the first soft footfall on the stairs. Phil sweated, rested the axe on his shoulder, gripped the stail with sticky hands, pressed himself back into the shadows. He wanted the first blow to take them by surprise; the advantage was his for anyone approaching him would be silhouetted against the faint light of the small landing window. First up, first to die!

Suddenly he saw them, shaggy long-haired creatures which might have been werewolf images depicted in some macabre shadow-show, the first one taller than the second, striking his head against a low beam, ducking.

And that was then Phil Winder drove in the first blow. He felt the impact, felt his stomach heave up. Like splitting logs, if you hit them properly they fell apart; inaccuracy or knotted wood resulted in the axe-head sticking so that you had to tug it free. This was one of the latter.

No scream, just a dull thud, the other's arms going up instinctively to pull at the axe then falling away limply. Dead, tottering, falling, almost pulling Phil with him. Winder took the strain, used a foot on the stair-rail as a lever and then the corpse pulled free, staggered, slumped backwards taking the man directly behind him down with him on to those below.

Christ, if only somebody would scream! But nobody did; somebody grunted with surprise and it sounded like water was trickling somewhere except that it was too thick and sluggish for water, dripping steadily off the stair-head down into the well of the hall below.

Phil swung his axe, saw them coming again, warier this time, a long pitchfork being thrust up ahead of them. He struck, snapped it in two, sent the twin-pronged head spinning. A second blow just in time to catch the next man who rushed him, a devastating shoulder wound. The man dropped with a groan, blocked the stairs, but they were clambering over him, an army who seemed not to know the meaning of death! A gathering tide which would surely sweep him down.

One of them lost half his face to a downwards sweep of the axe, the blade scraping the forehead, biting deep and gouging out an eye, taking out the cheekbone on its downward journey, slicing the mouth through and coming out at the jaw, showering teeth and bone splinters as it came free. A hand grabbed the handle, jerked on it, two or three more hands securing a grip. And in those few seconds Phil Winder was rendered defenceless, his axe wrested from his grip. ,

Mentally he surrendered. Perhaps he could have lifted the narrow mirror off the picture-rail above his head, wielded it until the glass was all smashed and gone. Or run back into the bedroom, forced the ancient lock to turn, given himself and Jackie a minute or two more of life. But in the end it would not have made much difference and he knew it,

He retreated until his back touched the wall, his head brushed a low beam on the slanted roof. His guts were twisted up and he tasted blood in his mouth. He half-raised his arms, dropped them again, gave an hysterical laugh. This bloody Jot didn't know the meaning of surrender -you fought until you dropped. No quarter asked nor given, he had killed and maimed two or three of them. Now it was their turn!

He remembered the pit; he'd sooner be dead, so long as they killed him quickly. Their hands reached out for him, scraped his face and chest like claws, gripped his arms. The man with the mutilated face miraculously still lived; it was impossible! Streaming blood, head thrust forward, blazing malevolence at Phil with his remaining eye. You did this to me and now I want my revenge!

Phil screamed, struggled with those who held him as the pain-maddened throwback clawed at his face, scraped, dug deep and raked. An eye for an eye . . . Blinded, blood streaming everywhere, pinioned whilst that pain-crazed bastard shredded him to bloody ribbons! Writhing. Strong fingers forced his

mouth open, gripped his cheek flesh, tore in opposite directions.

Kill me, you fuckers. Kill me!

He was dying but not fast enough; not even the strength to writhe now. He thought about Jackie, this was all his fault. If she hadn't helped him escape in the first place she would still be the chiefs woman back at the settlement. Now they would take their vengeance, had waited weeks to catch up with the fugitives.

They released their hold and Phil Winder slumped to the floor. Feet kicked him but it didn't matter any more. They were slashing at the lower half of his body with a knife, machete-style. But it doesn't fucking matter, I'm beyond the pain barrier, I just want to die!

Frenzied, the peak of their fury, jostling one another to get in a blow or a stab at the body on the floor. Standing on him, trampolining him, ballooning his belly until the stretched skin split and showered out yards of slimy, bloody intestines.

It was some time before the killers realised that their victim was dead. The cessation of their vicious attack was gradual. They stood there looking at one another and only then did they remember the woman, the reason they had come. Kuz's woman, the unfaithful bitch who had freed this man, deprived them of a slave, run off with him and even now might be carrying his young.

Kuz was dead, they had no leader. But every one of them wanted the woman, a shambling bloodied and wounded throng milling about on the landing until they found the open bedroom door, crowding in through it.

They sniffed the stuffy air, knew instantly that the room was empty, but she was not long gone for her smell still hung heavy in the air, a stench of fear mingling with that of a female on heat.

The bed was empty. One of them approached it, leaned over and smelled at the blankets, grunted. An odour of mating, this had been the rutting stand!

Snarling, looking about them, seeing the window wide open. A chorus of frustrated cries as they rushed towards it, looked out, saw where she had escaped; down the thick ivy which grew on the stonework.

They followed, one at a time, their dead forgotten, descending with the ease of jungle monkeys, hitting the ground below at a run, giving voice to their cries of lust, a hunting pack that would run down its prey. Ten of them, howling their anger and lust. They would follow the trail until they dropped from exhaustion.

THE SECURITY patrol was systematically scouring a section of suburbia, a convoy of armoured trucks infiltrating a pedestrianised shopping precinct, weaving its way between piles of debris, powdering broken glass beneath its wheels. Alert to any movement amongst the heaped wreckage.

Most of the enemy had gone, fled to the open spaces. Just a few remained, stubborn guerrilla fighters without a cause, the old and the young. The wounded. And the dead. The air was thick with the stench of decomposing corpses but the commandos were unaware of this behind their sterilised air-filters. Raiders from another planet in the aftermath of a terrible war, the victors of Armageddon come to loot. And to take prisoners!

Private Kenny King did not like it at all, neither did he like Sergeant Walters. The young rookie had been regretting his decision to join the Regulars from the very first posting to Whittington Barracks in the Midlands. At eighteen he was 'gawky' (the sergeant's description of him), his features a mass of acne, possibly because he had been late going into puberty. He was a bloody fool, he repeatedly told himself, signing on for this when he could have enjoyed a more leisurely life on the dole. And like an even bigger bloody fool he had signed on for a further two years following his return from Northern Ireland. On the other hand, he consoled himself, if he had not opted for army life he would have been 'one of them out there' undoubtedly. Or dead.

Walters was a fucking bastard, enjoyed being that way, and with administration handing out responsibility way above the status of jumped up bleeding sergeants because officers were almost an extinct species, a parade-ground bawler found himself elevated to the role of captain. It was the Year of the Bully but most of all Kenny found himself feeling sorry for these wretches trying to hide out in the remnants of suburbia. They were scared to hell, they didn't want to fight; the army was pushing them into corners.

Their instructions were to take prisoners, transport them back to that place in Hertfordshire. Fill the big prison van up until you couldn't get any more in, like Nazis taking Jews to the gas chamber. There wasn't a lot of difference. The buggers were human after all, well. . . sort of.

The armoured cars were parked at strategic points, a cordon that took in the multi-storey car park, an ugly high-rise edifice that suddenly resembled a medieval castle. If you looked up you saw faces peering over the ramparts; the occupants were ready to defend their castle with their lives. They were under siege.

'There's a good twenty of the fuckers up there.' Walters climbed down from the Land Rover, riot shield in his left hand, automatic pistol in his right. 'They can't go anywhere.' There was a leer on his swarthy face, his small eyes seeking out Kenny as they usually did, making him flinch. 'We need to take another ten.' He laughed.

Kenny would love to have had the courage to enable him to ask, 'And what about the other ten, Sergeant? Or are we just going to slaughter the bloody lot?'

That's up to them, boy. Our orders are to drive 'em out of the towns but there's only one way up and one way down from the multi-storey. It's a long way down from the top, the choice'll be theirs.

'Look out!' The shout came from over to the left, triggering trained soldiers into instant evasive action; a line of riot shields forming a semi-circular barricade, rifles at the ready. Looking up.

A maroon Marina with a black vinyl roof was mounting the concrete wall of the

top storey, the underside of the chassis scraping and screeching on the concrete blocks. Front wheels spinning in space. A jerk; it rested level for a second then began to tip downwards. The back wheels caught, held it like a fly on a wall. Then it was free, airborne, an aeroplane without wings, a clumsy useless thing yielding to the law of gravity. A weapon of death.

Maybe in other circumstances Kenny would have screamed but he had got used to not doing a lot of things that came naturally when Walters was around. The rookie's mouth opened in terror and he would have run had he not been hemmed in by riot shields. Something inside him said in a calm, matter-of-fact voice, 'You're OK, son, it won't reach us from there.'

The car fell vertically, a straight drop down, once catching a jutting parapet that dented and spun it, seemed to slow it up, a circus acrobat falling from the high wire; a trick, he did it twice a day, got some kind of sadistic pleasure from making his audience throw up, kids screaming and crying, hiding their faces.

The car hit the concrete pad adjacent to the park, a crash of buckling metal and showering glass, leaped up a good six feet as its suspension found enough bounce for a spectacular swan song; came down on its roof, a heap of scrap that gave it anonymity.

'Get in there, up the ramp,' Walters roared, led the charge forward, a habitual zig-zag that would have made him a difficult target for any marksman. 'Shoot at will.'

Some of the soldiers were already firing, a hail of rifle bullets aimed at the radiator of a Datsun which was just appearing over the rampart where the Marina had come from, ripping into highly polished metalwork.

Then they were on the ramp, safe from an overhead attack. Another car smashed on the forecourt outside. The throwbacks had not forgotten the battle techniques of their ancestors; repel all boarders.

The ground and first storey were deserted. Systematically the soldiers searched every parking lot, checked vehicles; most of them were locked. Shoppers and businessmen had parked their cars and never returned to them. Probably some of those very people were up above now engaged in a last-ditch defence. Innocent victims of a vile unspeakable mode of warfare who would be over-run by the very soldiers who should have been protecting them against a foreign foe. Kenny King hated himself almost as much as he hated his jumped-up commander.

Sergeant Walters fired. It was a woman, darting out from the open back of a van, sprinting for the second elevation. She screamed, bowled over like a shot rabbit, a complete somersault, and came to rest hard against a Cortina 2000, spottling its grey finish with crimson. She sat bolt upright, cursing them with dead eyes; somewhere behind her blood was pouring out, seeping round her body and following the fall of the floor.

Walters approached her, pushed her with his foot so that she slid slowly sideways. Now the wound was visible, a jagged hole at the nape of the neck where the dum-dum bullet had struck her. That was good shooting.

Kenny King swallowed, his eyes misting up and distorting the scene. She was young, maybe not quite seventeen yet, and her features could have been Asiatic; apart from the straggling hair and rough skin, dressed in modern clothes she might not even have attracted a second glance, except for the obvious reasons. He had dated a girl up in Wakefield before he joined up who

had looked very similar to this one. It might even have been her lying there in that spreading pool of blood. A chance in several millions. He hoped it wasn't. You bastard, Walters, you didn't have to kill her!

'Aren't we supposed to be taking prisoners, Sarge?' A tall sallow-faced soldier asked the question that everybody was thinking. 'I mean . . .' wishing suddenly that he hadn't voiced his thoughts, 'that is . . .'

'You take your orders from me, Private.' Walters wheeled and for a second the swinging barrel of the pistol took in all of them. ll said fire at will because those fucking animals up there are fighting backV They don't have any business trying to drop cars on us. They should run the moment they see us coming. 'Anybody not obeying orders will be court-martialied when we get back to base. Get it, all of you lousy fuckers?' They all nodded because they didn't have any option.

Up there, above them on the top elevation, was a group of very frightened people, people who had once been ordinary peace-loving folks now horrifically transformed into primitive Man by terrible germs released into the atmosphere, were now trapped like rabbits in a dead-end burrow. They could be taken alive but Walters didn't want it that way. He was glorying in a one-sided battle, lusting for a massacre. In a way perhaps the poor wretches would be better off dead. Kenny King was sure he would throw up before it was all over. Afterwards he might even desert at the first opportunity.

The second and third storeys were devoid of life. So was the fourth. Only the fifth remained now and they were up there all right. The soldiers could hear them as they fanned out into an arrow-shaped formation and began to ascend the steep sloping concrete ramp. Textbook perfection in their approach, ready to unleash a hail of fire at the first sign of trouble.

Kenny's eyes focused on the sergeant's broad green and brown blotched camouflaged back. You bastard!

A crash from far below, muffled, lingering like the sound of a coin tossed into a deep wishing-well. Another car had gone over the wall. And then the floor levelled out on to a giant sunlit balcony, a line of cars on either side. The top elevation and the throwbacks were right here.

Seven or eight of them were struggling to lift a Ford Escort up on to the rampart, powerful muscles bulging as they took the strain. Some more were dragging out a Metro. All had their backs towards the oncoming soldiers except a bunch of children who huddled together beneath an awning.

No! Kenny King felt every scrap of decency and fair play in him rebel. Helpless youngsters ranging from five to possibly ten; they could have been mistaken for trained chimpanzees at a cursory glance, hairy creatures who were busily filling an empty ice-cream tub with sand and unsuccessfully trying to make a castle from it on the concrete floor. Each time it crumbled, powdered, and they tried again.

Kenny didn't care any more, didn't want to be any part of this. Something inside him took over, had him rushing forward with pistol raised, marksman-style, trained on the back of Sergeant Walters. 'No, you're not going to murder them. I won't let you. I. . .'

A shot rang out. Walters should have died instantly because the young rookie was already taking a trigger pressure, hesitating at the last second because that same spark of decency which had hurled him forward was also quavering, a fleeting flash of conscience that said, *You can't shoot a man in the back.

You can't take human life!'

The slug fired by the corporal close behind took Kenny in the back of the head, tore a jagged hole through his skull and spewed brains and blood out of his forehead; threw him forward so that when his own pistol exploded the bullet flew harmlessly into the air.

Walters dropped to his knees. A glance behind him told him the whole story; he had seen it before, it would happen again, a boy's nerve giving out, an animal gone berserk and having to be put down.

The throwbacks turned, the Escort started to slip. One of them wasn't quick enough, screamed as it rolled over on to him. The others scattered, found themselves caught up in a hail of pistol and rifle fire. A blonde bearded male crumpled up, clutching at his stomach, was dead before he rolled over. Another had his throat torn out as though it had been savaged by a fierce dog.

The soldiers alongside Sergeant Walters were lying on their stomachs firing, those directly behind him kneeling, the rear ones shooting from a standing position.

Seven or eight dead lay in the foreground, the rest leaping up on to the rampart, running agilely along it. More shooting, a fairground game now; you collect your prize when they're all down.

Only three left, stopping because there was nowhere else to run. Sitting ducks. A single shot and the far one crumpled. Two to go. It was target practice now.

The last two jumped, defiance in their wild shrieks as they leaped into space. You found yourself listening, counting, wincing in anticipation of the crunch far below.

Sergeant Walters rose to his feet, dusted himself down, a half-smile on those swarthy features. 'I guess that about wraps it up, Corporal.'

'The kids, Sarge . . .'

Walters turned slowly, saw how the youngsters were bunched under that awning, half-raised his pistol.

'We still need more prisoners, Sarge.' The other's tone was nervous, his voice quavering, staring at the bloodied shot-up corpse of Kenny King, the lad from Wakefield. He had ended up that way because he couldn't stomach massacring women and kids. And you were the one who shot him, Corporal! They said they needed kids as well. To experiment on.'

What experiments? Oh, Jesus Christ Alive!

'Yeah, they do need kids.' Walters lowered his weapon. 'Round 'em up. Take 'em down and put 'em in the van with the others.'

The sergeant noted with contempt the way some of the rookies moved to carry out his orders. Fuck 'em, they weren't paid to think, to reason. Just to obey. He watched the way they took the children down the ramp, almost reluctantly. We don't want to do this to you but if we don't then we'll be court-martialled. They're the enemy, you fuckers, prisoners-of-war. And when we get 'em back to base in Hertfordshire they're going to be guinea pigs, injected with Christ-knows-what. They'll either live or die, they've got two choices, 'Hurry along there, you lot. We don't have all day.'

The sergeant's stomach knotted, felt like he'd got an appendicitis coming on. He couldn't have, though, because he'd had his appendix out, peritonitis when he was a rookie, like this rabble, on the Rhine. That kid had come close to chopping him, a matter of a second, maybe two. He'd buy the corporal a drink in the Mess tonight. Or maybe he wouldn't, the others might see it as a sign of weakness. You saved a colleague because it was your duty, and for no other reason. He'd do the same for any of them and not feel anything personal, just see that it went down on record.

On the drive back he would scribble out his report Just a brief encounter: attacked by the enemy hurling cars off a rooftop, fought to the last. The corporal would countersign it. And if any of those fucking rookies had anything to say they would be court-martialled. The country was in a State of Emergency, you couldn't afford to be squeamish. Soldiers were trained for battle, and in battle you killed the enemy.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DON'T TOUCH me, Jon, please!

Sylvia tensed, every nerve in her body rigid, tried to think of a plausible reason which she could put into words. I've got a headache. Husbands had given up believing that one twenty years ago. It's the wrong time of the month; he knew already that it wasn't. I'm too tired. She'd once told him that sex was better when you were tired because you were more relaxed.

She bit her lip, resisted the urge to knock his hand away. Please don't touch me. I don't want you, I want my own husband back because he's out there in the dark and cold. Alive. Oh God, Eric's alive.'

Jon wanted her tonight and there was no way short of a determined physical resistance that she was going to stop him. She groaned, eased her legs apart. Shut your eyes and think of England. No, think of Eric.

It was Eric in the darkness of her bed. It had to be; everything else had just been a bad dream. No, it wasn't Eric's feel, not his way. Her mind flipped back to the other morning and suddenly her whole body began to prickle and tingle. There had been no fear because it was Eric all right. Not even rape because she had been more than willing. So strong, so fierce, every thrust so meaningful.

Jon was lying with his full weight on top of her now. His naked flesh was repulsively smooth, his strength barely that of a callow youth. She turned her head away, tried to avoid his lips. Screw me then and get it over with; let me be back with Eric.

No way was she going to make it to an orgasm. She let him ride her, her feelings beginning to slip away like a piece of driftwood going out with an

ebbing tide. Sobbing softly to herself. Oh, Eric, I want you. I don't care what they've done to you, I just want to be with you.

Jimly she was aware that they were no longer coupled, that he was lying facing away from her. Oh how I hate you, Jon Quinn. This is all your fault. If it wasn't for you I wouldn't be here now, I would be out there with Eric; like him\

Her mind was made up. She would go to her husband. Not now, maybe not tomorrow. But before the winter set in and trapped her here with this man who only wanted her body.

Day after day Eric Atkinson had squatted up on that slope watching the smallholding below him, virtually an aerial view, the cottage a matchbox house, the two people dots which he scarcely recognised. Only the woman.

He had moved further back up the slope almost to the fringe of the big forest. Fear ate into him day by day, the knowledge that the hairless male had the means to kill him instantly if he got close enough, indeed he had almost done so already. He saw him shoot a rabbit on the edge of the patch of ground where he grew his vegetables. Unbelievable, terrifying.

The coney had been grazing a row of cabbages, had not heard the man's approach. Its ears went up and it bounded away, a blur of grey at full speed.

Bang!

The report echoed, the hills taking it up, magnifying it. Atkinson started, almost fell back, clutched at his ears trying to shut it out.

Bang. Ba..ng...ba..aaa...ng. Like thunder rolling before a storm. But he could not take his eyes off the scene below. The rabbit stopped as surely as if it had run into an invisible barrier, rolled over on to its back, the white of its belly uppermost, legs kicking, the motions growing weaker and weaker until finally it was still.

The man walked forward, not hurrying^ confident, the death-stick cradled under one arm, reached down and retrieved the dead creature by its back legs, carried it back towards the house.

Eric watched him until he disappeared inside. Still heard the killing sound.

Bang.. .baa-ng...

The same would happen to him if he ventured too close to the building. The other had already tried to kill him once. He could run now, escape, leave this place. He would have done so had it not been for the woman. His woman.

Instead he would watch and wait from up here. Incapable of forming any other plan, he could think of nothing else.

The days were shorter, colder. The leaves had begun to fall from the trees leaving the branches stark, no longer a protection against the chill westerly winds, and the dense bracken lay brown and flattened by the rain and sleet storms.

Eric had attempted to make himself a shelter out of dead branches and bracken because the thorn bushes no longer shielded him from the elements. He had worked on it for a whole day and that night a gale had demolished it. He would have to move on up to the forest, find himself a place amongst the thick firs.

The idea did not appeal to him. The forest was alive at night, wild dogs that howled and bayed as they hunted their prey. And people who had moved up here crept stealthily through the trees and fled at the first sign of a stranger. He did not seek any company other than his own and that of the woman down below.

He was permanently hungry too. The wild fruit was becoming mildewed and sour and he was having to rely almost solely on rowan berries. He had long since given up setting deadfall rock traps for rabbits because it was a waste of time. He never caught anything.

Grey skies stretched to the furthestmost hills and beyond, low cloud that brought hill-fog and fine drizzle. He shivered, knew that he would have to go into the forest. First, though, he had to find some food of a more substantial nature.

During the summer months he had feasted ravenously on the small tubers which grew at the base of the long-stemmed plants with the white flower. They were scarce now, harder to find because the flowers had died down. Armed with a knife, one he had taken from the Quinn workshop, he embarked upon another, more desperate, hunt for the bulbs.

It was painstaking work, his stomach urging him on. Scrabbling with his fingers, hacking until he broke the knife blade; finding one or two, cramming them into his mouth, spitting out the soil, obsessed with his task.

So obsessed that he did not see the snake until it was too late! The adder had burrowed deep into a pile of dead leaves, its hibernation already begun, its colouring rendering it almost invisible. Something awoke it, a sharp pain as the jagged knife nicked its body. It turned, spat, struck blindly and instinctively.

Eric Atkinson screamed, dropped the knife, stared in horror at the wriggling reptile which was now visible, a black zig-zag on its back. Excruciating pain and terror, revulsion. His fear of snakes went back further than his memory; to that day when his parents had taken him to Whipsnade Zoo. He had virtually had a fit in the reptile house, gone hysterical, angered his parents because they did not understand, had tried to force him to overcome his phobia, had held him there, pinioned his arms, dragged him from glass cage to glass cage.

And now, thirty years later, that fear came to its peak. He stumbled, fell, crawled, could not put his full weight on his poisoned hand. Gibbering, sobbing, blind to direction. Flee. Anywhere.

A dim realisation that he was in the forest. It had to be night because it was dark. Crawling until he collapsed from exhaustion, edging himself up against the bole of a huge fir, its branches dripping condensation steadily. Drip . . . drip . . . trickling . . . the kind of sound a pursuing snake would make . . .

Wide-eyed, staring into the blackness, seeing innumerable moving things, pushing his back hard against the tree trunk. Eyes; green ones, red ones, things moving about, twigs crackling. Circling him. Watching.

Waiting for him to die!

His hand throbbed. He held it up before his face, tried to see it, could just discern its outline. It was huge, throbbing with pain, so swollen that he could not lift it for more than a few seconds.

You're going to die!

Whimpering. He heard those animals snuffling again. They weren't in any hurry.

The darkness was streaked with red, brightening, dulling. His head pounded, but uppermost in his mind was the basic will to survive. He wasn't going to die, he would be all right when daylight came, find a stream or a pool and bathe his wound. He thought he could hear the rushing of water somewhere far away; it might just have been the rain.

Exhaustion was taking its toll, stronger than the pain; his arm seemed numb right up to his shoulder. He shifted his position, made himself as comfortable as he could. Those creatures had gone away; they were frightened of him after all.

People. Lots of them, frightening because they did not have long hair, nor were they dressed in crudely fashioned animal hides. Smooth flesh, tight-fitting clothing, sitting in a brightly lit room, eating strange food off the tables.

And he was with them, one of them, the same as them!

He held out his hand, examined it. There was no sign of the snake bite, the swelling had gone down, not even the puncture to be seen. Those clothes, he was wearing them too!

'What's the matter, Eric?' The woman sitting at his table eyed him with concern. 'You're acting very strangely.'

He stared at her, fought to remember her name, finally came up with it. Marlene. He could understand what she said, wondered if he could converse in the same language.

He took his time, got the words out, 'I'm OK. Really I am.'

'You're certainly acting very strangely then. Or are you trying to avoid the issue?'

'What issue?' What's an issue? Oh yes, I remember. I don't remember what this particular issue is, though. So strange, a kind of faraway feeling like he was sickening for something, a spectator to his own actions.

'Oh, you're impossible!' She was twirling the stem of her empty wine-glass angrily, it might snap at any second. 'AH you want me for is to screw, Eric. Now answer me straight, do you or do you not want to go back to your wife? Come on, let's have it straight.'

'My ... wife?'

'Yes, your wife. The woman you are legally married to. Sylvia.'

Sylvia . . . Sylvia . . . Sylvia. His arm was starting to throb again, his vision had darkened or else they had dimmed the lighting in the restaurant. Whisperings, like those creatures moving about in the wood. What creatures? What wood? Sylvia. . .Sylvia. . . Sylvia. SYLVIA. Oh God, he could hear her calling him somewhere. He staggered to his feet, clutched at the table and slopped a carafe of water.

'You've been taking me for a ride, haven't you, Eric?' Marlene spat out her venom in a shriek. She hurled her wine-glass; he felt the rush of air as it

skimmed his face, smashed somewhere behind him. 'Well, if you want your wife that bad, you go to her, and she's welcome to you. You're a wastrel. You go back to Sylvia!'

Sylvia.

He turned away, Marlene already forgotten. He had to find Sylvia. She could be anywhere, he had to search for her. Pushing his way past people who seemed oblivious of his presence, staggering out into a street that was brightly lit with orange lamps. Crowds everywhere, having to fight his way through them. Have any of you seen my wife? Her name's Sylvia. Nobody even glanced in his direction. He was a man alone.

Constant traffic, horns blaring. He gave up trying to cross the road, continued on his way along the packed pavement, lurching from side to side, would have fallen if the throng had not kept him upright.

Has anybody seen my wife? Her name's Sylvia. I've been unfaithful to her and now I need her more than I've ever needed anybody in my life. Please, somebody find her for me.

Featureless hairless faces everywhere, trying to scrutinise them but they were gone too quickly. All hurrying, all searching for somebody. They've all lost someone! This is hell, purgatory without the promised flames. You repent for your sins, want to say sorry to somebody but that somebody isn't there.

The town was gone. Where there had been light there was darkness now, tall trees instead of buildings. Everybody gone, nobody to buffet or lean on any more. The pain was back again, a liquid fire that burned its way right up into his shoulder and was beginning to dip into his chest. He couldn't keep going much longer, he would have to rest soon.

Eric Atkinson leaned against a tree, clutched at its gnarled trunk for support. Then his legs weakened, refused to hold him upright any longer, a sinking sensation like vertigo; that time he had gone on a tour of the cathedral with the choir, and the head verger had taken them up the main spire. A steel ladder, one slip and you would fall several hundred feet. You'll see the countryside for miles around when we get to the top. I don't want to go to the top. His senses were swimming.

At least he was lying on the ground where he could not fall anywhere. The pain! Sylvia . . . Sylvia ... he could smell her, that unmistakable musky odour. She was around somewhere. Why didn't she come to him? Oh God, I'm sorry, my darling, it's you I want. I didn't really want Alan to fuck you, it made me jealous. I didn't enjoy going with Marie either. I wanted you all the time. I've told Marlene to get lost, I wasn't going to leave you. Don't leave me, please. Sylvia, can you hear me?

Somebody was out there in the darkness. Sylvia? Shuffling sounds as though whoever it was came and had a look at him, went away again. Come back, Sylvia.

It was daylight when he awoke, a sort of daylight. Grey drizzly fog pervaded the damp forest, dripped steadily off the branches. A crow was calling harshly a short distance away.

Eric's pain was worse, his arm thick and swollen, red with poison. He didn't want to look at it. He wouldn't, he would go and find ... he couldn't remember her name, the woman who was his mate. She would soothe him, bathe his infection with cool fresh water.

He tried to get to his feet, almost made it then fell back again, almost blacked out. He grunted, tried to shout but only a hoarse whisper came from his parched throat.

And that was when his fear really hit him. Fear of the unknown, a dark forest world where fierce tribes hunted and animals roamed in search of easy prey. Worse than that, the loner was afraid of being alone.

You 're going to die!

The will to survive was weaker, nothing left to fight with. It had been a long gruelling search and it had proved futile. The woman was not far away, even now he scented her, but his strength was failing. He whimpered softly, closed his eyes.

He was going to die.

Sylvia had made up her mind to go to Eric. Tonight. She could not leave him out there any longer. For two whole days now she had not caught sight of him because the tops of the hills had been shrouded by low cloud. He might not still be up there. On the other hand he might. She had to go and see.

For once Jon did not fall asleep the moment he got into bed. Damn him, tonight of all 'nights he would choose to be restless. She thought for one awful moment that he might be in the mood for love, would have yielded to him just to get it over with and then perhaps he would go to sleep. But no, he was in a talkative mood.

'There's an awful lot of them moved up into the hills.' He had remembered to bring the shotgun upstairs tonight. 'I counted one lot of at least fifty. Funny thing, they didn't all seem to be together, rather small groups which had met up, just happened to be travelling the same route. It looks to me like they're going to winter in the forest. Well, there certainly won't be much in the way of food up there for them. I heard some shooting, too, sounded in the direction of the village. I'm just wondering if the army's constantly moving them on, trying to drive them to outlying areas whilst they try and get things back to normal.'

Things will never be normal again.' She laughed bitterly. 'How can they?' Just look what they've done to my Eric. Christ, I wish they'd done it to me, too. It would solve a lot of problems.

'I reckon there've got to be more survivors than we think,' he answered her. 'Damn it, it would take hundreds of germ bombs to destroy a whole country the size of Britain. The Continent, the States, you've got an even better chance of dodging the germs there. All we can do is sit tight, hold on and wait.'

You can, Jon. Me, I'm going out there and even if I don't find Eric I'd sooner die than go on living like a prisoner, not knowing when you're going to be attacked.

His conversation dwindled and she could tell he was becoming drowsy. At length his breathing became regular and she knew he was asleep.

Cautiously she slid off the bed, crawled on her hands and knees towards the bedroom door, stopped every time a floorboard creaked. But he didn't waken. Down the stairs, dressing in the living-room. She wouldn't need anything except a torch. Eric would surely have some food and if not then perhaps she could persuade him to accompany her to a deserted cottage or farmhouse where there was sure to be an abundance; these throwbacks didn't understand what

packaged food was.

She let herself out into the night, clicked the door softly shut behind her.

And that was when she saw them. And they had seen her, too!

The throwbacks were in the yard, ten or fifteen of them, an ominous semi-circle of them stealthily closing in on the cottage, surrounding it. Stooped creatures that would have seemed more natural walking on all-fours, every one of them carrying some kind of improvised weapon, scythes, pitchforks, clubs.

Sylvia froze, cringed. Searching their bearded squat faces; they all looked the same in the faint starlight, might all have been cast from the same mould. They stopped, watching her.

She fought to make her vocal cords work, struggling to get words out and when finally she succeeded all that she managed was a hoarse frightened whisper. 'Eric . . . are you there, Eric?'

No answer. No movement. Staring at her, eyes narrowed as though they suspected a trap. Shuffling forward a few paces, stopping again.

Sylvia screamed, a long shriek of sheer terror, and in that instant movement returned to her limbs. Panicking, turning back, her fingers struggling with the heavy door handle, slipping, unable to secure a grip and turn it. Pulling, pushing, knowing that they were coming for her, smelling their rancid animal odour. Eric wasn't amongst them, he wasn't like this', he would not hurt her.

She screamed again, an inarticulate yell, tugging at the door. Don't touch me, you brutes. 'Jon . . . Jon!'

And then she felt their grip, claw-like fingers digging into her arms and shoulders, dragging her out of the porch, lifting her up, carrying her. She struggled, kicked until they grabbed her legs, grunted their surprise and lust at finding one so unlike themselves. Curiosity, others crowding round, prodding at her, hurting her, starting to tear her clothes.

She almost passed out. They would rape her, maybe kill her when they had finished with her. Perhaps they had already murdered Eric; he would not let them do this to her.

Sobbing softly, her eyes closed because she could not bear to look, wanted to die now and get it all over; there was nothing left to live for. Kill me, please!

Suddenly there was a deafening explosion, an ear-splitting report that ripped through her, a vivid flash that she saw even with her eyes closed. A sensation of falling, hitting the ground, lying there, not understanding, not wanting to. Oh God, I want to die, please let me be dead.

A second explosion and then she heard her captors screaming, primitive cries of pain and fear. Opened her eyes, saw but did not understand. One of them was lying on the ground, a still, crumpled form from which blood poured out of innumerable wounds. Surely he was dead. Two others, bleeding but still upright, whimpering, pawing at their bodies in shocked amazement. The rest were running, howling.

'Sylvia . . . Sylvia are you all right?'

She recognised Jon's voice, got to her knees. A sliver of orange light played on her, momentarily dazzled her. A torch, coming from an upstairs window.

Two more loud reports. She recognised the stabbing flames of a shotgun blast, screamed as she saw the two wounded throwbacks stagger, clutch at their faces. Oh Jesus God, they didn't have faces any longer, just scarlet bloody mulch, their screams drowned by the blood that spouted from where their mouths had been seconds before. They hit the ground, did not move again.

Sylvia knelt there, tried not to think, heard the door opening, Jon's bare feet running across the yard. Smelled the sharp tang of burned gunpowder, coughed and was almost sick.

'Sylvia. . .Sylvia. . .'Still holding the gun, helping her to her feet with his free hand. 'Are you OK?'

'I'm all right.' The words came instinctively, a habit of civilised society. Somebody asked you how you were and you said you were OK even if you were ill. Polite conversation because nobody was really interested in your health.

This was neither the time nor the place for formalities, though.

He was helping her back to the house, supporting her weight, moving backwards so that he did not have to turn his back on the dark night, holding the heavy twelve-bore one-handed.

He kicked open the door, bundled her through, slammed it behind him and forced the key to turn. Then he shone the torchlight on her, ran the beam anxiously over her, breathed an audible sigh of relief when he saw nothing more serious than scratches on her face and arms,

'What the hell were you doing out there?' Angry now, demanding an answer, 'You're fully dressed. Where were you going?'

She bit her lip and in that one instant made up her mind to tell him. Better now than later, tell him the truth. She had not got the ingenuity right now to think up a plausible lie.

'I was leaving.' She was surprised how calmly she spoke. *I was going to find Eric because he's out there. It was Eric who came here for me that time. My husband, alive and . . . one of them.'

He stared. Disbelief on his pale features. 'You're mistaken,' he said, almost said, 'You're crazy,' but checked it just in time. 'You imagined it.'

'No, I didn't,' she screamed, suddenly sensed a wave of hysteria threatening to engulf her. 'It was Eric. He's been out there watching the house for weeks now. He needs me!'

Jon Quinn closed his eyes for a second or two. I don't believe it, I won't. I do, it's feasible. Jackie's out there somewhere too. She's got to be.

'If it's Eric,' he swallowed, hated himself for saying it, didn't quite know how to put it, 'then , . . then it won't really be him. I mean, not the Eric you once knew.' Just as Jackie won't be the Jackie I once knew.

'It's still Eric though. Her voice was subdued, she wanted to cry but couldn't. 'My Eric.'

They've surrounded the house,' he muttered. 'We've got a fight on our hands.'

There are hundreds of them in the hills, starving and without adequate homes. It's them or us, I'm afraid.'

She nodded dumbly. I still want to go to Eric though. If we've got to die then I want to be with him. But she made no move towards the door, just asked, 'What are we going to do, then?'

'Nothing much we can do except fight.' He tried to smile. 'They're frightened of guns, I've proved that. It all depends on how determined they are. We'd better get back upstairs, the bedroom window is the best place to hold them off from.'

They went back upstairs and Jon returned to the window, looked out. There was nobody in sight, just those three bloody corpses in the yard. He felt physically sick, Christ, it was bloody murder whichever way you looked at it; they had been ordinary people like himself once.

And if Eric Atkinson was out there somewhere then the chances were... his heart threatened to stop then speeded up ... so was Jackie.

He rested the shotgun on the window-sill and waited for daylight.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

JACKIE KNEW by the time she reached the forest that she had thrown off her pursuers, temporarily at least. But the dog was still on her trail.

She had been aware of it about a mile back. On the slopes below her she had caught a glimpse of it as it darted from gorse bush to gorse bush snuffling on her scent, a huge black shaggy thing which she recognised. Kuz's hound, the hellish creature he had trained to run down deer, take them in full flight and tear their throats out. It had been a stray, an outcast from one of the wild packs that inhabited these hills but Kuz had taken it into the village and now it knew only one master. It had had its orders - run down the woman! And it would run until its heart burst.

It could have caught up with her earlier but possibly it hesitated, hung back because it knew her and was uncertain. But now its mind was made up and it had her scent. It had adapted to hunting humans.

Jackie could not go much further. Her legs had gone soft and if she did not give them a respite they would take it. A pain in her side, a stitch that had her doubling up. She could not outrun the creature, neither could she destroy her scent and hide from it. There was only one possible chance . . . she saw the trees, their low branches, so easy to climb . . .

Even as she reached for a bough and was about to haul herself up she heard the low moans, groans of pain and hopelessness, physical and mental agony. Delirium.

She hesitated, looked behind her once more. There was no sign of the dog but it could not be far away. Safety lay within her grasp.

A cry, a hoarse whispered shout of pain as though whoever it was had lost the strength to give full voice. She peered into the darkness, a mass of dark shapes that were tree trunks and branches, could have been anything. The noise came again, nearer than she had at first thought. Climb up into the boughs whilst there is still time. No, somebody needs help. The female protective instinct prevailed.

She walked forward, outstretched arms warding off low branches, protecting her face. That dog could not be far away now. She ought not to linger. It might be a trap. It might . . .

Something grabbed her ankle, a tightening grip that would have thrown her off balance had she not clutched at a branch. She gasped, tried to drag herself away but the hold on her was too strong to break. A groan but there was nothing threatening in it. Pain, despair.

Jackie looked down, could just make out the shape of a man on the pine-needles, one who was incapable of doing anything more than hold on to her. He was either ill or injured.

'What is the matter?' she whispered, thought about the dog again. There was not much time, there couldn't be.

'Snake,' he grunted, held up his other arm for a second but its weight was too much for him. 'I am dying.'

His hold on her relaxed; she dropped to her knees, felt at his arm. The hairy flesh was very swollen, throbbing, so hot. His whole body was lathered in sweat. She could see his eyes in the blackness, the whites showing starkly.

'Sylvia.' His voice altered to a tongue which she did not understand. 'Where is Sylvia? They haven't taken her, have they? I must see Sylvia but I am too weak. Too weak.'

'I do not understand,' she answered him. This strange language frightened her. Words like Phil Winder had used but this man was not one of the smooth-skinned race. So why did he talk like one?

She listened intently for a second. Twigs cracked somewhere not far away. That dog . . . She wondered if she could lift this man up into the trees.

'A dog is following me,' she breathed. 'A fierce one that will kill us both. If I help you can you climb up into the branches of this tree?'

There was silence for a moment. Those eyes dulled, brightened again. 'Where is Sylvia?'

Jackie grasped his uninjured arm, pulled with all her strength. Perhaps she could make him understand. He groaned, began to push with his legs. That's it, now try and hold on to this branch. A slow process and at any second that loathsome hound might show up.

He gripped the branch and she lifted his feet up on to a lower one. Pull and I will push. The bough creaked but somehow she got him up there. Pushed again. Now he was lying across a hammock of interlaced fir branches; they sagged but held. It would have to do, she could not get him any further.

Jackie had just taken the weight of her body on another thick branch when she heard the dog coming. A fast trot now, panting heavily, the need for caution gone. The beast knew its prey could not outrun it now.

Her sweat went cold, she could smell its stale sweaty odour, heard the low killing growl in its throat. She gripped the branch, kicked her legs and swung her body at the same time, a trapeze artist getting early momentum, a human pendulum gathering speed.

Just in time! She was aware of the dog's spring, its snapping slavering jaws, mad eyes glinting in the forest blackness. Had it anticipated her swing it would have hit her, instead it leaped behind, missed and fell back. It snarled its fury, head upturned, waiting for her to fall, tensed and ready, hackles raised.

Jackie grabbed another bough, forced her protesting muscles into one last tremendous effort. She made it, hauled herself up and gave a sob of relief as she lay across the branches, a couple of feet above her unknown companion.

The dog barked, howled, jumped at the tree trunk, its vicious claws shredding the bark, trying for a hold but failing. It snarled, sat back on its haunches, stared at the two humans with sheer malevolence.

Jackie looked down at the man. His body was limp but with luck the branches would hold. If they didn't . . .

She could smell the animal's breath, foul vapours that drifted up to her, reeked of putrid flesh. A scavenger. Jaws that had killed, mutilated. A ravening beast whose only thought was to rip human flesh to bloody shreds, devour it raw. Canine madness.

She trembled, wished she had some water. The stream she had splashed through earlier, its icy cold current serving to revive her, came back to taunt her. She should have paused to slake her thirst but there had not been time. Likewise she had not eaten for several hours. Hungry, thirsty, exhausted, and afraid to sleep.

The dog's jaws opened. Not a snarl, something much more sinister. A yawn, a noisy slow relaxation that posed the worst threat of all. The creature had overcome its initial fury and frustration, now it was resorting to patience and cunning. It was in no hurry. Its prey was trapped in the tree above it and there was no way of escape. It could rest and watch. Sleep if necessary, because its senses were so alert that the slightest movement would wake it instantly. Time was on its side.

Jackie shivered, moved slightly and dislodged a shower of icy raindrops out of the foliage above. Staring at that shape below, the wolf-like silhouette with eyes that glowed green fire.

She transferred her gaze to the man immediately below her. He was desperately ill, he might die before morning, but better that he died peacefully than fell and was savaged by the waiting animal.

He moved and her heart threatened to stop as the big branch creaked. He was restless, changing position. His head turned to one side, craning his neck until he could see her, his eyes unnaturally bright and shiny.

'Have you seen . . . Sylvia?' Soft tones, chilling. Tell me, have you seen her?'

Jackie did not understand, just shook her head and tried to smile. He went into a fit of coughing; the fever inside him was raging, building up to a peak. He had not long to go-

'Lie still or you might fall. Perhaps the dog will get tired and go away.' She knew it wouldn't. It had the cunning and cruelty of its master.

'She knows it is me even though I have changed like everybody else.' He was talking fast now. 'She's with that Quinn fellow, that's what hurts me most. Somehow she escaped, just as he did. I've been turned into an animal but I still want to see her before I die. Everybody's going to die before long.'

His voice tailed off and she could hear him shivering, his teeth banging together. A glance downwards; the dog's eyes flickered open for a second, closed again. It wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. She stretched out, made sure her grip was secure. She wouldn't fall. How long before it got light? Not that it would make any difference.

She was aware of sleep claiming her, a soft soothing blanket that numbed her terror, gave her a sensation of warmth, a bed that was comfortable.

It was light. Or rather it wasn't quite so dark, a foggy greyness that created its own weird shapes. Trees became grotesque monsters, changed back to trees again. There was only one monster, a shaggy one with permanently erect pointed ears, lying with its head on its paws, its eyes wide and staring upwards. Waiting.

Jackie tried to ease her stiff limbs, felt excruciating pins and needles as the trapped blood began to flow again. The man was still there on the bed of branches beneath her, a still form with one arm that was twice the thickness of the other. For a moment she thought that he was dead, that the cold damp night air had put an end to his suffering. And then his head moved, his eyes coming round to meet hers, filmed but clearing slowly.

'Perhaps somebody will come before long,' she said. If somebody did come it would undoubtedly be Kuz and his followers. She would be rescued to meet a worse fate.

They would kill her companion because they had no use for the sick or the maimed. Only the fittest survived.

He nodded, shifted his position, and began to convulse! And she knew then that he was going to fall!

A combination of weakness and pins and needles robbed him of any chance of holding on. In his own fevered mind Eric Atkinson surrendered, had given up all hope of ever seeing Sylvia again. That single glowing ember, the spark that had kept him going, was dying. His fingers did not even attempt to grasp the interwoven fir boughs as he started to slip.

Jackie watched in horror. The branches bent, held him up for a final second or two but his sliding weight was too much for them and then they catapulted him down.

The dog had him the moment he struck the ground, Eric Atkinson's final scream of agony torn from his throat in a mass of bloody flesh, a jagged open wound that pumped scarlet fluid, saturating the crazed beast as it bit and tore, its fangs crunching on brittle bones. The man's head sagged to one side, the vertebrae snapped so that the body twisted round as it was dragged. Clothing

tore, exposed more flesh for mutilation; an open groin wound, intestines being pulled, unravelled.

It was several minutes before the creature's frenzy subsided, and only then did it begin to feast on the carnage, masticating noisily, ravenously, glancing round as though it feared lest its master might suddenly appear and deprive it of its prize.

Jackie closed her eyes but could not shut out the horror below her. Sooner or later she too would weaken.

The dog's hunger appeased, it lay down by the remains of the man it had savaged, turned its attention once more to the woman in the trees above it; watched her steadily. It gave a contented, threatening yawn. It would wait until tomorrow, the day after, next week if need be. It had food; she did not.

The false warmth inside Jackie's body had long since evaporated. Her skin was goose pimpled, the cold and damp beginning to penetrate deep. A feeling of drowsiness, a fight to keep awake. If she slept again she might move, roll. . fall! She would not make it through another night, she knew that.

Weak sunlight slanted down through the forest ceiling, a vain attempt because shortly afterward the hill-fog rolled back again as though it had something to hide. Strange thoughts, frightening ones, plagued Jackie Quinn's tortured mind. Phil Winder, a hairless race of weaklings; a face she half-knew flitting in, then disappearing and leaving her with a blurred image. A man, his features would be familiar if only she could visualise them, reaching out for her. But he could not help her, nobody could.

Her mouth was dry. She moistened her fingers on the wet foliage, sucked them. They tasted of resin, made her want to spit. Hunger gnawed, brought with it nausea. Once the lower branch creaked alarmingly, and she grabbed the overhead one but it did not crack. And below her the dog appeared to sleep but if she watched it long enough she saw an eye flicker open. It was playing a cruel game with her, savouring every second of it.

Dozing, hearing in her mind the baying of the brute as it picked up a fresh scent, the killing urge strong. A baying that grew louder. And louder.

Until at last it jerked her awake in a cold shivering sweat. She gripped the bough tightly for surely what she saw was an hallucination brought on by exposure to the elements.

There must have been a dozen dogs down below her! An assortment of mangy long-haired animals, mongrels of various strains, collies, Alsatians, deerhounds, a mixed ancestry with one overriding common factor - ferocity! They bunched together, their tongues dwindling to a low warning growl. The big dog stood its ground, spread-legged across the remnants of its Man-kill, its coat bloodsoaked and dried, its slobbering jaws challenging them to take its rightful prey if they dared.

They hung back, cowed. Growled again. An encounter, a cowardly hunting pack warily eyeing a King Beast, a champion. Weighing up their chances. They could conquer it but some of them would be killed and none wanted to be amongst the unlucky ones. Threatening barks but the big dog did not back off. If they wanted his food they would have to kill him for it.

Suddenly, without warning, they charged. A melee, a fighting tearing throng, fang and claw ripping deep into hide and flesh. A collie was airborne, the first one in tossed high by the beast at bay, its neck broken, dead before it

thudded down on to the soft ground. Blood spouted and sprayed, ruby aerosol tinsel on Christmas tree branches, a mass of fighting fury so that the spectator above was unable to follow blow by blow. The wounded squealed, leaped clear, came back into the fray.

The big dog was eventually pulled down. Jackie thought that they had got him because she could not see him any more. A pile of dead, a carpet for the living, the low cloud drifting in even thicker than before, a curtain to hide canine shame.

Now the animals were fighting each other, two of the smaller ones being driven off. Finally only five remained, two of them unscathed, tearing flesh from the dead human body, gnawing at the bones. Finally they lay down, belched with contentment. The pack had hunted and killed, were satisfied for the moment.

And up in the fir branches Jackie Quinn wondered how much longer she could hold on. She contemplated leaping down, offering herself to the wild dogs and hoping that the end would be quick.

Today or tomorrow, the outcome would be the same. Every torturous minute was only delaying the awful moment when she must face death in its most horrible form. There could only be one outcome.

CHAPTER TWENTY

REITZE HAD regulated the temperature in the cold store compartment to minus 20°C. That represented the coldest winter you were likely to get in Britain. It might not even drop that low this year but he always worked on extremities; give your specimens the severest of tests and you proved something conclusively. Otherwise it was a waste of time and you finished up with shit in your face.

He lit a Camel, inhaled deeply, rechecked his Progress Chart:

November 21-2 adults (1 male, 1 female both aged approx. 30)

1 male child aged approx. 10

1 ditto aged approx. 5

The youngster had died the first night, the ten-year-old the next day. The male adult had made it until 23 November. The woman lasted up until 25 November.

Conclusion: they couldn't live at that temperature. The whole throwback species would be wiped out before the spring. That would solve a lot of problems.

November 28-2 adults (1 male, 1 female both aged

approx. 20/25)

1 female child aged approx. 12 1 male child aged approx. 7

Temperature 28°F.

The two children died on 30 November, the adult male on 3 December, the female lasted up until 7 December. Conclusion: the female of the species is more resilient.

But overall the throwbacks would be wiped out in a month at the most if the weather worsened.

Reitze had a meeting that afternoon with the Prime Minister, only their second in three months so it had to be something pretty important. For once the Professor felt slightly uneasy. He got the feeling that these guys were looking to throw the book at somebody; they needed a scapegoat. They were starting to panic.

In the meantime he had better go and check the 'natural environment' experiments; the PM would want a full report. He wouldn't take Westcote because the latter was becoming squeamish. Reitze had always suspected that would happen once their experiments went beyond animals. He was the kind who would opt out if things ever returned to normal, defect to the 'amis' and use as a weapon all the information he had collected over the years. Build an empire then destroy it. He needed careful watching. Barnes would be glad of a trip out; he was another who needed watching but for a different reason. He would go to any lengths to gain another step up the ladder, knife you in the back if it was to his advantage and he thought he could get away with it. But he was dedicated and that counted for a lot.

Reitze permitted himself a smile as he left the laboratory. Ed Barnes wouldn't step out of line, not where Reitze was concerned anyway. Because he knew that the Professor knew all about him. You didn't take a guy on at this level without compiling a very personal dossier on him. If the White House found out then Barnes would be out faster than a rat out of a hole, but sometimes it was prudent to have an employee with a skeleton in the cupboard because you had him where you wanted him and he did as he was told. Blackmail, but the end justified the means.

Reitze had singled Barnes out shortly after the latter had graduated, had met him socially on a couple of occasions. Ideally you needed a team of eunuchs for this type of work, 24-hours-a-day men without any distractions. The next best thing was guys who wanted to shut themselves away because they were shit-scared of the outside world. Not criminals, that was too much of a risk.

Barnes fitted and the Agency had set him up. A relationship with a male prostitute. The whole saga had been bugged and they had even got a few intimate photographs. A Watergate-type operation - and Barnes was their man.

Ed Barnes looked up from his desk as Reitze walked in. Small, no more than 5 feet 4 inches tall, cropped dark hair. Eyes set a shade too close together gave him a furtive look like that of a man permanently on the run. Barnes was on the run - from his past. He was making some notes on a pad in his tiny spidery handwriting, further proof of a withdrawn personality.

'I want to check the environment compound,' Reitze said.

Barnes nodded, closed his pad as though he had written something which he did

not want the boss to see. He hadn't, it was just a natural reaction. If you watched him closely he blinked fast, had a slight twitch too. 'OK, I'll be right with you.'

They took one of the Land Rovers, up the sloping ramp and out into the world above. Reitze switched on the wipers; it was raining fast and there were splats of sleet on the windscreen. Good, this would put the outside experiments to the test. Winter had arrived virtually overnight.

They had less than a quarter of a mile to drive before they reached the compound. Once it had been a well-fenced paddock belonging to somebody who had kept ponies. So handy to the laboratory, so little adaptation needed. A reinforcement of barbed wire, the fenced extension a good 8 feet high, backed up with a double-strand electric fence. A locked gate was guarded by two soldiers. At the approach of the Land Rover they emerged from the shelter of their hut, kept their backs to the driving rain.

They knew Reitze, did not even ask for his pass. The Professor pulled the Land Rover off the track, climbed down, followed by Barnes.

'We need to examine the specimens,' he told the guard. 'One of you better come with us. The other can lock the gate after us.'

It was a routine precaution. The throwbacks had never shown violence, only fear of their hairless overlords, but when you were experimenting you never knew how things would turn out.

Barnes shivered, turned up the collar of his windcheater. This sleet was turning to snow. You felt the cold worse when you spent most of your life below ground in a centrally heated building. He wished he had put on an extra sweater.

They walked across the uneven ground, the soldier a couple of yards ahead of them, unslinging his rifle as they approached the dilapidated tin-sheet structure. At the moment there was no sign of life; the occupants of this compound would all be huddled inside that three-sided shelter with the open front. You couldn't blame 'em for that.

Surprise and fear, a dozen squat shapes leaping up from the piles of blankets on which they had been sitting or lying, huddling in the far corner, pressing against each other. They reminded Reitze of those cages of rats in the lab in Arizona. No matter how many times a day you went near them they always squealed and ran to a corner. Because they were intelligent enough to know that you were experimenting on them, that you didn't give a shit whether they lived or died so long as you got the results you were after.

Reitze stood in the wide doorway and regarded the throwbacks carefully, saw the fear in their faces. Totally demoralised, they had given up, maybe they were even willing themselves to die. His eyes narrowed. One of them was dead, the rest crowding and standing on the corpse, treading it into the muddy floor.

'We'd better take a look at that one,' he said, and moved forward a pace.

The captives huddled closer together, spilled away along the wall, crowded into the other corner. The Professor knelt down, had to extricate the body from the mud before he could roll it over. It was a girl, in her late 'teens or early twenties. She was stiff and cold, had probably died during the night.

'Pneumonia,' he said looking up at Barnes, 'but you'll have to take some

tests. We can send over for the body later. In the meantime we'd better check the others.'

It wasn't easy because they kept backing away, furtively following the wall round, only the soldier at the entrance preventing them from fleeing out into the open. Outside the sleet had turned to pure snow, the paddock beginning to whiten over already.

The throwbacks bunched and suddenly one of them fell, a young man toppling forward on to his face, hitting the ground with a thud and lying still. The rest trampled on him in their haste to keep their distance from their captors.

Reitze let them go, he was only interested in the unconscious one. He knelt down and Barnes helped him to roll the body over. The man was still breathing, shallow breaths that might peter out at any second. His bearded face was flushed, the flesh hot with a high temperature.

'What is it?' Barnes whispered, lifted one of the unconscious man's eyelids, let it slip back.

'A fever.' Reitze's voice was tense, suddenly that dull monotone gone. 'We'd better get him back for checks.' Not for attention, for checks. Because it looks interesting.

Between the two of them they lifted the sick man. Reitze supporting the head and shoulders, Barnes taking the legs. The soldier was eyeing the rest of the throwbacks, rifle barrel half-raised. They were scared to hell and there was no knowing what they might do if they panicked. You couldn't say to them, 'This man's sick, we're taking him for treatment.' You were taking one of their kind away to harm him and they were incapable of understanding anything beyond that. In a way they were right because the scientists didn't care whether he died, were only curious what he died of.

They loaded him unceremoniously into the back of the Land Rover, and Reitze took the wheel. It was snowing hard now, the ground slippery with white slush. If it kept up it could be deep by nightfall. The Professor engaged four-wheel drive and even then the wheels slipped a little, the vehicle slewing then righting itself.

'That bunch are in a bad way.' Barnes watched the wipers building up a block of packed snow on the windscreen. They can't stand the winter. They'll all be dead by the end of the week if we don't do something.'

'Like what?' There was a touch of sarcasm in Reitze's reply.

'House 'em better.'

They're undergoing tests. It would be defeating the object.'

They'll all die. You can see that for yourself.' Then so will the thousands, millions, living in the wild. We can't do anything about them.'

Neither of them spoke again until they arrived back at HQ. Reitze called two assistants, had them stretcher the 'patient' up to the end lab, the closed one with the operating table in it. Newman was in there, his features serious when he saw the newcomer.

'Christ, what's the matter with him?' he snapped. He had already done post-mortems on Reitze's victims from the freezer block. Exposure. This was something different, though. Even a layman could tell that.

'I'll have to leave you to it.' Reitze made for the door. 'I've got a meeting in ten minutes. Check this guy out thoroughly.'

'He needs a heavy dose of antibiotics.' 'No!' Reitze whirled, his cheeks flushed slightly. 'You'll fuck the whole experiment up if you start pumping drugs into him. Do all the usual tests first. Ed will help you.'

Newman checked a retort. If they didn't do something drastic quickly this fellow could die. It wasn't just exposure he was suffering from and that was what worried him. 'I'll have a report ready in an hour,' he said tight-lipped. Reitze closed the door behind him. Suddenly they weren't making any headway at all and Caldecott and Rankine were going to ask an awful lot of questions.

'You mean that tough as they seem they can't stand exposure to the elements!' The Prime Minister was incredulous. 'My God, and our security forces have driven thousands of them out of the towns into the hills and woods!'

Reitze got the impression he was supposed to say something. 'I'm sorry, I should have told you before that they would not be able to withstand the cold. Perhaps we can round them up again. It's too fucking late because it's blizzarding out there now. He said nothing, just waited. Put the ball in their court.'

'Are you absolutely sure they're not resilient?' Rankine was clutching at straws. 'I mean . . . you could be wrong . . . couldn't you.'

Reitze hoped his contempt for them didn't show. You lot ballsed it up. You wouldn't wait for my tests. Drive 'em out of the towns into the wilds, get rid of 'em. We don't mean 'em any harm because they are our people; we just don't want 'em around. Now you're shitting yourselves because you might've got rid of 'em for good. Please help us. Professor, or else we'll blame you.

'I'm not wrong.' Reitze's voice was as emotionless as ever. 'My tests have proved beyond doubt that the throw-backs can't stand the winter.'

'Did you really have to . . . to kill those few to prove that?' Caldecott's eyebrows knitted, accusing.

They died.' A politician's answer, avoid replying to a direct question. 'If you want me to do tests then there are bound to be casualties.'

The Defence Minister and the Prime Minister exchanged glances. Both were uneasy. They gave up blaming the Americans, looked for another outlet; there weren't many left.

'But we've got to do something.' Caldecott spread his hands in despair. 'If only it wasn't winter.'

There's nothing we can do.' Reitze took his time selecting and lighting a Camel, 'The way the snow's blowing up right now we won't be able to get out of here ourselves before long. Even if we could, even if the weather was mild, it would be an impossibility rounding these people up again. They've dispersed, are trying to adapt to a new environment. Towns and cities are foreign to their primitive nature so no way will they be coming back. We've just got to face up to it - by the spring there won't be many of 'em left.'

Silence. The battery clock on the wall sounded deafeningly loud. Time was everybody's enemy right now.

'What about these . . . these latest tests you're doing?' Caldecott asked hesitantly. 'The ones in the . . . outdoor shelter.'

'I've just come back from there.' Reitze took his time replying. Damn them, they would ask about that. There was no point in lying; the truth could be known in a matter of hours. Just don't try blaming me. 'We've got a problem.'

'What sort of a problem?'

'At the moment I'm not sure. Newman and Barnes are conducting tests right now on a man who collapsed less than an hour ago. It isn't from exposure to the elements, I'm virtually certain of that.' 'What then?'

'I'm not sure. I'll let you know the minute I am.' That should break the meeting up if anything could.

'All right,' Caldecott nodded, 'we'll be waiting to hear from you, Professor. I just hope it isn't bad news. It seems that time is on the side of the enemy who did this awful thing to us. They have only to sit and wait and within a matter of months the unpopulated western world will be theirs for the taking! I just hope you're wrong.'

'It's bad.' Brian Newman's features were devoid of colour. He sat on a chair in the corner of the laboratory. There was no sign of Barnes and Reitze didn't ask after him. On the operating table a sheet covered the body of the man they had brought in earlier. There was no movement from beneath it and Reitze did not enquire if he was dead because he never wasted his time on futile questions.

'How bad?' Don't rush him, let him take his time giving the facts.

'A virus,' Newman replied. 'An off-shoot of the microorganism that worked on the skin tissues, doubtless. It affects the lungs like the fastest cancer you've ever known and the heart can't stand the strain. Triggered off by a drop in body temperature. If those we deep froze hadn't died so quick they'd've got it almost certainly. Cold and wet brings it on. Whether it will affect every single one of the millions of throwback Britons is anybody's guess, but I'd say you'd have to be bloody lucky to survive out there. Another thing, and I'm not absolutely sure about this, but I'd say it's contagious.'

The hell it is!' Reitze instinctively moved back a pace. 'In that case we'd better start work with some antibiotics, inject all that lot up in the environment compound. Right now I can't think of anything else.'

They took the Land Rover again. The blizzard had increased to gale force, restricted visibility to less than fifteen yards. The snow was beginning to drift and several times they had wheel-spin but they scarcely noticed it.

The same sentry unlocked the gate, climbed on the tailboard. It wasn't going to be easy injecting a crowd of primitive men and women who had a terror of civilisation.

Reitze drove right up to the hut, parked the Land Rover across the entrance and killed the engine.

'Jesus H. Christ!' was all he said.

His companions stared where he was looking. There was limited vision through the driving white flakes but it was enough. More than enough.

Newman wanted to say 'Maybe they're just sleeping, huddled together for warmth.' It would have been a pointless lie. The soldier had jumped down from the rear, was pressed up against the side of the vehicle, his rifle still slung on his shoulder because he wouldn't be needing it.

Two of the hut's occupants squatted against the far walls, heads forward, nodding as though they were on the verge of slumber. They did not look up even though they had surely heard the Land Rover's approach. Two children lay just inside, arms entwined around each other.

The rest were strewn across the entire floor space, lying in various poses, some on their backs, others face upwards. Not moving.

The snow was cutting a virgin white path inside as far as the centre, creating a fluffy shroud which was fast covering the bodies in the foreground. Maybe in a few hours it would fill the whole shed, hide the horror of it all. Nature's final apology before the world died.

Reitze pushed the starter-button, began to reverse back out into the paddock.

Test Number Three was conclusive enough without further examination of the specimens - the new virus was fatal within a matter of hours*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE THROWBACKS would not be attacking again, Jon Quinn was optimistic about that. They would not face guns; they had learned their lesson.

He had spent the remainder of that awful night at the bedroom window, but there had been no sign of the enemy out there in the darkness. They had withdrawn, were doubtless watching from the hills around. But they had no answer to the sudden death that firearms were capable of. They would not risk another raid, would rely on stealth, maybe an ambush if they got the chance.

Dawn came gradually, a slow greyness, a creeping hill-fog that reduced visibility to a few yards. He could make out the gate, the tall hedge that bordered the lane, but only because he knew what and where they were. Detail was obscured in a still damp world. If you listened hard enough you heard the steady dripping of condensation. Not even the harsh squawking of a crow in the fir spinney. Nothing.

Sylvia was sleeping heavily. He bent over her, for one awful moment thought she had stopped breathing. Her breasts scarcely rose and fell. A combination of shock and exhaustion. She would probably sleep the clock round.

As he turned away from the bed an awful feeling of loneliness assailed him. He didn't even have Sylvia any more. Physically she was here in the cottage but her love, her thoughts, were out there up in the hills. Eric Atkinson was a terrible sight to behold but everything in her had gone back to him. She might

even go to him now and if that was her wish then he would let her go. There was no point in trying to stop her.

Another awful thought; out there in the yard were three dead bodies.

Murderer!

He winced, did not even try to convince his conscience that it was self-defence, that he had shot them to save Sylvia; just accepted that he had killed them. The corpses had to be buried, there was no question about that, and there was only one person to do it. It was a task that could not be delayed,

He went downstairs and outside, took the gun with him. The sooner he got it done, the better. Funerals were therapy, a sort of climax to grief, and once they were over and done with time could begin to heal; perhaps his conscience would be easier when the dead were below ground.

The cultivation patch was the obvious choice; the soil there was soft and the digging would be relatively easy. AH the same, it would take him most of the day.

He fetched a spade from the outbuilding and propping the loaded shotgun up against the fence he began marking out the first oblong. He would not need to cultivate the whole area again, all he would need would be a few rows of essential basic crops for himself (Sylvia would not be here then). He might not even bother to grow vegetables again. He wasn't thinking positively any more.

The digging was soft and easy, rhythmic motions, taking his time, piling up a mound of soil, some of it sliding back into the shallow rectangular hole.

The fog had rolled back as far as the base of the steep hillside. Every so often he paused and glanced around but there was no sign of anybody. The throwbacks had returned to the hills, maybe now they would leave him alone.

His eyes smarted with tears that would not come; he could not remember the last time he had cried. Probably when he was a young boy. He had not even cried when his parents had died and God knows he had tried hard enough. Burning grief inside him that could not escape, knotting him up. The only two funerals he had ever attended.

Morbid, so unnecessary. A grave like this one only much, much deeper, a roll of artificial grass hiding the mound of earth for some obscure reason. Civilisation went to a lot of needless trouble. A coffin that had cost a hundred quid in those days, high-quality polished oak that would only rot away in the ground. Pointless in the extreme.

His mother's wish had been to be buried in the same grave so they had to dig it all out again. The same rigmarole, plastic grass and a meaningless ceremony because nobody except himself really cared. That night he had almost cried. Almost, but not quite.

He paused. He was sweating heavily. The sides of the grave were up to his thighs. It would do, it would have to. So long as he got the corpses underground that was all that mattered. He debated going and fetching one of them; no, he would dig the other graves first, try and get finished before dark. Filling them in would not take long.

He worked right through until mid-afternoon. The fog was beginning to creep in

again and he could only just make out the outline of the cottage. Probably Sylvia still slept. He wouldn't be long now.

There was no way Jon could carry the bodies across to the graves, he would have to drag them by the legs, unceremoniously. Ignominious. Like the time he had buried Nita, the old milking goat. He had put a piece of rope on her back legs, pulled her in stages out of the shed, across the yard and into the field. He would have to do the same now.

He took the nearest first, looped the rope over the man's ankles, pulled it tight, took the strain. Stiff and resisting, a rigid arm becoming caught on the gatepost. He sweated, had to go and free it. Damn it, the eyes had come open, were staring balefully at him.

Murderer!

No, I didn't want to kill you, please believe me. I'm sorry. Oh God, I'm sorry!

It took him ten minutes to lug the corpse to the graveside, turned his head away as he fumbled to undo the knots. Don't look at me please. I'm sorry.

He pushed, the corpse slid, took a small avalanche of soil and stones with it, fell awkwardly, face downwards. No, I'm not going down there to turn you over. It doesn't matter anyway because you're dead.

Maybe he should have dug deeper, one big grave, buried all three together. Funny how you thought of these things when it was too late.

It was dusk by the time he had all three of them in their graves, took the spade again and began to shovel the earth back in with dull thumps. Finality. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away, He could hear that young curate's voice at his mother's graveside, rushing through the words as though he had to get it all over as soon as possible. Maybe he had been scared too. Secretly everybody was frightened of death because no matter what you did in life you ended up like this. All efforts were in vain.

He finished, smoothed the slight mounds over with the flat of the spade and stood back. It was almost dark now, the fog seeming to have melted with the coming of night. The sweat was chilling fast on his body, an icy shirt clinging damply to his flesh. It felt like there could be a frost tonight.

Jon Quinn retrieved his gun, headed back to the cottage. He kicked his boots off in the porch, went inside and locked the door behind him. Silence. No movement, no faint glow of a candle burning.

He grabbed a storm lantern, lit it and waited for the flame to settle. The wick needed renewing; he would see to it tomorrow. Always tomorrow but deep down you found yourself hoping that tomorrow never came.

Upstairs, almost afraid to go into the bedroom. Maybe Sylvia had gone, crept out whilst he was engrossed in his gruesome task, had just walked away into the fog and wouldn't be coming back. Or else she was dead. Last night might have proved too much for her; there was a bottle of aspirins by the bed.

Nausea compressed his stomach, tried to force him to vomit. Don't go in there, don't look. That way you won't ever know. If she's dead then you'll have to bury her too.

He kicked open the door, held the lamp at arm's length, the yellow circle of light quivering and casting weird shadows. The bed, a still form beneath the crumpled sheets. Alive or dead?

Then the bedclothes moved and Sylvia came into view, propped herself up on an elbow, blinked in the sudden wan light. He scarcely recognised her, she seemed to have aged a decade, her eyes black-ringed and sunken, deep contours etched into her skin. Sheer hopelessness, and something else - grief.

'Jon?'

'Are you OK?'

'Eric's dead, Jon.'

A jumble of replies crammed his confused brain. Don't be silly. How could you possibly know? He's OK, I'm certain of it. But they all sounded hollow so he said nothing, just stood there looking at her.

'He's dead,' she repeated.

Jon moved into the room, set the lantern down on the dresser. She moved again, sat up, and he saw that she was still fully dressed.

'I know he is.' She spoke flatly, not even a tremor in her voice. 'I wish I could have seen him one more time though. Just to say I'm sorry.'

He lowered himself down on to the edge of the bed, suddenly saw how she had changed during these last few hours, almost drew away in horror. The texture of her skin was different, blotched, coarser, her hair wiry, the soft silkiness gone out of it. The pertness of her features was gone too; lips thicker, nose less pointed. An unmistakable resemblance to those corpses which he had interred today!

'You're ill.' He had to say something, must not alarm her unduly. He hoped the revulsion, the shock, did not show in his expression. He tried to tell himself that it was a trick of the light, that if he went and fetched a torch and shone it on her she would be all right. In the end he accepted what he saw, let his brain go numb, didn't try to find reasons, or hope. Somehow Sylvia was undergoing the physical change which had thrown back the population of the rest of the world thousands of years. Mentally she seemed to have all her faculties. At the moment anyway.

'I know he's dead.' Her voice was a dull whisper now. 'I just know.'

Panic hit him as he sat there. Like the time Jackie (oh God, how I need her now!) had been suddenly ill in the middle of the night soon after they were married. It had turned out to be an allergy to a drug which the doctor had prescribed but he did not know that at the time, was certain she was having a heart attack. Wanting to rush downstairs and phone the doctor but he was afraid to leave her. Sure that she was going to die. If she did then he would kill himself because he couldn't bear to be without her. He couldn't bear being without Jackie now. But he hadn't killed himself because she had been all right.

There was no doctor to phone, no help of any kind. Nothing. He just had to stay with Sylvia.

'I'll get you a drink.' His voice seemed far away, a faint echo coming from downstairs. He stood up and his legs felt weak. He swayed, had to hold on to

the dresser.

He groped his way downstairs, found a torch; the battery was going and he didn't know whether there were any spares left but it would do for now. A glass, holding it under the tap, leaning on the sink.

Sylvia groped for the tumbler, slopped some of it down herself, drank the remainder in one gulp. She stared at him, did not seem to recognise him-, her eyes vacant.

He took the empty glass from her, backed towards the door. 'Til be back in a bit.' A mumbled excuse for leaving. You visited a senile patient in hospital, were grateful to take your leave, told them you'd see them again. You hoped you wouldn't but you did not want to be cruel.

Downstairs he would have thrown up had his stomach not been empty. He didn't want to eat; couldn't. His head was spinning, a wave of dizziness had him staggering towards the frayed sofa in the kitchen, flinging himself full-length on to it. Exhaustion was an illness, you had to sleep it off. A release valve to stop you from going mad; you reached a point where you didn't care any more. So you slept.

Morning; not early, comparatively late by the way the weak sunshine was patterning latticed diamonds on the wall. Much colder too. Jon Quinn shivered, lay there and let his recollections of the previous day come back in their own time. He listened, couldn't hear anything, didn't want to. He wished he could go back to sleep, divorce himself from reality. Hide.

In the end he swung his legs to the floor and made his way to the sink. A glass of water, not the same glass that Sylvia had used, he made sure of that. There was a sour taste in his mouth, the taste of damp earth. Grave soil?

He would have to go upstairs, it was his duty. Better now, get it over with; if he put it off any longer he wouldn't go. He would walk right out of that door and up the steep hillside opposite. I can't beat you so I've come to join you. Maybe the change will take me, too, and then I won't know any different.

He mounted the stairs a step at a time. In the cold light of morning there would be no shadows to hide the awful facial details. You're not Sylvia, you're something else.

Just like Jackie is.

He stood on the landing, almost turned back. How could it have happened? That storm months ago had cleared the atmosphere of any remaining micro-organisms, blown them on westwards. What damage was done was done, there wouldn't be any more. You were just left to live with what remained. In theory.

The mating, the rape . . . That was it, he was sure. Eric had passed the change on in his semen, given Sylvia new life in a different way. Oh Jesus God! A husband's revenge on his unfaithful wife and her lover!

No, I don't want to go near you, Sylvia. Thank God our relationship has been platonic these last few weeks. Or else . . .

He hit the bedroom at a rush otherwise he would never have gone through that door. Revulsion, curiosity. All right, let's get it over, let me look at you and . . .

The room was empty!

He stood there just inside the door, his brain trying to accept that there was no horror lying there on the bed, no disfiguration, no creature that might have been four thousand years old. Nothing but a pile of crumpled sheets and blankets, an empty bed in a room that stank of stale sweat and urine.

Instinctively, dazed, he checked the wardrobe, looked under the bed. Just to satisfy himself that she wasn't there. She wasn't, he didn't expect her to be.

She had gone because the call of the wild was too strong for her to resist; she had returned to her own kind.

It was some time later when Jon Quinn went outside. The sun had been obliterated by a bank of dark clouds and the temperature had dropped several degrees. He grimaced. Winter had replaced autumn overnight; those were snow clouds, maybe only a shower, a light ground covering but nevertheless snow.

He filled the hayracks in the goat shed. The animals were becoming accustomed to being shut in now, didn't stampede round the building in an attempt to get out of his way. The young billy was ready to be slaughtered for meat but there wasn't any point anymore. In all probability he would just turn him loose, let him go to the hills. He could have his freedom for what it was worth.

As he came out of the buildings a flock of rooks suddenly rose into the air, cawing loudly, circling, wanting to drop back down on to whatever they had been feeding on.

Jon stared in amazement. Something on the cultivation patch had attracted them, he couldn't think what; there were few growing crops to interest corvines at this time of the year. He picked up the gun, changed his mind. He did not have cartridges to waste. All the same he would go and take a look.

They were probably scratching in the soil after wire-worms ... He stopped, almost turned and ran. God, no, not that.

Two of the newly-dug graves had been disturbed, the loose soil scratched out, scattered all around. And lying there, partly out of the ground, exposed to their waists, were two of the corpses! They stared fixedly in his direction out of bloody eyeless sockets, flesh hanging from their faces in scarlet ribbons. Rigid in rigor mortis, stiff arms pointing in his direction.

Murderer!

If his limbs had responded Jon Quinn would have turned and run. Instead he was forced to stand there, cringe before the mute accusations of the partly exhumed dead.

Murderer! You cannot be rid of us so easily.

Gradually logic, cold reasoning infiltrated his sheer terror. Those . . . things . . . were dead, they could not harm him, repulsive as they were. This was not Haiti where the witch-doctors summoned the dead from their graves to enslavement as zombies. It was Britain and things like that did not happen. You just got poisoned and thrown back into your ancestry.

Nevertheless, somebody or something had dug the bodies up. He moved a few paces nearer, ran his eye over the dispersed soil. Footprints, large animal ones with claw imprints. Dogs!

He laughed his sheer relief aloud. The starving wild dogs from the hills had

scented death and come during the night hours, had scratched up the human corpses from their shallow graves, had feasted on the dead meat. And when the canines left at daybreak the crows had flown in to a banquet of carnage, pecked out the eyes, scraped the flesh off with their talons. And now the sinister birds were wheeling overhead, demanding a return to their feast before flying back to their roost. Jon turned away. Let the bastards come back and feed.

That was the role scavengers played in the world of death, preventing putrefaction and disease. After dark the dogs might come again, foxes too. It was the law of Nature when things got out of control.

One last look up at the dark forest on the skyline before he went back indoors. The first few snowflakes were starting to drift down. Sylvia was somewhere up there.

Maybe Jackie, too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IT WAS morning again. Jackie stirred, instinctively clutched at the tree branches, experienced a dizzy bout of vertigo. Sickness; fear, and the fact that she had neither eaten nor drunk for almost two days.

She was going down there today, down below to where death awaited her. She either died up here slowly of starvation or gave herself up to the pack. The latter would be relatively quick. Her mind was made up.

A flap of huge wings close by, a huge brown bird taking off, gliding and settling again in a tree further away, A buzzard. It was waiting for her to die so that it could feast; it wasn't in any hurry.

She released her hold on the big bough, felt the branches beneath her starting to bow, yielding to her full weight.

Sliding, slippery . . .

She tensed as she felt herself go, closed her eyes, braced every nerve in her body for the impact. Seconds seemed an eternity. A brief flash of inexplicable memory: that face again, so smooth like Phil Winder's, eyes that were filled with sorrow, lips moving. Please don't die. Then it was gone.

She hit something soft, rolled, sprawled. A cushioned landing, she had fallen on the wild dogs, amongst them. She closed her eyes tightly. I'm not going to look, I don't want to see them. Kill me quickly.

Jackie could feel the rough hair of the dog underneath her, a still form that did not move. One of the dead ones. She was lying there waiting to die but death did not come.

It was the silence that had her opening her eyes in bewilderment. The snarling pack should have been on her by now but there was not so much as a warning growl. She should have been dragged to and fro like a rag doll caught up in a canine tug-o'-war, pulled one way then the other, teeth biting and tearing as they savaged her.

It took several seconds for understanding to filter through to her confused brain, rejecting the fact that she was not going to die. Glancing from one animal to another. She lay on the big one, the one which had hunted her, had killed her companion. Two more close by, a third by the human corpse. Another some yards away. All of them dead. The rest had gone.

For some reason the dogs had left. They had fought and feasted on human carrion, satisfied their hunger. Became bored. It didn't matter why they had left, just that they had.

Jackie sat there staring about her, noticed for the first time that it was snowing, odd patches of open ground beneath the trees already sprinkled with a soft white covering. She shook herself, sat up, still listening in case the dogs were close by but there was no sound. An empty forest, devoid of all life except that buzzard still perched in the tree.

She tried to stand but her legs were weak and she fell, crawled a few yards away from the scene of the bloody carnage. She couldn't stop here, the animals might come back or else others scenting death might appear. She had resigned herself to dying but instead she lived and now she had the will to fight again.

After some time she found she could stand, walk a few paces, holding on to low branches to support herself. It was bitterly cold and she was hungry, thirsty. Also she was a fugitive. Those who hunted her would not have given up the trail.

She followed a well-trodden path through the trees. The thick overhead evergreen foliage was preventing the ground from being covered with snow and it made travelling easier. All the same she could not remain in the forest. She had to keep moving.

It was midday when she finally emerged from the big wood, stood and looked across at snow-covered hills and valleys. It was still snowing lightly but the clouds to the west were breaking up. She knew that she had to find food and shelter before nightfall.

She headed across the ridge of hills, wary, hiding in the bushes whenever she spied other people. Once a group of five men and a woman passed within yards of her. The men were struggling to support the woman, two of them carrying her a few yards, setting her down to rest. She was coughing badly, her breath wheezing and rasping its way out of her lungs. A conference between the other three men; they were worried and Jackie thought that they looked ill, too. Eventually they moved on and once they were out of sight Jackie continued on her way. But overall she sensed that something was dreadfully wrong.

Some time later her foot caught against something, almost caused her to fall. With a start she saw that it was the body of a man that the snow had covered. She saw his face, stepped back in horror. Sunken eyes, the flesh blotched as though some disease had ravaged him, a trickle of dried blood from the open mouth.

Death was common enough, she had come to accept it as an everyday occurrence

but there was something about this corpse that alarmed her. Had he been savaged by wild animals or mutilated by the fierce roving tribes then she would hardly have given him a second glance. But he had died from some inexplicable cause that had left its own mark on him; he reminded her of that woman she had seen earlier, the emaciation, the sheer hopelessness in the features. And it frightened her.

Jackie's body was warmer now but shelter and food were priorities. She remembered the comfort of the Winder farmhouse, foreign to her instincts then but she needed such a place now. And when she spied the stone cottage set back against the side of the hill below her she knew that that was where she must take refuge. She would be warm and safe in there, she had learned that certain packages and jars contained nourishing food and, above all, the tribes mostly avoided these strange dwelling-places.

She approached the cottage cautiously. A small tumbledown stone-built two-up, two-down that had fallen into a state of disrepair, the covering of snow hiding most of its structural faults. Window frames had rotted, a couple of broken panes had been repaired with brown tape. Several slates were missing off the roof and jackdaws had chipped most of the mortar out of the chimney stack. The garden gate had come off its hinges, was lying on its side.

Jackie took a direct course for the front door; it was locked. Following the wall, she peeped in at the first window she came to. The usual furniture she had come to accept, a couple of easy chairs, a sofa and a table. A fireplace with just crumpled newspapers in the grate. A table was strewn with sheets of paper and some kind of squat machine which she did not recognise; she had never seen a typewriter before. She moved on, skirted a lean-to, came to the back door. It was open an inch or two so that it creaked in the wind and the snow slanted in.

She pushed it wide, stepped over the threshold. A wave of dizziness passed over her and she flung herself on to the sofa. Sheer bliss, rolling back, stretching out. She would rest awhile and then she would find something to eat and drink. Outside the snow was thickening, beginning to plaster the windows, darkening the rooms.

In her dreams Jackie saw that man again. He was in the same room as her but somehow he always succeeded in keeping his back to her. Occasionally she glimpsed his profile but it was always in shadow.

And when finally he came to her the light was gone and she could not see him, only feel him. Strong smooth flesh that rubbed against her own, kissing her passionately and thrusting his tongue into her mouth. Sensuous fingertips doing things to her that Kuz had never done. Dominant yet gentle, loving her.

She sobbed aloud when finally he rolled in between her legs and even then he took his time entering her. She soared, drifted along in an ecstatic flight. And still she did not see his face clearly. She clung to him, tried to stop him leaving her, determined to go wherever he went. But, as usual, he slipped from her grasp and then he was gone into the shadows of her mind, leaving only a dim memory behind. But he would come again surely, he always did. And next time . . .

Jackie was vaguely aware that she was not alone in the room, her senses picking up movements, conscious of them even as she slept. Stirring, trying to recollect. He had come back! Her pulses raced but she did not open her eyes immediately because she would not see him clearly. He would be standing in a shadowy corner or else looking out of the window with his back to her.

Her sleep receded and now every sense was alert. Positive movements, footsteps, he was attending to some chore or other. Perhaps if she squinted through half-closed eyes she would surprise him, catch him unawares before he had a chance to hide his features from her again.

She trembled, tensed, experienced a sense of guilt. She was not meant to see and yet she was determined. Candlelight; she had slept longer than she had thought and it was already dark outside. Her slitted eyes followed the wan circle of yellow light - saw him!

She suppressed a groan of disappointment; he had his back to her as usual, was kneeling before the fireplace with an armful of kindling wood, laying sticks on the newspaper. He wore a blue anorak and the hood was still pulled up, the wet snow on it melting and dripping on to the floor. Muddy Wellington boots had left a trail of footprints from the back door.

A matchbox rattled, a rasping noise, and a bright flame was applied to the paper, hungrily devouring it, the sticks crackling and hissing, A puff of smoke billowed back, made him cough. A fit of coughing, a handkerchief clutched to his mouth. A sound that frightened Jackie because it was reminiscent of that woman's coughing earlier.

Her alarm blended into disappointment as the man. turned away from the fire and she saw his features clearly for the first time. It was not him. Too old, so gaunt, no way was it the lover who haunted her dreams and fantasies.

'Hallo,' he nodded, not in the least surprised, as though he had quite expected to find her lying there on the sofa. He pushed his hood back and she noted the receding hairline, the balding crown. 'Now that I've found some wood we can have a fire. We'll soon get warm.'

She smiled, hoped her anguish didn't show. She also hoped that he would not make any demands on her although she would have traded anything and everything she had to offer for food and shelter.

'Rod.' He tapped his chest, gave another deep rumbling cough. 'Rod Savage.1

'Jac.' She pointed to herself, smiled again. They would have to overcome the language barrier. She had coped with Phil Winder. Somehow her vocal chords were incapable of producing this new language and even when she understood certain sounds she was unable to repeat them except in a barely articulate nasal tone.

'Pleased to meet you, Jac.' Rod Savage obviously welcomed the opportunity to talk to somebody even if they did not understand. Talking to oneself got exceedingly boring after several weeks. 'I expect you'd like some tea.' He took off his anorak, began opening some cans, sardines and spaghetti. A packet of Ryvita that was no longer crisp, spread with peanut butter. He boiled the kettle, made some tea.

Jackie ate ravenously, gave up trying to master the art of using a fork. Her companion did not seem to notice.

She watched him carefully as she ate. Certainly he was not well, his features shiny with sweat even though the blazing fire had not yet had a chance to warm the room. Periodically his eyes seemed to film over, cleared again. And always that hacking cough.

'Damned typewriter's broken.' He pushed his empty plate away. 'Carriage spring, I think. No chance of getting it repaired and I'm not mechanically

minded so I'll have to write the rest of my "History of the New Britain" in longhand. Don't expect it will ever get published anyway because there's nobody left to publish it.' He tried to laugh, surrendered to another fit of coughing.

Jackie noticed that when the handkerchief came away from his mouth it was spottled with scarlet.

'I'm ill, y'know.' Clipped hurried speech as though he had got an awful lot to say and was afraid he would not get time to finish speaking. 'Had it a fortnight now. Some days it's not too bad, like today, other days it's pretty chronic. Pneumonia probably, came on when the weather changed. Maybe I'll rest up for a few days.' He spread his arms, spoke more directly. 'You're welcome to stay here as long as you like. Get it? You... stay... here ...'

She nodded. Phil Winder had taught her how to wash dishes and she would repay this strange man for his hospitality. He wouldn't expect anything else, he was too ill.

'Say, that's cute, real cute.' He watched her at the sink from the armchair. 'Never thought you lot would be able to master household chores. Have to make a note of that. I'll sub-title it "How I lived with a trained throwback".' He laughed and coughed again.

'Got you lot all worked out.' Rod Savage talked incessantly in spite of the fact that it was a strain. 'For weeks now you've been gathering in the hills. Couldn't understand it, anybody with any sense would stick to the valleys and lowlands with winter coming on. Then I hit on it. The old Iron Age trade route starts from here, I found an old book about it, the route marked on a map. Through these hills, heading south. Not that you've got anything to trade or anybody to trade with but old instincts die hard. You're massing for the great trek south. You need a warmer climate and that's where you're going, but if you ask me you've left it too damned late\'

Jackie slept on the sofa that night, lay and listened to the wind howling, buffeting the cottage, driving the snow against the walls, building up deep drifts. And hour after hour Rod Savage lay and coughed. She heard him turning restlessly in his bed directly above the tiny living-room, remembered that woman who had had to be carried, and the body in the snow.

She dozed uneasily. Tonight her lover did not come; she called out for him, willed him to join her, but he never came. Strange dreams of a land where everybody except herself was dead, the hills and forests littered with bodies where the fevered coughing illness had taken its toll.

Only she remained, alone in a dead hell, wanting to die but living, forced to walk the silent land in search of a will-o'-the-wisp that no longer came to taunt her. A land of cold and hunger and thirst.

When finally she awoke she was not sure whether it was light or not, went to the window and rubbed a patch in the condensation. A virgin white curtain of snow covered the outside of the glass pane. She turned back in despair, wondered if she could find sticks and paper with which to light a fire.

The wind had dropped. Suddenly she was aware of the total stillness, the cloying silence. And with it came a feeling bordering on panic. Rod Savage was no longer turning restlessly in his bed upstairs and coughing incessantly. No sound came from above.

And that was when Jackie's dream came back to her, of a land where everybody except herself was dead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SYLVIA HAD found the village within an hour or so of leaving the cottage, had come upon it suddenly in the thick hill-fog. She could have drawn back, fled before the occupants caught sight of her. But she didn't.

She walked slowly, dazedly into the settlement. The snow was falling steadily, a refreshing wind threatening to whip it into a blizzard. A strange atmosphere which she sensed immediately, a kind of bustle of activity which had suddenly come to a stop. Loaded litters, the snow already beginning to cover them with a white film, a cluster of men who eyed her with a mixture of curiosity and apathy. We were about to leave but we've changed our minds. Who are you and what are you doing here?

They were all packed up and ready to go. Where to? Sylvia came to a halt before the group, eyed them question-ingly, felt she had to say something. They would not understand, but it didn't matter. Thinking, talking, was becoming increasingly difficult, her brain fogged and sluggish.

'My name's Sylvia. My husband's dead.' Grief that had been threatening like thunderheads on the horizon suddenly hit her. Unrestricted sobs. One of them pointed to the nearest dwelling-place. Go in there, woman, out of the cold.

She walked shakily towards it, paused in the entrance. The interior was dark, had a sharp unpleasant odour about it. She waited for her vision to adjust to the gloom, saw through a liquid misty flood, distorted shapes; somebody lay on a bed in the corner, not moving. A woman was stretched out on some hides by the wall, and it was quite obvious that she was dead. A fit of uncontrollable coughing attracted her attention and she turned her head and made out a boy of perhaps ten years of age squatting beyond the dying embers of the fire. Tiny rivulets of blood trickled down his chin. He saw her but his expression did not register surprise, just acceptance.

'You're all ill.' She spoke aloud. 'You need help, a doctor.' Now that was a silly thing to say because there weren't any doctors left. They were all out there, any one of these menfolk might have been a doctor once. Before all this. What was a doctor? She could not really remember; somebody who helped you, perhaps.

She stood just inside the open doorway, looked back outside. Several more people were emerging from the other huts bearing litters on which lay prone bodies wrapped in animal hides, scarcely seeming able to lift the weight of them. A conference. They were pointing, arguing. Sylvia did not need an interpreter to understand what they were saying.

We must go even though we are ill and dying. The snow is here, winter is upon

us. If we stay here we shall starve. Go now whilst there is still a little time left.

A woman appeared from somewhere, came into the hut and with some difficulty lifted up the sick boy. He began to cry, coughed some more blood. Sylvia made as if to help but some inhibition checked her. She was a stranger here, an intruder in-a different way of life; they might resent her interference. She felt self-conscious.

The child was taken out, room made for him on one of the stretchers alongside the still form of a red-headed man who might already have been dead. They were hurrying now, seeming to have to force their limbs into jerky movements. Sylvia was ignored, perhaps they had forgotten her. Very soon they would all be gone and she would be left here in this deserted place of death.

Panic, almost running out to them, the snow coming faster now. For God's sake don't go without me, don't leave me here. Please! I'm one of you now - look at me!

The litter on to which they had just placed the boy was lowered back on to the ground, two of them were straining to lift the man off. He was dead, there was no point in taking him with them. They dragged him free, laid him down in the snow. You did not bury your dead, you left them for the wild dogs and foxes.

'I want to go with you,' Sylvia cried, clutched at one of them. Til walk, I promise I won't be a nuisance, but don't leave me behind!' A flash of lucid speech and then it was gone again and words were meaningless to her.

They looked at one another, grunted. Arguing again. They had no room for passengers, anybody who went on the trek had a part to play. You must help to carry the sick, woman. And if you fail then you will be abandoned. Nobody will help you.

Sylvia took the handles of the stretcher, the boy's mother going in front. Between them they could manage now that the weight of the adult corpse had been removed. A slow procession, the men in front, the women bringing up the rear.

The snow eased off a little and away to her right Sylvia saw and recognised the outline of the Quinn smallholding, like a miniature toy farm set out on an uneven white sheet. One brief wave of nostalgia but she pushed it forcibly away. Jon was nothing to her, never had been, only somebody to fill a gap while Eric was away. A lump caught in her throat. Poor Eric, this didn't have to happen to him. But it had. If only she hadn't been one of the unlucky survivors. But she would not survive long now, none of them would. Eric? Who was Eric? Her mind slipped again, became a vacuum.

The descent was steep and slippery. Once the woman in front lost her footing and somehow Sylvia managed to prevent the stretcher from tipping over, steadied it down on to the snow. The hide blankets slid to one side and she saw the boy. Oh God, his body shook with the fever, he was delirious, mouthing meaningless animal noises. His bright eyes saw her, weak arms tried to reach out for her but they had not the strength; he thought she was his mother.

Sylvia helped the distraught woman wrap him up again and then they had to hurry to catch up with the others. Once they reached the floor of the narrow valley their pace was slowed, the snow much deeper here, wading up to their thighs.

Sylvia wished she could ask them where they were going. There was a definite

purposefulness about their route, an urgency driving them on, keeping them going when their physical strength was failing. She glanced up at the sky, judged that it was well into the afternoon, the sun a fiery red ball now that the clouds had dispersed. Tonight there would be a hard frost.

They paused for a spell and she was handed some strips of dried meat, bit on it hungrily but had difficulty in chewing it. It had a smoky flavour where it had been dried over a smouldering fire. Revolting, but she knew she had to eat it. Then, wearily, they set off again.

She heard the approaching helicopter long before it came into sight over a strip of woodland in front. The whining, chainsaw-like noise getting louder and louder, her companions looking at one another in alarm, setting down their loads. Frightened, wanting to run but not knowing in which direction to flee. It seemed to kick-start her memory, jerked her back to civilised thinking.

'It's all right, it's a helicopter,' she shouted. They would not have understood even if they had been able to hear her above the din.

A helicopter! Her brain reeled, a shipwrecked mariner suddenly seeing the smoke from an approaching steamer on the skyline after months of waiting in vain. Numbed, fumbling for some garment to wave madly, reflexes stalling. It might go away, it might not see you. Hurry!

And just as the whirling blades came into sight Sylvia flung herself headlong into the snow, pressed herself flat. Please God it doesn't see me. I don't want to be picked up, I don't want to be rescued! Crazy, she knew it was, but all the same she buried her face in the snow, clasped her hands over her eyes. Don't stop, please don't stop!

Deafening, directly overhead, seeming to hover. If they land then I'll refuse to go with them, they can't make me.

I don't want to go back. I want to be out here with Eric. He's dead, I know it, but I still want to be with him.

Realisation that the noise was receding. Sylvia turned her head, glanced upwards. A huge unwieldy mechanical bird droning on up the valley, its dark blue paintwork in stark contrast to the dazzling whiteness of the hills and fields. Going away. If it had seen her then it wasn't stopping. She felt slightly dizzy, afraid.

The other woman was screaming hysterically, the limp form of her son clutched to her, his arms and legs dangling limply. Shaking him, slapping him, but his head lolled to one side.

Two of the men had come across to her, were grunting and gesticulating angrily. The boy is dead, we cannot take him with us. We cannot delay. The woman shouted back at them, stepped away, spat when one of them reached out an arm. She was not giving him up, refused to cast his body to one side for the creatures of the night hours to feed on.

The procession was moving on again. Sylvia glanced down at the stretcher; it would not be needed any longer. The woman was standing back waiting. Either she was going to stay behind or else follow at a discreet distance. Sylvia didn't know which, only that the other spurned company.

Sylvia followed the others, did not attempt to catch up with them. They were on a road of some kind now, the going much easier. Houses, scattered farms and cottages, she saw a sign but the letters had been blotted out by drifted snow.

It didn't matter, names had ceased to mean anything; one place was much the same as another.

Another hour and it would be dark. Sylvia wondered where they were going to spend the night. There were always deserted houses to be used but she guessed that her companions would spurn habitation beyond the status of crude stone dwellings, suspecting a trap, claustrophobic because the chill night air was shut out. She had lived in one once; she half-remembered it.

The woman carrying her dead child was stilt following, a hundred yards or so behind them, wailing her grief, staggering under the weight of her burden. She would not be able to keep up much longer. Once she stopped she would die because she did not have the will to live. In all probability she would not survive the coming night.

Dusk, a saffron sky streaked with the last reflections from the sun which had dipped behind the distant jagged mountain peaks. On the left was a village, its church spire rigid and defiant in this white wilderness. But the party was veering off, taking a narrow lane bordered by high snow-capped hedgerows. Barely more than a crawling pace now, the journey having sapped their weakened bodies.

It was almost dark when they saw the ruined castle, skeletal remains of an isolated bastion which had once withstood the onslaught of Welsh raiders across the border, an impression of top-heaviness as it perched on a hillock, still on guard in spite of its crumbling stonework.

One of the party had slumped to the ground, the others clustering round him. They made no attempt to pick him up. The sick must be left to die. They staggered on, came to the foot of the knoll, the small castle sinister and forbidding in the failing light. Sylvia shuddered, she could almost feel the aura of death that had surrounded this place for centuries. In the distance somebody was wailing, grief-stricken cries that hung in the still frosty air. It was probably the woman who cradled her dead offspring, unable to continue any further. Eventually the noise died away.

The ruins were already occupied, another group of a dozen or more tribesmen engaged in building a fire with dead wood which they had dug out of the drifts. There was neither animosity nor friendship shown towards the newcomers, just an acceptance of their presence.

With some difficulty they managed to ignite the woodpile, the yellow flames having to fight for a hold on the wet kindling, hissing angrily, determined to conquer, giving off a strange eerie glow.

Sylvia found herself scrutinising the faces of the strangers, peering at each in turn; hope, despair, still hoping.

Eric was dead, he would not be here. She tried to remember what he looked like but her memory failed her.

Her reasoning was becoming dulled, even she realised it, knew vaguely what was happening to her. Very soon I shall be one of you. She felt at her face, her cheeks were rough and coarse and that line of fluffy hair along her upper lip, which she had creamed for years, had grown strong and prickly. Her armpits were bushes of coarse hair, her breasts full as though they were in milk.

She did not feel the cold as she had done earlier, huddling now with the others in the damp pit which had once been a prison from which captured enemy soldiers rarely emerged alive. No longer an outcast, she mingled with the

others, sought the warmth of their bodies. They were her people, always had been.

A long cold night, the condensation on the stone walls a sheet of ice. Sleeping; dreams which were beyond her comprehension now, of strange places where the elements did not penetrate, where there was food in abundance. Fearful of this unfamiliar environment, shying away from it. Running to the hills in search of her own kind.

In search of a man who had once been her mate.

And with the coming of daylight she no longer questioned her presence here, helped the others to search for firewood amongst the frozen snowdrifts. The clouds were building up again and they all knew that it was going to snow once more, that further travel was inadvisable. They had a supply of dried meat but they needed to keep the fire going. They would have to hole up here until the weather changed.

When Sylvia went back inside she noticed that two of the men had not risen from their sleeping positions of the previous night. She knew they were dead, the others realised it, too. Everybody accepted it; later the corpses would be dragged outside and that would be the end of it. Where there was life there was always death.

By mid-morning it had begun to snow and the wind had risen, driving it against the north-west face of the castle, buffeting the ancient walls mercilessly as though it sought to break through to those sheltering inside. A ceaseless onslaught.

Sylvia helped the women prepare the food, noticed how two more of them coughed and spat blood. Her head ached, she felt unnaturally hot, her forehead damp when she wiped it with the back of her hand. A soreness in her lungs, but there was no blood when she coughed.

And each night she dreamed of one who had once been her mate. She saw his face, heard him calling her. She knew she had to go to him, that she must leave this place.

On the fourth day she left the castle, took her opportunity when she and two of the other women had gone out to search for firewood. The snow was deep, travelling was not easy, and every movement required a determined effort. If her lover had not been constantly calling her she would not have gone. She would have stayed and died in that underground place; somebody died every day.

She had to rest every hundred yards or so and now when she coughed there was a tinge of red on the snow. A desperation that overcame her waning strength, an inexplicable instinct urging her to retrace her steps of the last few days. She must return to the hills, she should never have left them.

And all the time she heard her mate calling her, a call which could not be denied. Floundering, falling, dragging herself through deep snowdrifts. Crawling when she could no longer walk, sobbing her frustration.

Until finally she could go no further, lying there in the frozen snow and listening to the voice of her lover vibrating in her pain-crazed brain. Waiting for nightfall, for surely then he would come to her, carry her back to the hills which would be their rightful Kingdom now that everybody else had left.

But he did not come. And eventually he stopped calling her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JACKIE DID not go upstairs to check on Rod Savage. She knew he was dead and there was nothing to be gained by going to look at him. Secretly she was aware of her fear of death. It had not always been like that, she had seen plenty of it these last few months and had accepted it. But now it was different, she did not know why.

The snowstorm petered out later the next day, but the drifts were piled high up against the walls of the small cottage. Travelling was out of the question, she had no choice other than to remain where she was.

Yet her instinct to leave was strong. Very strong. Like the wild geese experiencing the urge to fly south with the onset of winter, so she became restless. Pacing the living-room hour after hour, staring out of the windows at the drifted snow, contemplating digging herself out of the garden. But it would not end there; miles of deep snow lay between herself and the freedom she craved. In the end she resigned herself to staying, remaining in the cottage, a corpse on the bed upstairs for company.

Two nights later the dreams began, weird frightening dreams as though a hitherto closed door of her subconscious had opened up, a computer that had been given an extra key and processed data which had previously been denied it.

Delany's again, her surroundings so familiar that it might have been only yesterday that she had staggered in there. You're not well, you need to rest. 'It's the Russians that have done this to us.' She ignored the man loitering in the craft centre, pushed past him and went on into the restaurant. Empty, as she knew it would be. The ovens still steamed, gave off an appetising aroma of vegetarian dishes. I'm not well, there's something wrong with my skin, it's smarting and I can't think properly. Yes, you can. Fight it, don't succumb to it.

Seated at a table, a cup of steaming herb tea before her, inhaling the vapour; it seemed to clear her head a little. Think, girl, think it all out carefully. You made the wrong decision last time; this is your final chance.

The steam quelled the feeling of dizziness, her brain shuttered like an old plate camera, came back to reality. People were shouting outside, sirens blaring, police and ambulances stuck in the traffic jam. What the hell was going on? A nuclear attack?

Forget them, concentrate on yourself, you've got to get back home. Don't go to Pauline's mother's house this time because that was where you went wrong before. Maybe now she could drive the Dyane except she would never get out of town in it. Whatever her decision she would have to go on foot. Head south. Remember that, keep going south.

She drank the herb tea thirstily, poured herself some more. Don't forget to fill your carrier bags with food before you go because you'll need it. Then with a jolt she remembered Jon. Jon! She could picture his face clearly now, the misty profile which had been eluding her for so long. Her husband. A pang of bitterness because he had another woman, probably that Atkinson girl was with him right now. Jealousy, then guilt. She had had other men too but now it was time for a reconciliation. She and Jon could both work at something they had let slip, a marriage that had slid for years and was nearly at the bottom of the slope. But she had to get home, that was a priority. Her one chance to put things right.

She loaded her bags with food and went back outside into the street. A milling throng, the traffic all snarled up, people hurrying, clambering over abandoned vehicles in their haste.

Jackie fought her way through, joined a stream going the other way. Don't go to First Terrace this time. Ignore everybody else. You're on your own. Head south.

She kept going, recognised landmarks, lost them again but knew she was going in the right direction. People lay in the road, on the pavements, some of them dead, not because of their awful affliction but simply because they had been trampled by the crowds. A crying child came towards her, its features beginning to peel and harden but she ignored it. Don't stop for anybody, you can't help them. Head for home whilst you still know where home is. South . . . south . . . south . . .

Days of burning sunshine, cool nights that brought relief. Sleeping in long grass, heather, the air filled with strange grunts and cries, people incessantly on the move. She hid; they must not find her, this time there must be no Kuz.

Walking, sleeping, eating wild fruit and herbs after her own food had run out, raiding the larders of deserted cottages whenever she came upon an isolated dwelling. Mile after mile each day but never seeming to arrive anywhere, knowing that she was heading in the right direction.

A long trek throughout a summer that waned and eased into autumn. Always on the move. The hills were full of restless people, some of them congregating into groups which built stone structures, prepared for the onset of winter. Fools, you will not survive when the cold comes, head south whilst there is still time or else seek the protection of proper dwellings built to resist the blizzards.

And that was how she had arrived at this cottage in the hills, alive and warm whilst everybody else was either dead or gone. Waking, only the figments of those strange dreams lingering on, frightening her because she was all alone. She should be dead like everybody else who had been caught out by the winter. Perhaps it would have been better that way. But she still had the will to fight and live.

No longer did that face evade her. Now she knew it, saw its every detail as clearly as though she had only gazed upon it yesterday. Jon! And only the snow was preventing her from going to him.

Endless days spent in keeping the fire going; fortunately the shed at the bottom of the garden was well stocked with coal. Surviving.

And at nights the dreams came again. Always Jon, how it had once been between

them and how it would be when they were together again.

A bright sunny morning, the snow crisped by a severe overnight frost. Jackie had stoked up the fire, opened the door and looked out upon an arctic world. She tested the drift that smothered the lean-to and it bore her weight. The snow was walkable.

Jubilation, fears crowding in on her. If she left would she find her way in this white wilderness? If she did not then she faced certain death once night fell and the temperature dropped. She shivered, her skin goose pim-pling. And then she heard the approaching helicopter.

She was familiar with the big sky-birds, the way they flew deafeningly across the countryside, hovered, sometimes landed and men got out. Men with guns, searching. For what?

She fled back inside, forced the warped door closed. The helicopter would pass over, soon be gone. Its roar vibrated some ornaments on the mantelshelf and she knew that it was directly overhead, maybe barely higher than the roof. Whining angrily, sending a stab of stark fear into her palpitating heart. As if it scented her.

It wasn't going away! Even louder. She clasped her hands to her ears, stumbled for the cover of the old sofa which had been her bed for so long, flung herself full-length behind it, could not shut out the noise.

Louder and still louder, the glass in the rotted window frames rattling, threatening to fall out. Wind gusting, icy unnatural blasts finding their way in under the ill-fitting door. Then silence.

Jackie cringed, moaned softly to herself, aware that the machine had landed as she had seen others do from time to time when she had been living in the settlement. Noises, something slammed, echoed mechanically. Voices. The awful realisation that the men were coming here, that they had spied the smoke from the chimney and had put down to investigate.

Footsteps. She heard the door being forced back, curled herself up into a ball, shut her eyes tightly. Please don't see me, don't take me away. If that happened she would never ever see Jon again, months of hoping and surviving all for nothing.

There's gotta be somebody around.' The man who entered was dressed in thick flying clothes, still wore his goggles which hid most of his rather weak features and gave him a sinister appearance. 'It's like they say, there's no smoke without fire.'

'And there's a fire all right.' The second man pointed to the fireplace with the barrel of his .357 Magnum. 'Let's check upstairs.'

Jackie heard their heavy footsteps on the stairs, across the small landing and into the bedroom directly above. A moment's silence and then they were coming back downstairs. That bugger's been dead for some time.' The speaker wrinkled his nose beneath his goggles. 'So there's gotta be somebody around to have lit that fire. Hey . . . look there!'

Jackie's brain spun as the sofa was dragged roughly to one side, found herself looking up into the barrel of the Magnum and knew only too well what it could do. One blast and she would be dead instantly. She had seen a youth shot once who had foolishly stoned a search party of soldiers. Please don't kill me. I don't want to die any more.

'Jeez!' The first man let a slow grin spread across his face. 'D'you see what I see, Bill?'

'For one o'them she's fuckin' beautiful,' his companion replied. 'Now fancy findin' her in a land where everybody else is dead.'

Jackie Quinn cringed, knew only too well what they were thinking, remembered the expressions on the faces of the throwbacks who had broken into the house in First Terrace that night so long ago. Certain aspects of behaviour did not change even over a four-thousand-year gap. She knew male lust when she saw it, knew what she would have to endure. And afterwards they would either kill her or take her away with them.

They pulled her roughly to her feet and she felt the coldness of the automatic barrel against her neck, their hands smoothing over her, loosening the ties on her hide dress, baring her breasts, feeling at them.

'See this?' The one who had pushed his goggles up on to his forehead tapped the solid steel of the Magnum. 'Any trouble and BANG. Get it?'

She understood, nodded. The second one forced the door shut, poked at the fire. They weren't in any hurry. She let the other one undress her, didn't resist. The sooner it was over, the better. She lay back, watched as they began to take off their heavy clothing, saw how aroused they were. She turned her head away, did not want to watch.

Then they took her. And throughout the pistol was not far from her head. She closed her eyes, shuddered as they pawed at her, changed over, changed back again; kept going until they were spent.

Finally they were dressing, throwing her clothing at her. 'Get dressed, you stinking whore, you're coming with us. And when our boffins get doing things to you, you'll wish you were back here with us having the arse fucked off you!'

Jackie cried, the first time she had cried since . . . she could not remember the last time. Physical and mental hurt that had built up inside her for months suddenly bursting its dam. Sobbing, trembling, trying to fasten the thongs on her hide garments with shaking fingers.

'She cries.' The pilot gave a guttural laugh. 'Make a note of that for the files, Bill. We've heard'em scream but we've never yet found one that cried. Don't look so worried, Bill, they can't talk. But even if she did manage to squeal nobody would give a shit. They're animals.'

They pushed her ahead of them out through the door, the gun jabbing into her back. She saw the helicopter standing on a flat piece of ground that the gales which had brought the blizzards had swept clear, a huge silent metal bird of prey. And it had found its prey.

Please let me go, you've had what you want. Please! She stopped and something hard struck her across the back of the head so that she stumbled and nearly fell. She almost blacked out and then they were forcing her up the rungs of the short ladder into the helicopter, shoving her into the rear seat.

'Let's go out of this God-awful place,' the co-pilot muttered. 'I can't wait to get back to base. Hell, imagine anybody living out here.'

The chassis vibrated and Jackie clung to her seat. The man called Bill still

had the pistol trained on her, maybe thought that she would attack them in a wild frenzy, afraid of a weeping girl who asked nothing else than to be freed back into this environment of death.

She felt the helicopter begin to take off, rising vertically, shuddering, straining, roaring its ferocity at the world below. A stark white unbroken landscape beneath, rolling hills that went on and on.

Jackie peered down, mutely screamed her frustration and hopelessness. It had taken her months to trek back here; she had almost made it back to her mate and then suddenly these men had appeared and were spiriting her away. Primitive fear, she wanted to leap out, to fall, to die down there in the snow. Because it was home.

Faster now, the scenic view a dazzling blur in the bright sunlight, the tops of coniferous trees dull green where they poked clear of the snow. Scattered dwellings like symmetrical buried boxes. All being left behind.

A sudden jerk that threw her forward so that she banged her head, cried out. The helicopter bucked, sent her slithering on to the floor. The two men were trying to shout to each other and she felt their fear rather than heard it, Bill's eyes wide with terror behind his thick goggles.

And at that moment the noise cut out. Nothing; just a rush of air, a sensation of dizziness, the only roaring that in her own ears.

'For fuck's sake!'

A scream, she thought it came from the pilot. Clung tightly to the stanchion of her seat, shut her eyes tightly.

'Fucking shit!' Both men were yelling, screaming, struggling desperately with levers on the instrument panel.

Plunging downwards, the rotor blades spinning slower and slower.

Jackie did not even brace herself for the inevitable impact, just saw in her mind the face which no longer eluded her, wept because she remembered more clearly than ever now, and knew that she would never see it again.

And then they hit the snow-covered hillside, bounced, slewed, the helicopter breaking up and leaving a trail of debris in its wake as it rolled downhill, finally struck an outcrop of rock and was crunched into a ball of mangled metal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

REITZE HAD coughed and spat blood into the wash-basin that morning, then vomited, clinging on to the stand, otherwise he would have fallen. The room

around him swam and he had to wait for it to steady.

He forced himself to think logically, didn't like what his thoughts came up with. The tests had proved conclusive, too conclusive. They would not be making any more tests because they had achieved the ultimate - death, the end of civilisation.

A cancerous side-effect to the skin disease, a contagious one. The reversion had only been a symptom of what was to follow. The body's resistance was lowered, vulnerable to just about anything that was going, like AIDS in a way. Severe cold had killed off most of the population and those who survived ended up with this spreading cancer that grew like couch grass in May. And if you missed it once you caught it off somebody else.

He brushed his teeth, tried to get the taste out of his mouth. It didn't work, smelled like your shit had come up the wrong way. Bastards, not just the fuckers who had started all this but the throwbacks themselves, disease-carrying apes that should have been driven into the hills in the beginning and left there. Instead they were brought in here for tests and this was what you ended up with, a dose of internal syphilis.

Reitze began to pull on his shirt, coughed again and spotted it with crimson. Even so he needed a Camel, he wouldn't gain anything by kicking the habit now.

He let himself out of his room and went down to the laboratory. There was no sign of Westcote, Barnes or Newman, and he didn't think they would be showing up.

Caldecott and his ministers had been moved across to the other centre, the one where Royalty was housed, the final bastion. The last step to preserve life as Mankind knew it.

Sketchy reports were still filtering in from the States but now winter had hit them hard too. Whole settlements of throwbacks were reported dead and there had been outbreaks of the Coughing Death reported in New York, Los Angeles and Houston. Undoubtedly it was in a lot of other places, too, but the news had not come through. Maybe nobody really wanted to know.

The Professor's lips tightened into a bloodless slit, those eyes behind the rimless lenses were no longer expressionless. He crossed to the first experimental chamber, peered in through the tiny window. One of them was still alive; two lay dead on the floor, their bodies streaked with pink phlegm as though haemorrhaging snails had crawled all over them. The third was sitting propped up against the far wall; for him time was running out too.

Reitze went to one of the cupboards, unlocked it and took down a red-labelled bottle, filled a syringe from it. He laughed softly to himself, heard his lungs rattle. There wasn't much time left for any of them.

There was fear in the captive's eyes when Reitze opened the door, sheer terror that had those twin orbs rolling right up until only the whites were visible, arms and legs twitching, the nearest they could get to crazy headlong flight. A rush of liquid anal wind. The bastard knows, Reitze thought. He might be the equivalent of a Stone Age man but he knows just what I'm going to do to him.

A prick just beneath the skin on the neck, pressing the plunger slowly until all the grey fluid had emptied out of the cartridge. Withdrawing, standing back to watch, to gloat.

The eyeballs dropped back down; Reitze thought they clicked. The mouth opened,

the tongue protruded, darted like a snake's, the saliva thick and frothy, mucus beginning to ooze out of the flared nostrils.

The limbs jerked, twitched, went into spasms, the head nodding like a puppet's, stretching so that the veins in the neck bulged and stood out. One scream and then the vocal cords gave out, just left the victim mouthing his cries of agony mutely. Fingers and toes bent over, long nails digging deep into the flesh so that blood began to flow.

A silent scream, a choking cough that brought up a blob of black congealed blood, almost drowning in a second until he got it out. Pain and hate in those eyes, an expression that bridged a gap spanning thousands of years.

And Reitze stood back and laughed, coughed his own blood and still laughed. If only the other two had not died overnight they could have had the same. ML 273, a formula that destroyed the body in much the same way as strychnine did only much, much faster, did not act on the brain. You only died when you couldn't stand the pain any longer.

He watched the throwback disintegrating, nerves stretch and break, vomiting his life's blood in huge splodges until the skin whitened to the colour of pork. Twitching because he hadn't the strength to writhe and convulse, biting on his teeth until they chipped and broke.

Just the heart pumping weakly and the brain still functioning. Reitze knelt down and pushed his face close to the other's, stared into those bloodshot eyes.

'I wish you didn't have to die/ He unloaded his hate in a terse whisper. 'I wish you could go on like this for ever because you bastards have killed the world off. Sure, there'll be a few survivors but they'll be the unlucky ones. I'm dying now but what few fuckers of you remain are going to pay!'

He stood up, lurched unsteadily. Time was running out for him, too. He had to be going, he could not stop here any longer. Down the corridor and into the vehicle bay. The duty soldier did not question him when he made for the end Land Rover, took a rifle out of the rack and filled his pockets with ammunition. Nobody travelled unarmed these days.

Reitze pulled himself up into the driver's seat, collapsed into it. Only hate and will power gave him the strength he needed, spun the wheels as he misjudged the clutch. Up the ramp and out into the open.

Most of the snow had blown off the lane and drifted the hedgerows; he hoped the Land Rover would make it. Soft powdery patches created wheel-spin in places and once he had to hit a drift at 30 mph to bulldoze his way through. He skidded, hit something beneath the snow with a metallic clang, bumped over it and kept going.

God, he hoped he would find some of 'em, that the soldiers hadn't driven 'em all to the woods and fields, that the cold and the coughing hadn't wiped the last of 'em out. The shitfuckers, he wanted 'em now more than he had ever done all along.

Within a mile he found the first one, a female coming towards him, limping, dragging herself along. She saw him, stopped, but did not attempt to run. In all probability she had not the strength.

He hit her dead centre with the Land Rover, the speedometer needle flickering on 35, a crunching impact that slewed the vehicle sideways on, sprawled her

across the bonnet, gushing blood like a burst flagon of claret. Reitze jammed on his brakes, threw the Land Rover into a 390-degree spin and threw her off into the road. Then he went over her with the nearside front wheel, caught her with the rear one as well. He didn't even glance in his mirror because he had spied some more throwbacks further up the lane.

They ran for the bank, floundered in the snow and had to grab hawthorn branches in the hedge to save themselves from sliding back down. Suspended up there they thought they were safe. The Professor cruised slowly forward, slid to a stop fifteen yards from them. Slowly, deliberately, he picked up the rifle and climbed out. There was nowhere they could go, it was easier than the kids' airgun gallery at the fairground.

Five of them, he took the furthest first, a teenage girl, disintegrated her features with a dum-dum bullet, transferred his sights to the second and blew out his jugular vein so that bright scarlet blood sprayed technicolour patterns all down the snow-capped hedge. The third had turned his back so Reitze blasted his spine, sent him writhing down the slope.

The last two jumped for it, gave him sporting shots as they ran and slipped on the ice. He missed for the first time, broke a leg at the second attempt, scored a direct head shot on the fifth one.

Four dead, one flaying about. He climbed back in the Land Rover, edged it forward in low-ratio. He aimed the offside front wheel for the head, felt it crunch and split, bumped over the trunk with the back tyres, split the abdomen like a squashed haggis.

Half a mile further on he saw the big wood, knew there would be some of them in there but he would have to leave the Land Rover and go on foot, hoped he had the strength to clamber over those huge drifts. The fuckers would be in that wood all right.

Only his obsession kept him going. He was breathing heavily, spitting blood all the time, and his heart was trying to hammer its way out of his body. It took him nearly half an hour to make it to the wood.

Huge trees, mostly oaks, a few dead leaves still clinging stubbornly to their branches. Rhododendrons were virtually the only cover; that was where he would find the bastards skulking, flush them out as if he was hunting rabbits for sport. It was sport.

It was the blood that gave them away, thick dark lung-blood, a trail of it leading up to a dense patch of bushes, maybe fifty metres square. Reitze leaned up against the trunk of an oak, the rifle resting in the crook of his arm. They were in there, all right, skulking like the animals they were. Getting them out was the only problem . . .

He thought about it; thinking didn't come easy these days. He found the Camel packet in his pocket, just one left. Just one. He straightened it out, rolled it between his fingers. Just one small white cylinder of paper packed with rich dark tobacco. He sniffed it; it smelted sweet. He would in all probability never smoke another after this one because he wasn't going back. He put it to his lips, flicked his lighter, drew the smoke down deep into his diseased lungs, sent himself into a fierce coughing fit.

They would know he was here now, but it didn't matter. Jesus, he wanted the fuckers to know what they were in for. An idea, but the deep snow made it impracticable; if it had been summer he could have set fire to the whole wood, stood downwind and waited. Get roasted or shot, you fuck pigs, it's up to you!

But it wasn't summer and no way was he going to be able to fire the wood.
Shit!

The hunter, it gave him a sense of pride, Man's superiority over animals. They were in there crapping themselves because they didn't know how to escape him. Well, there was only one way to get them - he would go in there after them!

Moving slowly, unsteadily, his rubber boots slipping on the snow. Parting the outer trailing branches of the bushes and peering inside. Much darker in here, even the snow had only penetrated in places.

Something rustled. The rifle came up to Professor Reitze's shoulder, bucked. A bullet cut through the foliage, whined, embedded itself in the trunk of a silver birch. Then silence.

Reitze stood there listening, sweat streaming down his face. There should have been panic, throwbacks stampeding everywhere at the sound of the shot, screaming with terror. But there was nothing, not even a protesting crow insulting him from a distant tree. It made him uneasy.

He stepped forward, rifle at the ready. God, it was heavy, made his arms ache. More blood here; he quickened his pace, had to stoop beneath the twisting rhododendron trailers, peering into every dark recess. So quiet.

A sudden noise had him whirling round, forefinger taking a trigger pressure. Just dislodged snow falling. Nothing else.

He came to a birch tree, had to rest for a moment, leaning up against it. Only then was he aware of the cigarette butt scorching his lips, leaned forward and spat it out into a patch of snow, saw how the nicotine-soaked paper was pink. Trying not to cough in case it gave his position away, a heaving of his lungs that eventually threw up stringy phlegm. He turned his head away, didn't want to see. His strength was failing fast, he had to find them soon.

A lot more blood now, they couldn't be far away. He would come to the end of the rhododendrons soon, the beasts of the chase hugging every last scrap of cover until there was no more left. Then they would be forced out into the open. Six ... eight... ten ... a dozen of them, firing as fast as he could pull the trigger, using his remaining strength and sheer will power to work the bolt. Bodies falling, convulsing, lying still. That was how it would be, there could not be any other outcome. His whole body trembled with anticipation, somehow found that extra reserve of strength to keep going.

And then at last he found them, a big bunch of them, twenty at least, in a wide clearing amidst the dense bushes, men, women and children. A strewn litter of bodies, corpses!

It took some time for Reitze to realise, to accept, that they were all dead. He did not want to believe it, wanted them alive, fleeing, shrieking their terror as he cut them down one by one, wanted the satisfaction of gazing down on every one of them dead by his own hand. But the elements and the Coughing Death had beaten him to it.

No, it couldn't be, it wasn't like this. They were all alive, trying to fool him into thinking they were dead so that he would go away. But you can't fool me, you shit-pigs!

'Get up!' He screamed, brought the rifle up to his shoulder. 'I know you're not fucking well dead. D'you hear what I say? Get up and run for it. I'm giving you a chance. D'you fucking well hear?'

No movement except a piece of wet snow sliding off a branch, plopping on to the ground. Faces stared back at him, dull orbs that were filled with a hopelessness that had frozen into them. Features rigid, defiant. We're not going to run because we're dead. You're too late.

'For the last time, are you going to fucking well get up and take your chance with me?'

No answer, no movement. Reitze had the rifle barrel trained on the forehead of the nearest inert body, took another trigger pressure. Your chance has gone, you bastard!

The slug split the skull in two, exploded a shower of red bone splinters. The second shot was almost simultaneous, bowled a small child over, rolled it so that you could not see the gaping wound in its side. Firing fast now, corpses coming alive with the impact of the bullets, thrown back, jerked one way, slumping another. Reloading, shooting again, the cloud of cordite smoke thickening, doing its best to screen the awful mutilation.

Reitze paused to reload, looked for unscathed bodies and could not find any. The first throwback again, this time a chest shot, ripping out the breast bone, breaking legs, arms, disembowelling others so that the stench of human offal mingled with the smeil of powdersmoke.

Only when he was out of cartridges did he stop, dropping on to his haunches, leaning back against the birch trunk. His eyelids were heavy, wanted to close, the smoke was making them smart but he forced them to remain open. The conqueror revelled in the sight of his conquest, wanted to savour the bloody carnage. All my own work. Liar! No, I killed 'em because they were still alive, trying to fool me but I was too damned smart for 'em. They paid.

'I got you, you fuck bastards!' A cracked whisper that was meant to be a jubilant yell. 'I got you for what you did to us.'

And when dusk drifted into the wood Reitze was still propped up against the bole of that tree, rigid, eyes still fixed on the bloodshed in front of him. The rifle had fallen from his grasp, half-buried in a patch of snow. Anyone stumbling upon him might have been forgiven for thinking that he was still alive, that he had slaughtered mercilessly and was merely resting.

But nobody would be coming here any more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JON QUINN had wounded a hare on the steep hillside that led up to Gwyther's boundary. An almost pathetic creature lolloping in the snow, its size confusing his judgement of distance when he fired; forty-five yards had seemed no more than thirty. It had squealed once, momentarily lost its footing then

regained its balance, powered itself on upwards in spite of the pellets embedded in its back legs, bright red bloodspots marking the course it took once it had gained the brow.

'Damn!' Quinn ejected the spent cartridge, slipped another into the breech. Guilt because he had wounded the creature and in all probability it would die a lingering death up in the big forest after dark when the temperature dropped below freezing. He tried to console his conscience that he was desperate for meat. Rubbish, nobody needs meat, there are ample vegetables stored in the big barn. All the same, he had to follow it and make every possible attempt to alleviate its suffering.

He was sweating hard, his shirt beneath his windcheater sticking to his skin. There was the danger that it might result in a chill. He could not afford to be ill; survival was now a full-time occupation.

He reached the horizon, saw that the footmarks and bloodstains headed across in the direction of the forest. He would have to follow them. He ...

Suddenly he heard the helicopter, its engine powering it into take-off somewhere close by. The noise hit him like a physical blow, froze him into immobility. Hide! There's nowhere to hide. Run before they see you. Open country, he would not make it to the forest in time.

The helicopter was visible now, flying low, coming towards him. Oh Christ, they've seen me, they'll take me back with them to enforced civilisation. The hills and woods are throwback territory, everybody else has to get out. Emergency regulations, martial law. His eyes were fixed on the approaching machine, watching it grow bigger every second, nearer and nearer . . .

And then, without warning, it stopped as though it had run into an invisible barrier. For a second or two it appeared to hover, unbelievably still as though it defied Newton's Law. Then dropped vertically.

Jon Quinn braced himself, felt the vibration of the crash, screamed his horror as he saw the chopper bounce, the vanes snap like bamboo canes, overturning, rolling. Breaking up.

It bounced again off a rock beneath the snow, seemed to split apart, strewing its wreckage as it careered down the steep slope. Something was thrown from it, a mangled bloodied body, blood jetting from a ragged neck stump where it had been decapitated, spraying crimson like a garden sprinkler in summer, a deep snowdrift finally swallowing it up.

Finally there was nothing left to roll any further. A blinding explosion as the fuel tank ignited, a brief funeral pyre that quickly extinguished itself in the frozen wilderness. Less than half a minute and it was all over.

Jon Quinn did not want to go and look. His logic screamed at him that there could be no survivors but his conscience yelled even louder that it was his duty to check. He was still holding the shotgun; euthanasia was his only remedy if anybody still lived, for he could offer neither medical attention nor hope. Just mercy.

Approaching hesitantly, the urge to flee this place very strong. Mangled metal stretched for over a hundred yards down the hillside, a bloody hole in the snow where the headless victim had disappeared. A crumpled door . . . the cab. Oh Jesus Christ, I don't want to look inside there. You have to.

The pilot had hit the control panel, was crushed flat across it, blood

dripping steadily off the instruments.

Unrecognisable as a human being, as if a road-roller had gone over him.

That hare, you hurt it bad, you ought to be going and trying to find it. Follow the bloodstains in the snow. There was blood everywhere.

The rest of the cab was empty as far as he could ascertain, like something you found in the corner of a breaker's yard, not even worth stripping for spares.

Go and search for that hare, put it out of its misery. There was nothing to linger on here for.

As he turned away Jon Quinn spied a third body in the snow. It lay fifteen or twenty yards away, face down. He caught his breath, wanted to back off, saw at a cursory glance that it was a throwback. He licked his dry lips. Maybe it had been here all along, was nothing to do with the crash. The hills were full of corpses; when the thaw came (if it ever did) they would begin to decompose, fill the air with the stench of rotting flesh, a reminder of this winter of death.

That hare could be lying up there in the forest in agony. All you have to do is to follow the blood.

He had to check the third body; he would never be able to live with himself if he didn't. It had been a person once.

It was a woman, he could tell that when he was still two or three yards away. Her hide clothing was torn down the one side giving him a glimpse of a shapely body beneath. His eyes searched for signs of blood, found none.

He knelt down, rested a hand on her, detected a shallow rise and fall. Merciful God, she still breathed. She was alive!

He could not leave her now. That hare crossed his mind again; it was suffering too, but human life was more important than animal life.

A feel at her back and limbs, there were certainly no bones broken. She had been thrown clear on impact when the doors flew open, had landed in deep soft snow. Unconscious, though. Shock and concussion.

Suddenly, inexplicably, Jon Quinn's flesh prickled, goosepimpled a path right the way up his spine and into the nape of his neck, on from there, spreading across his scalp. His brain seemed to stop, start again. Instincts gone crazy, knowing, recognising something but not being able to place it.

The woman, it had something to do with this woman . . .

He forced his arms underneath her, used the slope to help him roll her over. He would have to examine her carefully, make sure that it was only concussion. Pulling, pushing gently, turning her over.

Then he saw her face. It was akin to an electric shock coursing through his body, those goosepimples spreading everywhere like a moorland fire fanned by a gale. His vision tunnelled, circled a face he knew only too well, features as familiar as his own in the mirror each morning; even the change could not destroy such beauty, only alter it slightly. Marginally.

His brain flipped again. For a second everything before him went black, came back again like a rapid change of channel on television. He swayed, thought he

was going to faint, his lips forming a name, mute utterances until at last he got it out.

'Jackie . . . Jackie . . . JACKIE!'

For Jon Quinn the whole world came to a stop in those few seconds. Time ceased to exist. Just the two of them, himself and Jackie, together again. Remembering so clearly the last time he had seen her, that bright sunny morning walking across the yard to where the Dyane was parked, calling out to him, 'I might be late back'; that meant she was going to stop off at Tiffany's tonight.

Late. Six months, maybe seven, he had lost track of time. But she had kept her word, come back. Alive!

Desperately he forced himself back to reality. She might be seriously hurt, even now she might not live. Fear, his quivering fingers examining her body. A few scratches and bruises, nothing worse as far as he could ascertain. Just concussion. Sometimes people died from concussion, victims of road accidents. The golden rule for bystanders who tried to help at the scene of a crash - never try to move an injured person!

He had to, though, because no medical help would be arriving, no ambulance with wailing siren and flashing blue light. No doctors. No hospital emergency unit. Just himself and a catch-phrase which now took on a different meaning - self-sufficiency! Self-survival.

Somehow he lifted her, cradled her in his arms, began the steep slippery descent. Miraculously he kept his footing, every minute an hour, the sweat running freely out of his pores. Until finally he reached level ground, followed the snow-topped hedges all the way back to the cottage, a journey that ended up in the bedroom where he lowered her gently on to the bed and removed the rest of her clothing. Only then did he kiss her.

It was still a dream. He braced himself for the awakening, the return to reality. A twinge of guilt as he remembered that hare, prayed that it was dead by now.

The thaw came in late February, the first hint of spring towards the middle of March, warm winds that brought with them the stench of rotting corpses in the hills. The corvines and their fellow predators were busy justifying their role in Nature's plans, the big cleaning-up operation.

Jackie had not regained consciousness for a week, and for a fortnight after that Jon fed her with fresh warm goats' milk. Gradually her strength returned and then began the makings of a new relationship which both realised that they would have to work at, developing their own means of understanding and communication. Adaptation. It wasn't easy but, as Jon reminded himself, they had to stick together because they might never see another human being again, civilised or throwback.

Spring eased its way into summer and with it came the knowledge that Jackie was pregnant. And something else . . .

He had not been feeling well for a day or two, nothing which he could be absolutely positive about, more a kind of lethargy, having to exert his will power to complete even the simplest chore. His reasoning was dulled, a simple

lifestyle suddenly taking on complications. And throughout it all Jackie seemed closer, their understanding so much easier.

A casual glance in the mirror brought on that same sensation of shock that he had experienced the day he had looked down upon Jackie's features on those snowy slopes, his flesh goosepimpling, his brain reeling. Staring into the cracked and dirt-streaked mirror over the kitchen sink, seeing a reflection that he barely recognised as his own.

The skin was coarser, seemed to be afflicted with some kind of allergy rash; eyes sunken and red-rimmed, a beard that was coarse and straggling. Lips thicker, nose squashed as though at some time it had been pushed back, broken by a heavy blow. Changed . . .

Wrestling with realisation, giving up. Accepting it. He went outside into the yard. The hillsides were starting to green over again with the lush surge of a new growth. A new beginning to a new world.

He breathed deeply, no longer smelled the odour of putrefaction. He sensed Jackie by his side, both of them standing there looking up towards the forest on the skyline. A wilderness, just the two of them left in it.

Suddenly this was how it had always been, how it would go on. Nothing would change, they did not want it to.