



HYPNOSIS

LUCAS HYDE

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Lucas Hyde

Vibritannia

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CHAPTER 1

Hypnosis will improve your life, the advert had said, and he wanted to believe it – though given his profession, it was understandable why he had been tinged with cynicism upon reading that bold and unqualified claim. He hadn't been put off though, and the looming appointment had evoked a curious dream, one that left him unsettled in his skin when he awoke. His night had been restless and hot. When sleep had come, he had dreamed he had been hypnotized, but the hypnotist had been unable to revive him and had been forced instead to tell him to go about his life as though he had, in perpetual hypnosis.

Now that he stood outside the building, the real appointment pressing, he could see no mention of therapy. The sign said Mister, and not Doctor – which if it had would have been a reassurance. Nor did it so much as hint at hypnotism. Oblivious to the people who pushed past him on the narrow pavement, he continued to stare, absorbed by his confusion.

The sign was a plaque of brass, set in stone by the door. It gave the impression, though possibly an undeserved one, that this wasn't a fly-by-night operation. It simply read Practitioner and gave a name – that was what really caught Gordon's eye.

He recalled how he had made the appointment a week ago. The woman who had answered his call had spoken in a cadence that was mellifluous and distracting. He hadn't thought to ask her who would see him – though somehow it had been apparent it wouldn't be her – and he remembered having been more concerned with how much it was going to cost than any other detail. He knew that had he stumbled upon that name then, he would have looked for an

appointment elsewhere, just in case. Finding himself confronted with it now came as an unpleasant jolt.

He stood stock-still while the hot afternoon sun beat down on him, and his curly brown hair undulated in the gentle breeze. He looked at the establishment and then down at the cigarette burning between his fingers. It wasn't too late to back out.

He almost turned away right then, and probably would have under other circumstances. He had decided to sort his life out – it *needed* sorting out – and so he had made a list, item one of which was 'Stop Smoking'. His experiences with abstinence had proved that giving up took willpower, and after several failed attempts, he had admitted he didn't have what it took. Submerged one time in the clouds of another aborted bid, the solution had occurred to him. He didn't know where he had got the idea or why he had thought of it first rather than, say... nicotine patches, but in him the conviction had grown – if he wanted to give up smoking, he would have to go somewhere to get hypnotized.

He rolled the cigarette back and forth between his fingers. He could turn around and make an appointment for another day somewhere else. The thought brought a sick expression to his face. If he was wavering already, what hope could he expect to have for the rest of his plans? It became a test of character.

But *him* – he read the nameplate again. Why did it have to be him?

An urge to flee struck him – a wave of tension that rolled up from his stomach and broke on his chest, a tingling of blood – and the temptation to succumb was great. His feet twitched becoming light at their heels. 'Wet,' he chided and his head bowed. Would he let himself be frightened off by perhaps nothing other than a ghost in a name?

He looked at his cigarette with suspicion. He had got used to this crutch and used to its quick fix. For the first time, he felt a real threat that he might never feel such pleasurable inhalations again.

A man in a hurried mince bumped into Gordon though he barely noticed as he struggled with his misgivings. He stared hard at those uncomfortable two words. His eyes screwed up, and his lips pouted. His mind was not beyond playing tricks to save this vice – he knew that much. Just how many people lived in London? How many more

from the surrounds were sucked in each morning for the sake of work and disgorged again in the evening – as though the city were taking giant people-filled breaths. It was the same name, but it could be anybody. The same person – *and* a hypnotist?

‘Idiot,’ he thought angrily.

He sucked hard on the cigarette and reached the acrid taste of burning filter. With a sweep of his hand, he flung the butt away violently. ‘Right!’ he blurted. The word escaped his lips as a bark of determination. He picked up the briefcase, from where it nestled safely between his feet, and marched up the steps and into the hypnotist’s.

CHAPTER 2

The reception was empty except for the blonde woman behind the desk, who didn't bother to look at Gordon as he came in, remaining turned to the side away from the front entrance. Gordon's roaming eyes took advantage of the unguarded moment to linger on the swell of her breast, before skirting up her smooth neck. He couldn't see her face and experienced a small excited hope that it would be beautiful.

Evidently the receptionist was watching something through the door to the office at the end of the waiting room; Gordon couldn't see what from where he stood. He had the uncomfortable feeling of having intruded, perhaps because the receptionist hadn't yet given any indication of having noticed his presence. He shuffled his feet deliberately noisily as he approached her desk, which seemed to work. The receptionist's head turned slowly, though she was reluctant to let her attention be diverted so that she almost faced him by the time her eyes finally broke away, and flicked upon him.

Surprise flashed across her features as she met his gaze. He felt a little rush of pleasure at the thought that she might find him attractive.

She returned his smile pleasantly now. He wondered if he had seen anything at all, or whether it had just been wishful thinking. 'Hello. I'm Gordon Lissope,' he began. His lips failed traitorously to keep time with his jaw. Warmth tightened his cheeks. 'I have an appointment.'

She held his eyes and answered, 'Oh... yes...' Then she glanced at her monitor, and her fingers created a spasmodic rattle on the keyboard which ended with a loud disparaging beep. She waved her hand dismissively at the monitor and turned back to Gordon,

flushing slightly. 'Mister Auger's already waiting for you. You can go straight in.' She gestured to the open door to the office without taking her eyes from him.

Gordon felt the smile wiped from his face. That name again.

She continued to gaze at him intently, and he hoped she wouldn't interpret his palled expression as having been any reaction to herself. He tried to smile. 'Thank you,' he said and strode for the indicated door.

The receptionist's eyes followed him, at a safe point flicking cursorily down the length of Gordon's figure. Then as though she had just remembered something important, her gaze turned sharply upon the open doorway, but not before Gordon's advance had blocked her view past him. She struggled with indecision for just the moment that she watched him recede, but then he had already entered the office and had come to a troublingly frozen-looking halt.

§

The hypnotist sat in profile, viewed from where Gordon stood in cataplexy. Although the years had aged him, his heavy features were unmistakable – the sloping forehead; the bony ridge of brow, which hooded deep eye sockets; the hard nose and the long lip, drawn down to cover tall teeth. The visage transfigured, in Gordon's eyes, to a younger face he still recalled vividly.

The hypnotist turned, swivelling in the chair behind his desk.

Gordon was dimly aware from his periphery that the hypnotist fumbled something into a drawer. The hypnotist's deep-set eyes sparkled blue at him from their shadowed depths.

His mind protested that the coincidence was absurd – it couldn't rationally be the same person – but any residual doubts vanished when Gordon heard the man speak.

'Hello, Gordon... I've been expecting you.'

'Julian!' Gordon blurted. 'It's you.' Embarrassed he cleared his throat. 'It's really you. Julian Auger – *you're* the hypnotist?'

The hypnotist stood up, smoothing his trousers as he did. 'Yes, Gordon. Whom else did you expect?'

'When... how?' he asked exasperatedly.

The hypnotist shrugged off the unflattering effect of Gordon's apparent scepticism and began to walk out from behind the desk.

‘I’ve been working as a hypnotist – I prefer hypnotherapist – well... for years.’

Gordon allowed his gaze to take in the room. An expansive, filled bookcase imposed behind the hypnotist and lent an erudite credibility. Sunlight streamed in through the blinds of the window. In the darker corner behind Gordon, some pictures hung on the wall. On the other side, there was a sideboard. There was a couch. Auger was standing beside the huge solid desk, whose uncluttered surface gleamed like a smooth wooden pond.

‘I started in much humbler premises than these, but I’m quite successful now.’

A thought was crossing Gordon’s mind. How could Julian be one? Weren’t these types all quacks and sham artists? But if he really believed that, what on earth was he doing here? He stood in silence. He struggled to imagine what had led Julian into so unlikely a profession. Nothing was forthcoming. ‘But how?’

Auger released a bored breath. ‘Another time. Tell me, what do you do these days, Gordon?’

‘I’m an advertising executive...’ Gordon began enthusiastically. He had a job that interested people, or so he believed – though he realized he had been trumped by Julian.

Auger’s face darkened.

‘...that’s a sort of copywriter cum art director – I think up ideas for adverts,’ Gordon continued and was troubled by the thought that he had said something wrong. It wasn’t clear what. Julian remained silent; his expression wasn’t obviously hostile, but neither was it especially friendly. Gordon felt a need to change the subject. ‘By the way, nice receptionist you’ve got out there, eh, Julian? She raises the tone of the place a bit – er, I mean, creates the right impression...’ Auger remained silent, and Gordon stumbled on. ‘Actually,’ he confided with a wink, ‘I think she fancies me a bit.’

Julian’s face grew colder. ‘Nerine she’s called. She’s my girlfriend.’

An embarrassed titter escaped from Gordon. The guilt was trivial, but it awoke the memories of older feelings. He sincerely wished he could have avoided Julian Auger. ‘Sorry, Julian,’ he said uneasily and wondered if, in his mind, he might be apologizing for more than his simple faux pas.

The hypnotist mumbled something and then said quizzically, ‘Sorry?’ and looked as though he had smelt something repugnant. His eyes glazed over for an instant, and then his demeanour changed abruptly. ‘No, I’m sorry, Gordon,’ he said cordially. ‘I shouldn’t take it out on you. You see, Nerine and I split up... recently. Well, actually, *she* split up with *me*.’

‘That’s bad luck, Julian,’ Gordon answered – anything other than say sorry again – but immediately he worried his reply had sounded insincere, or even mocking. That hadn’t been his intention. He thought in his defence, at least no one was likely to propose the reverse – especially not since Nerine was such a looker.

‘So don’t mind me,’ Julian continued calmly. ‘You’re right. I can’t blame your... enthusiasm.’

Gordon didn’t dare pick up Julian’s reply and stood mutely. His gaffe had struck a sore point even though Julian had let it pass. He tried but failed to remember the resolve that had brought him to this situation, and he wondered if he could make an excuse, any excuse, to rush out the door – and of course, he wouldn’t come back.

But Auger didn’t leave an escape: It was as if, with almost telepathic ability, he had detected Gordon’s second thoughts because he interrupted the silence, saying brusquely, ‘Take a seat, Gordon. I believe you want to give up smoking.’

Gordon found himself sitting down automatically and suddenly realized that a getaway might be harder than he imagined. Auger went to close the door, disappearing behind Gordon. When he returned, he had a large circular piece of card in his hand. It was white with a thick red, tightly-packed spiral drawn on it. Auger pulled up an old wooden chair, which looked inappropriately like it might have been the sole survivor from an old dining room set, and sat in front of Gordon. He held the card before him by something unseen on the back of it.

‘Stare into the centre of the card, Gordon.’

Gordon did so, and the card began to rotate, the red spiral rotating outwards. Its expanding rings drew him in, sucking him down deeper and deeper.

‘There is only my voice. Nothing but my voice...’

CHAPTER 3

The hypnotist leaned around and plopped the spiral onto his desk. Before him rested his patient, eyelids lightly closed, a hand hanging loosely from the couch. Now he lifted that arm by the sleeve and dropped it into Gordon's lap where it flopped lifelessly. He searched his subject's face for telltale signs before withdrawing his gaze.

'Gordon... Why do you wish to give up smoking?'

'For my health.' The patient's voice sounded vacant and flat, like someone who had replied to a question without dragging his attention from the TV.

'OK. Good.' The hypnotist pursed his lips. 'So... why do you need me?'

'Because I keep smoking.'

'And why is that, Gordon?'

'I don't know...' He breathed heavily. 'Something always happens... and then I give up trying.'

The hypnotist sighed through his nose. 'Smoking hijacks pathways in your brain —' he began in a sermonizing tone, and halted suddenly. This was Gordon he was talking to. He bent over close to the patient's ear and paused a moment, his breath on the subject's cheek. He whispered something, and the patient's eyelids twitched.

The backrest of the wooden chair creaked as Auger leant back. He wondered, should he mention the potential for illness? It was already apparent that health considerations alone hadn't provided the mental leverage that Gordon required.

The hypnotist pinched his bottom lip and pulled at it. Perhaps he could provide Gordon with a better-placed fulcrum about which to pivot his efforts. 'Nicotine *exploits* the chemistry that urges you to eat

and reproduce. And *why* do you look upon this exploitation fondly?... Because your body tells you nicotine is good. It isn't! Your body has been fooled. Do you understand me, Gordon?

Auger's mind wandered, and he remembered that Gordon had said he worked in advertising, a revelation which he had found displeasurable. That Gordon should have chosen just *that* area in which to forge a career – it was perverse. Perhaps it was just as well that he hadn't let Gordon know his opinion of the industry. He looked at his patient lying peacefully in his hypnotic trance. Various temptations suggested themselves, but all were unethical.

'Wake up, Gordon.'

Gordon yawned. 'I feel like I've been sleeping.'

'Ah...' said the hypnotist. 'I can assure you that was not the case.' He stood up dismissively and started to move towards his desk. 'Your experience is not unusual.' But he stopped then and turned back around to his patient.

Gordon sat up and leant forward, hands upon knees as though about to stand. He hesitated. 'Am I all done then?'

Auger considered his answer, while nodding slowly to himself. 'Of course, I will need to see you again,' he added with a glance. 'Make an appointment with Nerine before you go... please.'

'Right. Yes.' Gordon looked around, saw his briefcase and picked it up.

'Until next time then, Gordon.' Auger sat down behind his desk and proceeded to read through some papers.

Gordon realized he had been dismissed. He thought that after more than a decade they ought to have more to say, though he didn't himself feel much in the mood to chat.

He opened the door and went out.

He considered walking straight out of reception and taking his chance that another appointment would turn out to be unnecessary, but he found himself gravitating towards the gorgeous receptionist.

'Hi, *Nerine*.' He grinned, aware that he was showing that he had discovered her name from Auger. 'Julian says I need to make another appointment.'

'I'm sure I can fit you in... *Gordon*,' she answered, turning to consult her monitor while restraining a smirk. Her eyes flashed

mischievously back at him. Did she find him attractive? He hoped so.

‘Am I allowed to ask for a date?’

‘Well, you are... I’d like to have you again in two days. How does the same time on Wednesday sound?’

‘Fine.’ He wondered if he should really ask her on a date. He stared into her eyes; she stared back. He opened his mouth to speak, but a doubt made him hesitate. Wasn’t it only her job to be friendly to customers?

She raised her eyebrows minutely.

‘Thank you,’ he said and turned to go.

He had the distinct feeling that she watched him leave.

§

The hypnotist tipped himself back in his chair and mulled over his unceremonious reunion with Gordon. The whole thing had been something of an anticlimax, and he brooded upon it moodily. Sorry, Gordon had said. The word should have stuck in his throat. He remembered something else suddenly.

Affronted by Gordon’s remark, he had been struck with a flash of an idea, too quick to have put into words, a fleeting strip of images, and he had told the lie without knowing whether he would follow it through. He could... but if he did, it would involve Nerine, a prospect which troubled him. It was hardly an idea that would delight her.

He swivelled his leather chair around to his desk drawer. He opened it and looked at the heavy black metal that lay there. He glanced up. Nerine was watching him, frowning from her desk in reception. She had teased him uneasily about it once: She hoped he wasn’t thinking, one day, to add it to his stock of therapeutic tools. He had refused to be drawn by the gibe.

This time he didn’t ignore her disapproving glare. She didn’t want to see it. It was a potent symbol. In a way, it was uncouth of him not to conceal it. He closed the drawer without removing anything, and Nerine went back to what she was doing, apparently contented.

He didn’t think Gordon had seen anything. It was clear something else had preoccupied him. He must have convinced himself that the Auger on the doorplate wasn’t the Auger he knew. The thought nettled. He touched his cheek with splayed fingertips and pushed up

against his stubble. Gordon must long-ago have consigned him to the past.

‘But the past catches up with you,’ he thought and grinned sickly, ‘...one way or another.’

CHAPTER 4

Nerine turned to see Julian walking absently from his office. He looked at her without speaking for a moment and then asked casually, 'Do you remember a patient we had today – Gordon Lissope?'

She clicked send on an email and shut down her computer. The cool of the early evening brought goose pimples to her bare arms. The last client had left not minutes before, and reception was empty apart from the two of them.

'Hmmm...' Of course she remembered him straight away, though the reason she did couldn't be why Julian asked. She thought for a moment and remembered that Julian had mentioned he had known someone with that name. 'Was it him then? Was it your friend?'

'I never said he was my *friend*,' he answered her tetchily. 'But, yes, it was the same person. How did he strike you?'

She looked at him blankly. She thought Gordon was attractive. That wasn't what he was asking, was it? God, men could be so insecure. He had once been piqued about a lustful remark she had made about a tennis star. Probably it was a thing she would normally only have said in all-female company – 'Cor, he gets me hot between the legs,' or something like it. He had since fallen in the seedings and out of the public eye. Now what was his name?... 'I don't really remember,' she lied. 'I hardly spoke to him.'

'The fact is, I don't like him much.' He sat down on the corner of her desk. 'Thirteen years hasn't tempered my dislike. He thinks he's God's gift to women now.'

'So... it wasn't a warm reunion.'

Julian appeared to hesitate. 'I'd like to teach him a lesson, Nerine, and I want you to help me.'

'What?' she retorted and pulled a sour face.

'You'd just have to go out with him once,' he said glancing at her sideways.

She cackled with a laugh that made her sound slightly unbalanced. 'No way!' she objected dutifully. She remembered that, at one moment, she had thought Gordon was going to ask her out, though she didn't know whether she was relieved or disappointed that he hadn't.

Amazed by Julian's suggestion, she watched as he pushed himself up from where he had been resting and sauntered across the room to a window. Suddenly she felt humiliated that he wasn't more jealous of her. And why was he just gazing out of the window now? Poor old Nerine the doormat, enamoured and enslaved – was that how he thought of her?

'He insinuated some things about you, you know?' he said now and continued to stare out of the window.

He was manipulating her, she knew, and she seethed. 'What things?'

'I'm not repeating them,' he goaded. 'If you want to know, you can ask him when you take him out.'

She didn't reply, and he returned from the window and perched at her side against the desk. 'All you have to do is go out. Flirt with him,' he said and didn't meet her eyes. 'Tease him a bit, and build up his hopes.'

'Oh, is that all.' She found she couldn't look at him either. She added in a mumble, 'Perhaps you'd like to do it yourself then. I'll lend you a dress.'

'Nerine, what –'

'What sort of a woman do you think I am?'

He looked straight at her. 'A beautiful one,' he said. Then he smirked. 'One that makes men turn giddy fools when they sink into your eyes.'

She noticed his hand was upon her shoulder and couldn't remember it getting there. His attempt at flattery was inept, and she was cross with herself that it gratified her at all. She tried not to let

him see it and fumed at him, 'So how does that teach him a lesson?'

'I told him we'd broken up.' Nerine's eyes narrowed. 'Well, that you'd dumped me, actually,' he said withdrawing his touch.

Keep on going like this, Julian, she thought, and it might still happen yet. It was an empty threat, and she knew it. His conceit wasn't altogether unjustified, and the thought swelled her anger.

'I want you to make him yearn for you.' Then looking at her meaningfully he said, 'And I don't care what guile you use to achieve it.' He continued in an offhand manner as though nothing should be simpler, 'And then, the next time you see him, just when he believes everything is going to go his way, that's when you'll deal him a blow. Tell him you've decided to make it up with me. He won't like that at all.'

A pang of foolish pride told her 'perhaps', and something else he had said intrigued her fleetingly – was he giving her permission to... 'People get back together all the time,' she said watching him carefully. 'Julian... don't you think he'll just take it on the chin?'

She realized she had just given him an opportunity for further flattery, but all he said was, 'Well then,' and pulled at his ear. 'So you'll do it then? For me?'

She gave him a look of pitying indulgence, and thought about it. Perhaps she would go out with Gordon. Perhaps she would make sure she enjoyed herself too, though not in the way Julian imagined. 'Oh all right, Julian,' she said. 'I'll do it, for *you*.'

And thought to herself, '...just to teach you a lesson.'

§

The telephone rang, and Nerine looked from the phone to Julian and raised her eyebrows. The hypnotist decided he would take, rather than ignore, this one last call. He told Nerine not to wait for him and stalked back into his office. The caller was a male who preferred not to give his name straight away. He sounded younger than himself – early twenties, Auger guessed. He was slowly getting around to saying what his problem was, and he wanted to know if hypnotherapy could be any help.

Julian reassured him and patiently coaxed the trouble out of him. The prospective patient was saying now, 'I'm so self-conscious that I can't lose myself to the moment, and so the whole thing is ruined by

a horrible feeling of awkwardness... and fathomless inadequacy.'

'Yes, I understand exactly what you're driving at,' Julian said sincerely. 'I won't say that I can't help you – there is always *something* I can do – but what you're describing is, at heart, a problem more common than you might suspect, a problem of conscience.

'I will treat you, but... perhaps I could give you something to think about before you decide to go ahead.'

'Well, yes, what is it you want to say?'

'You strike me as a sensitive person. If you want to be happy, don't try to live insensitively.'

The man on the other end of the line coughed and went quiet. After a long silence, he said he would think over their conversation, thanked Auger, and hung up.

The hypnotist replaced the receiver and stared at the paintings on the walls in the corner of his office. The caller was already out of his mind. Nerine, he thought, had been right – those paintings did brighten up the place.

He looked at the prints and saw lurid wheat fields. He saw turbulence. He looked at other prints and saw more turmoil, and distortion. He felt somehow settled by these scenes. The real world often disturbed him, but looking into this storm of colour, he felt calm as though glimpsing a place where he might possibly belong.

His eyes unfocused and saw instead the reflection of the room in the glass of the picture frames – his desk, his bookshelves, one reality superimposed upon the other. Life is shadows thrown by fire on the wall of a cave, he thought. But which shadows and which fire?

Nerine had insisted he pick out the pictures himself, just another way in which she had proved her worth. Reproaching himself, he pondered the idea that he had stifled her by allowing her to continue to work for him as a receptionist. She was keen. Why hadn't he embraced her?

He recalled her reaction after she had heard what he wanted her to do to Gordon. He was conscious of how petty he must have appeared to her then. He remembered the brief look of pity that had appeared on her face and thought despondently that she could be right. Maybe it would fall flat. Maybe it would just be so much water off a duck's back.

It didn't matter. His reunion with Gordon presented other possibilities. It all came flooding back now – the unhealed wounds.

Perhaps he could use Gordon. The thought captivated him. His mind began to explore possibilities in a surreal and twisted landscape while his distant eyes reflected the sight of garish colour. An idea struck that made the hypnotist grin and his eyes water, a grin that bared his teeth.

CHAPTER 5

Gordon looked gloomily through the file spread on his desk and thought, not for the first time, that his career was going down the toilet. He glanced over at the empty desk next to his. Today he didn't even have Ronnie's companionship to distract him. Ronnie was out of the office all day on a course, 'Need – The Emotion that Sells and How to Induce it'. He had told Gordon yesterday how the particular training group involved always took the class out for a really fine lunch during which they kept everybody's glass topped up. A bit of a jolly really, and why didn't Gordon sign up for more of them. He said he was going to do his best to stay awake during the morning lesson, but after lunch, frankly he didn't fancy his chances. So Gordon had asked him if he was sure the course wouldn't be more aptly titled 'Sleep – A Chorus of Snoring and How to Produce it'. In answer, Ronnie had told Gordon he needed to relax more and go with the flow.

Sometimes Gordon wondered how Ronnie managed to stay upbeat. His accounts were hardly any more exciting than Gordon's. His current one was pulled right from the bottom of the heap – sanitary towels. It was an unwritten law among their team that nobody took the piss out of whoever landed that one. Everybody squirmed when it periodically came up for assignment.

The truth was he would have liked to go along on the course with Ronnie. His spirits could do with a bit of edifying – a lavish meal, expensive wine in inexhaustible supply, and a somnolently droning speaker to lull him into an afternoon of pleasant drowsing. Ronnie was right about it being a perk. The problem was that everybody saw it. Given his current circumstances, he didn't think his taking a jaunt

at the company's expense would be looked upon favourably.

He gazed at the file dismally. Water, what could he say about water? Everything that floated into his head met with an internal groan. He could think of nothing but unusable pap. The brief was transforming into an instrument of torture. What was obvious was the client's wish for something original, but Gordon found himself in the midst of a drought. He was all dried up. He was suffering from a thirst bottled water both had induced and was incapable of slaking, and nothing about the project whet his enthusiasm.

Inevitably his mind was drawn to more stimulating material. He recalled the hypnotherapist's receptionist from a day earlier. Fantasizing, a clear picture in his head, he replayed the interchange with a less tentative sexual interest. Though it was an unwanted connection, a vision of Auger intruded upon his thoughts. Julian Auger – a hypnotist!

He tried to recover the imagery of the reception desk and Nerine upon it wearing less clothes than were either decent or likely, but Auger's image had stuck.

He was taken back. He hadn't heard anything of Julian since school, Francis Henry Compton Crick's Secondary School and Sixth Form College – quite a mouthful; the first pupils had rather mutinously dubbed it Watson's for short. Somehow years had passed before he grasped that molecule of inheritance. He had assumed it was the name of a former head or something, and it had aroused no more curiosity than the school's motto, which he couldn't remember now. The headmaster sometimes worked it into his speeches in assembly – he was that sort of head. Gordon was sure that Haughton had used it in his address to them all in the aftermath.

Order and Progress – were those the words of the motto? It came to him now; how could he have forgotten. Haughton loved order. Perhaps the silence which ensued that speech especially was testimony to Haughton's grip on it. Everybody had obeyed the prohibition – the staff included, it appeared to Gordon. *The Unspeakable*... He hadn't even discussed the thing with Julian.

And it stayed wedged intractably between them.

He leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms behind him. He had to try harder to keep his mind on work. The company had

recently lost a client – a small one – something he would normally have been happily unconcerned about, but it had been his assignment, and unfortunately, he was solely responsible. Another problem to add to the list.

At least he had started to try and sort out his life. He had talked to Helen calmly about money instead of ignoring the subject until the next argument blew up. He was giving up smoking. And he had resolved to get his career back on track, even though as yet it was still stubbornly mired. Losing clients wouldn't earn him any bonuses – given the mess he had fallen into, a bonus would be very welcome.

He looked at his watch – it was almost lunchtime meaning another unproductive morning – and suddenly a thought excited him. He hadn't been outside. Not even once! He hadn't even considered it. He sat with his hands flat against the desk and gazed blankly at the wall. He couldn't detect the usual urge. The treatment had cost an abnormal amount of money – especially when only recently he had admitted to himself that his spending was out of control – but he was staggered at how effective it was proving. It was actually working. He had stopped smoking!

His phone rang, making him start. He answered it.

'Hello, Gordon.'

He thought he recognized the voice, but he couldn't put a face to it. 'Hello, er...'

The woman on the other end of the line guessed his difficulty. 'It's Nerine... remember, from yesterday.'

'Ah yes. Oh hello, Nerine.' He wished he could have avoided creating the impression he had forgotten her already. It was just he hadn't expected her call. Why would he? He wondered if she needed to reschedule his appointment. 'How can I help you?'

'Well... I hope you don't mind that I'm using your contact details for this... You see, this isn't a business call.'

'OK, not a business call...'

'I was wondering if you'd like to go out with me tonight. Just for a drink.'

'The two of us, you mean?'

'Yes. I thought...'

So he hadn't imagined it. She did fancy him after all – and enough

to call him up. 'That would be great,' he said enthusiastically, peculiarly unembarrassed by how keen he must sound. 'I'd love to.'

'There's this bar I quite like. We could meet there.'

'OK.' He could have suggested an alternative venue, but he thought why complicate things. He agreed to be waiting in the bar at seven and put the receiver down, shaking his head slowly at the surprise of it all. He was flattered to be asked out by a woman, and such a great-looking one. That was probably why he hadn't remembered that he already had a date tonight – with Helen.

He cursed himself. He wasn't ringing Nerine back now to tell her it would have to be another night. He could just stand her up... but he really didn't want to miss out. So that only left the alternative. He was going to have to ring up Helen and palm her off with some excuse. She wasn't going to like it.

He didn't have time to think about it further because Ewart Hammel was standing beside him, apparently having been waiting for him to finish his call.

'I hope you really do have time to be organizing your social life at my expense.'

Gordon squirmed, but Hammel didn't wait for an answer.

'How's Highland Tarns coming along?'

'Well... I'm still trying to get some ideas.'

'What have you got so far?'

Gordon gulped. He had nothing.

'I see,' said Mr Hammel, not waiting for Gordon to fumble some reply. 'Well knuckle down to it. This isn't a social club.'

Gordon watched Mr Hammel walk away. It wasn't often that he was presented with the opportunity to make an impression on the boss – though it wasn't difficult to guess what had prompted Hammel's attention – but the boss had caught him chatting on the bloody phone. He would have preferred Hammel to find him working industriously, like an employee who realized the mistake he had made to lose a client and was determined not to repeat the slip, not like someone who looked about to lose another.

This account for Highland Tarns, he realized dismally, was going to be crucial. Now more than ever, he needed to delight everybody, but to flatter the client he required an original advertising idea with

balls. He thought of his bad luck that the crunch should come when he had such meagre ingredients to work with – bloody bottled acid-rainwater. The pressure was upon him to produce a sparkle.

§

‘I’m sorry, Madam, but your card has been refused.’

‘What?’ Helen yelled, taken aback. Though the reply was unexpected, the real surprise was just how much of a feeling of panic it prompted.

The woman behind Helen sighed heavily through her nose.

‘Oh shut up, bitch!’ she thought in a burst of anger directed at her. There were two more women in the queue behind. She got a hold of herself, her face reddening with embarrassment. ‘Why won’t you take my card?’

‘The machine declined it,’ said the female cashier apologetically.

‘Can’t you try it again?’

‘I’ve tried it twice.’ She looked blankly at Helen. ‘Look.’ She swiped it again unsuccessfully. ‘I’m sorry.’ Seeing the mixture of horror and incomprehension on Helen’s face, she lowered her voice and said, ‘At least it doesn’t say retain card.’ She handed the card back to Helen. ‘You’ve probably just got to your credit limit or something.’

‘Oh.’ Yes, they did have those, didn’t they. She didn’t remember what hers was but realized it didn’t really matter because she hadn’t the slightest idea how much she had run up on the card – not even in thousands.

She remembered Gordon’s insistence now, that they really had to get their finances under control. She had just agreed with him to shut him up. She had a vague notion that controlling their money would require action of some kind. Gordon could do that. She had intended just to carry on as always.

Fat chance! She looked desolately at the lacy ensemble she had picked out: an elaborately-patterned bra and panties, suspender belt, and stockings to match, all in pale peach – but not pink; Gordon always said he hated pink. They were going out tonight to a posh French restaurant in Soho, which they had booked ages ago on a whim – before Gordon had started counting pennies. What she wanted was something that she could excite Gordon with afterwards.

Her reasoning went that after such a refined beginning to the evening, anything even slightly cheap would look hideously naff. This shop's range was exclusively expensive – apart from the odd anomaly.

She had giggled earlier when she had rounded on a rather overt and, therefore, not particularly tasteful item. But she did consider it, if only for the briefest moment. Surely a liberated woman such as herself, she thought, should not be ashamed to admit that what she really wanted was a good seeing to – though if Gordon had been a bit more attentive recently, such measures wouldn't be necessary.

That was a depressing admission to make.

She had moved on quickly, discarding one item after the next. A career girl, she told herself, hadn't time to fanny about. Gordon's words about their need to be more careful with money had floated hazily in the back of her mind, but she hadn't been concerned by them, and it had never occurred to her that she wouldn't be able to pay for what she wanted.

And, of all the shops, it had to be *this* one where it happened.

The woman behind her had begun to tap her foot impatiently in a most irritating manner. Helen was sorely tempted to whirl around and slap the cow.

'Have you got any other cards?' asked the cashier helpfully.

Of course. 'Erm, yes!' She fumbled with her purse and pulled out her MasterCard. She hesitated. How much credit was left on this one? If she used this one up, she wouldn't be able to pay for anything, perhaps for days. The thought was abhorrent.

She took out her supermarket credit card instead. She held it in a joint account with Gordon, and it was supposed to be for their household expense, but she had no other option, at least until she had had time to check how much credit was left on her other card. She might instead have just said she had decided not to take the things – but not with that snooty bitch behind her in the queue.

The cashier took the supermarket card from her, staring at it hard as though she had been handed something from the dustbin. She swiped it through the machine. She looked up then, and smiled happily. 'That's fine,' she said.

Helen walked out of the shop, swinging the bag with her new

things in as though the packaging itself were the height in fashion accessories. The incident at the checkout was already behind her. She judged that she just had time to pop in somewhere and buy a sandwich before she dashed back to the office.

Then her phone rang.

She greeted Gordon effusively, gushing, her decadence still fresh. 'Hi, darling, man of my life!'

'Hi, Helen. I tried your phone at work.'

'I just popped out to get a sandwich.'

'Maybe we should start making our own.'

He wasn't serious? He could take this obsession with their finances too far. Now wasn't the time to mention her latest expenditure – on their joint credit card as well. She felt a pang of guilt. 'OK, I'll give you my order tonight,' she joked.

'Listen Helen, about tonight. It's bad news – I can't go.'

Helen didn't reply but was ready to argue.

'I've got to work. I tried to get out of it, but Hammel wouldn't have any of it.'

'Oh Gordon!' she groaned unhappily, and her spirits sunk like a ship hulled in one devastating shot.

'I could've tried to put my foot down, but you know I'm already having trouble at work.'

'But we made plans. I was looking forward to it.'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

No, he didn't know. And that was the problem. The purchase acquired a new dragging weight in the bag in her hand. Now wasn't the time to come clean.

§

'She's retiring?... It's hard to imagine Auntie Rosa not being a teacher any more... Mum, I've got to go... Yes I'll ask him, but I think he might have other plans... I know... Yes he's *still* a vegetarian, Mum... Well, I think they all do... Mum, I've got to say goodbye now... I'm going out... I won't... Bye then. Love you.'

She hung up the bedroom extension, sighed and then, for a moment, stood motionlessly with her hands on her hips. She promised herself that, if nothing else, she would enjoy the coming evening. If it didn't work... no great loss. Whatever her motivation

for agreeing to this charade, there were reasons why it might be fun. She called to mind his tall, dark, attractive looks, and his curly hair and remembered how keen he had sounded to meet up.

She walked over to the open wardrobe and stood in her underwear in front of it. She wanted something seductive. She ran through the hangers and pulled out a dress. This would certainly get a man hot under the collar, but she put it back – too formal.

Her hands alighted on a top with horizontal stripes, and she stood there with her arms outstretched while she mulled it over. She took it out and removed it from the hanger and was about to pull it on, but she stopped mid-manoeuvre. Instead she threw it over the top of the wardrobe door and took off her bra. She took the top again and pulled it on over her head and went to check it in the mirror.

With a satisfying sense of her own sexiness, she saw that the material was light enough to allow a certain amount of protrusion. The horizontal stripes and the snug fit flattered the curves of her breasts. Nerine, she told herself, he'll be putty in your hands.

She realized that time was slipping by and finished dressing while mentally walking through her plan. It was a while since she had had the opportunity to practise this kind of seduction. Something in what Julian had said had given her permission. She was looking forward to the night out; she was going to make Julian jealous; and she was going to fool around with Gordon.

But most of all, it was going to be fun to try out what Julian had once reluctantly taught her, and on someone other than Julian himself.

CHAPTER 6

The bar that Nerine had picked was quiet. Something was playing but it was hardly audible. Small round wooden tables filled the floor; around the walls were alcoves. Gordon took in the place as he cast about for Nerine, but didn't see her anywhere, not that he had expected to find her waiting.

The barman who served him sounded foreign – East European maybe, but he wouldn't have bet any money on it. He saw they had a stout on tap – one he had seen around on billboards recently – and asked for that. Now why couldn't he get his hands on a beer ad instead of... he noticed the rows of assorted bottled waters on the shelves behind the bar, and frowned at them reproachfully. He hazarded a guess at a drink for Nerine, whom he expected to be along shortly – a white-wine spritzer with ice and lemon. He took the drinks and parked himself in an alcove that faced the door.

Where was she?

He sipped slowly at his drink and watched the other patrons. A man walked into the bar with a thick black beard and long knotted hair. One of the bar staff cast a glance at him and then went back to what he was doing. The man proceeded to search the place for someone or something, almost making a show of it. Finally he stood alone in the centre of the floor with his hands on his waist. His eyes became empty and sad, as though he realized he had been forsaken and suspected that the world had somehow colluded. Then suddenly he turned and stalked out, looking highly agitated as he went.

Half an hour had passed, and Gordon scratched at the back of his neck and fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. He felt conspicuous for having sat on his own for so long with two drinks. When he looked

at his watch and saw that an hour had passed, he gave in to his doubts.

He sipped from his glass, and only a swallow remained of the pint. A barmaid in a tight black skirt and thin white blouse – through which the pattern of her bra was occasionally visible – swept up his glass as she breezed by. He ogled her as she weaved through the tables to collect more empties on her path. Then she turned suddenly, holding up his glass, and said, ‘Oh sorry. Is this empty?’ He smiled yes, and she gave him a cheeky little smirk out of the corner of her eye as she turned away.

Idly he fantasized that instead she had taken the last gulp herself, then eyed him with a measuring look and asked if he wouldn’t mind helping her to change the barrel – which she might have done innocently if not for what her eyes were saying. He imagined himself following her out behind the bar, and out of sight, where she then turned and lifted her hands towards his face. It seemed for a moment that she was going to grab him and kiss him, but instead her fingers ran through his thick locks. ‘God, I love your curly hair. Do you want to see my –’

The barmaid dropped a glass, which bounced, but her attempt to save it caused the stack of glasses in her clutches to teeter dangerously, and she chased it back up to the vertical.

Nerine wasn’t coming, he decided. He had been ‘given a long wait,’ as the Spanish say. Stood up.

He took a gulp from the apparently superfluous spritzer and stared into the glass for consolation. Someone was standing close to him. He looked up into a smiling face that said, ‘Hello, Gordon.’

‘Nerine!’

‘I’m *really* sorry. I didn’t mean to be so late. First I couldn’t get away from work, and then the stupid cash machine was out of order, so I had to find another one... and can you believe it – that one was out of cash.’

‘How useful. Did you order a cheque book?’

‘No,’ she said eyeing him carefully and breaking into a grin. ‘I flagged down a taxi and said to the driver, “Take me to a flippin’ cash machine that works, please,” which he did – he drove me about two hundred yards around the corner and said, “There you go.” So I said

thank you, trying not to feel like a fool, and asked how much I owed him, and he started laughing his head off.'

Gordon restrained a snigger. 'And that machine was working OK?'

'Yes, but I didn't remember to ask him to wait, and when I'd finished he'd already driven off – I don't know why, but I thought he was just turning round. So I started walking, thinking I could flag down another on the way, but I think God must have been against me.'

'Oh no way, not from where I'm sitting.'

She blushed. 'I'm sorry I've left you here on your own half the evening.'

'No, don't worry, don't worry! I was late too,' he lied, embarrassed to admit how long he had really waited. 'What're you drinking?'

'...Umm. What's that you've got?'

'White-wine spritzer.'

'Ooh. Sounds good to me.'

'OK. Coming up.'

Gordon got served out of turn, but he didn't feel like redirecting the barman – at least his order was a swift one. He headed back with Nerine's drink and a couple of bags of crisps. Nerine sat primly, staring out across the bar. Her hair was straight and blonde; her breasts weren't large but were shapely; her whole expression was beautiful – the way she smiled, the way she spoke, even the way she sat. Auger must have felt like jumping off a bridge when she dumped him. And now here she was with him. He quickly surveyed the women in the bar and had time to think that he was carrying a drink to the most beautiful one.

'I got some crisps too.'

She eyed them dolefully. 'I don't know if I should. I've got to watch my figure', she said arching out her chest.

Gordon opened a packet of cheese and onion and spread it open on the table between them. 'You eat the crisps. I'll take over the vigil on your figure.'

She opened her mouth and widened her eyes in feigned shock, and popped a crisp into her mouth. She munched through a good proportion of the rest as she chatted about some of the peculiar

people she had to deal with in the course of her work. Gordon remarked that he hoped he wasn't one of them – which caused Nerine to start a giggle which she tried to repress and instead made worse. He wasn't bothered that she supplied most of the conversation; he found himself caressed by her lilting voice and absorbed in her loveliness. Poor Julian. He began to wonder just what had caused her to dump him.

'You know, I knew Julian at school.'

'Yes, he did mention that to me. What a funny coincidence meeting up like that! Didn't you realize it was his surgery?'

'Not until it was too late.'

Nerine laughed uncertainly.

'If you don't mind my asking, why did you split up with Julian?'

The question seemed to catch her off-guard. He wondered whether he had put his foot in it. *God, you're smooth, Lissope.*

'Er... no, really, I don't mind telling you. It's simple, really. Because he's a jerk.'

A burst of laughter escaped from him. Upon this Nerine, who had looked troubled just a moment before, succumbed to a great giggle of laughter herself.

A jerk, Gordon thought, some things don't change then.

'Actually,' Nerine continued, 'one of the things that annoys me about him is how he always takes all this hypnotism business so seriously. He never wants to have any fun.'

A couple of vivid images sprang into Gordon's mind. Suddenly he felt very aroused.

'He says that hypnotism isn't a game and that he takes his professional responsibility very seriously.'

'That *does* sound like Julian,' Gordon agreed, looking down into his spritzer. 'He's always had a tendency to get boringly serious –' he glanced up again '– if you let him forget that canny flippancy of his.'

Nerine looked directly and intensely into Gordon's eyes; her own were slightly wide. She became suddenly self-conscious, and her eyelids dropped as her eyes cast down, and an impish smile broke out on her face. He wanted to kiss her. She looked up at him. 'He left me feeling a little frustrated,' she said coquettishly. 'Gordon... would *you* let me hypnotize you?'

His head was filled with the warm glow of alcohol, and Nerine's question seemed tantamount to her asking would he play games with her in the bedroom. 'Yes. I *would*,' he assured her wholeheartedly.

'OK then.' She got up and slid in at his side of the table. 'Are you comfortable enough?'

'Yes –' he suddenly realized her intention '– what?' She wanted to try something right here in the bar. He thought fleetingly how embarrassing that might be, but he was rapidly consumed instead by his consciousness of how close she had moved to him. The alcohol was already numbing his alarm, and he found himself supposing that, after all, they were quite private here in their own nook. He had absolutely no fear that she actually could hypnotize him.

Fine, he thought. I'll play along for this dazzling woman.

§

Nerine smiled at Gordon and fought off a small nag of guilt. She was certain that he didn't suspect what she was about to do. Sorry Gordon, she thought, but I'll make it up to you.

He slipped under very easily. The drink and the relaxed atmosphere, she imagined, helped a lot. She wondered why it had never occurred to her before that, if she had hypnotized Julian even once – a hypnotist – she could probably hypnotize anybody. With Gordon prepared, she took a last moment to collect herself.

Right, Mister Julian Auger, she thought. You're going to get just a little bit more than you bargained for. Think you can field me out like some whore, do you?

'Gordon?'

His reply was sleepy, and she hoped his mild inebriation wouldn't be obstructive.

'The next time you talk to Julian...'

'Yes.'

'I want you to really go on about how much you liked me, and how gorgeous you think I am.'

'You *are* really sexy.'

'*I want* you to tell him I was all over you...'

'Oh yes.'

'...and that you think I've really got the hots for you.'

'You're really hot,' he slurred.

‘*Got* the hots, I said!’ He hadn’t sounded so drunk before she started. That was something unexpected.

‘The hots.’

‘Yes. And you will *have* to tell him this, Gordon, and you won’t be able to contain your glee.’

Gordon sat slumped, head back, with an idiotic smile pasted across his face.

‘And... Gordon?’

‘Mmm.’

‘You’ll tell him what a fool he was to let a woman like me slip through his hands. And how lucky it was for you that he did.’

‘The fool.’

‘Tell him you’re not surprised, though, because – let’s face it – I’m far too good for him.’

Nerine heard Gordon mumble something in reply – just what, didn’t seem important. A satisfied smile crossed her lips. She started to contemplate how Julian might react. That ought to give him something to think about, she thought and felt better already, about everything. This was turning out to be a better lark than she had hoped. Now, she thought, to have some fun with Gordon...

‘I’m going to wake you in a moment,’ she said focusing again. Gordon looked like he was about to fall asleep. She hadn’t tried something exactly like this before, and Julian of course had only ever been sober. ‘When I do, you will not open your eyes. You will play along. You will not remember that you have been hypnotized.’

‘Now, Gordon, wake up.’

§

Gordon’s eyelids twitched but didn’t open.

‘You are now completely hypnotized. You are under my complete power,’ Nerine said in an attempt at a tyrant’s voice, which was slightly comical.

‘Your will is my command,’ Gordon replied in monotone, trying his hardest to keep a solemn expression.

‘Each time you bring me a drink, you will lean over and kiss me on the cheek as though it’s the normal thing to do.’

‘I will kiss-you-on-the-cheek-each-time-I-bring-you-a-driinnk.’ He hoped he wasn’t overdoing it.

‘If I ask for ice with my drink, you have to kiss me on the lips; if I ask for a drink with a cherry in it, you have to give my breasts a feel as you’re doing it.’

‘I understand.’

‘*But...* you better make it natural. If I don’t like the way you do it, I might give you a forfeit, and you won’t be able to get out of it.’

‘Right.’

‘Now, when I count to three and click my fingers, you will wake up feeling refreshed. One... two... three!’

Gordon opened his eyes, blinked a few times, and took a gulp from his drink. ‘Can I get you another drink, Nerine?’

‘A half of cider would be nice.’

‘With ice?’

‘Hmmm... no, not this time, I think.’

‘OK,’ he smiled and strode off to the bar enthusiastically. He was trying to think what sort of a drink usually came with a cherry in it.

§

Helen stood before the full-length mirror in her underwear. Her new lingerie lay thrown in the corner of the bedroom, unopened.

She regarded her reflection miserably. On the bed lay a large, half-eaten tray of Belgian chocolates – indulgently expensive ones. Screw Gordon and his financial control. In her hand she held a tumbler of cherry brandy – sweet and sticky, just right with a mouthful of chocolate.

Her hair was a dank, greasy brown, and her face was pasty and bloodless. She looked like London had sucked her down its tubes and spat her out of a fast-food outlet. She had always had a healthy complexion, she thought. Her convenience lifestyle had done this to her.

She took a gulp of the cherry brandy. Its warmth burned her throat. Gordon had ruined her evening. She really should get herself in shape, eat more healthily or something. But not tonight. Tonight she would erase her disappointment by getting wasted.

She took another gulp at the tumbler then swigged the lot and flopped backwards onto the bed. Some of the chocolates leapt out of the tray as the mattress bounced. Helen rolled over sideways and

collected the chocolates that had escaped, pushing them three at a time into her mouth.

She lay back and sucked out the bits of chocolate and flecks of nut from her teeth. Delicious. Now, more drink. She sat up and poured her second huge tumblerful from the newly opened bottle of cherry brandy on the bedside table.

Half a bottle later, she had discarded her knickers and bra and was fumbling with the contents of the cardboard box in the corner of the room. She put everything on and went to admire herself in the mirror.

The alcohol had flushed her cheeks attractively – at least it seemed so. She looked stunning, she thought. Gordon would love this. She put her hands behind her head and gyrated drunkenly in the mirror. Was *she* sexy. What man could resist?

She hoped Gordon would feel like it when he got home. She felt quite in the mood herself. She ate the last two chocolates, and filled up another tumbler of cherry brandy.

She passed out before Gordon returned home.

§

Gordon walked slowly through the warm night air, meandering happily along. He fumbled with the light on his watch and made an effort to focus his eyes on its illuminated dial. It was quite likely Helen had gone to bed without waiting for him. He wondered if she might already be asleep. He hoped that she would be by the time he got back, and walked slower still, with that thought in mind.

He had asked Nerine if she wanted him to walk her anywhere, but she had said no. She told him she was a big girl. He slurred, ‘Yeh, but the city’s bigger,’ which somehow he managed to pull off without it sounding corny – maybe because they were both pretty drunk, though Gordon more so. By chucking-out time, he had been slugging down his own drinks and bringing ones for Nerine whether she had finished hers or not. They parted ways outside the pub.

He thought back over the evening, a smile across his face, and then it struck him. He hadn’t smoked. He had spent all evening in a pub – surrounded by smokers as usual, he supposed, and drinking as well – and yet he hadn’t even been tempted. The idea hadn’t entered his head.

He guessed Nerine had helped distract him from drifting into habit. Yes, she was very distracting. He liked her and, what was better, she seemed to like him too. He wondered when he would see her again and realized it would be almost straight away. He had his follow-up appointment at the hypnotist's tomorrow afternoon. Already he looked forward to seeing her again, and he noticed he had begun to walk faster.

But there was still Helen.

How did he feel about Helen now? How had he been feeling about her for ages? Things might develop with Nerine. He felt he wanted them to. He found himself thinking idly that if he dumped Helen, it would be messy. He would have to move out. He wondered if she was still awake.

CHAPTER 7

Helen rushed into the office, somehow having managed to make it in on time, and with her face still feeling rubbery from the night before. By lunchtime she wanted to nap with as much desire as ever she could remember. As the afternoon wore on, she felt a draining tiredness that made her fantasize about her bed and a soft pillow. Last night's indulgence in booze and choccies had taken its toll, and it still wasn't time to leave.

She stroked a finger down the greasy side of her nose and felt the little white spots that had sprung there. She let out her breath, letting it puff out her lips as she slumped.

'Looks like someone could do with a holiday, does it *not*, Miss Pringston?'

Her manager Hailey was walking by along the aisle. That woman thought she was such a card, the silly bitch. Helen smiled feebly, straightened, turned back to her desk and gave her best impression of putting her nose back to the grindstone.

In the corner of her eye, she watched Hailey recede and then gave up the pretence. She wondered if Gordon would be working late again tonight, but the thought annoyed her. She wondered instead how he was getting along with his new attempt to give up smoking. He had always said how hard it was, and she believed him too if his crankiness on the previous occasions was anything to go by. Maybe she should go on a diet at the same time, and they could be bad-tempered together. Gordon always succumbed again to the habit before he ever really managed to give it up – that was what she thought – almost as though he was afraid to part with the addiction. Better never to start was what her father liked to remind her. He

didn't smoke and rarely drank, though he had apparently done so copiously in what he referred to as his wild youth. Her father had grown up in a small village, which had since sprawled into a town – it hardly evoked images of rabid partying. For some reason he had wanted his children to be brought up in a similarly small village. Mum had acquiesced; she had always had a car. A central and prominent feature of the village was the graveyard of the church, which was peculiarly large, and it was right next door to the only pub in the parish. Handy if you wanted to drink and smoke yourself to an early grave, her father liked to joke.

That would seem preferable to waiting for your life to tick away at work. She had heard work was supposed to expand to fill the time available. Maybe it would if she could actually bring herself to do any, but she had already written the day off.

Another twenty minutes and she would make a sly break for the exit and rush off before anybody could interrogate her. In that art she was a master.

§

He had thought Julian might be happier for him. It occurred to him that he was being tactless, but he couldn't help himself.

'...and then she said if she asked for a cherry, I had to grope her breasts.'

'Enough!' Julian snapped at him. 'Do you really think I want to hear this, Gordon?' His face was sour, and his eyes spat at Gordon accusingly.

Gordon saw his petulant scowl and felt himself become suffused with Julian's spite. 'Let's face it, Julian, she was bound to dump you in the end. A girl like her can do a lot better than you.' He could hardly believe he was hearing the words from his own mouth.

Julian's fists were clenched at his sides. He appeared about to burst in a fit of rage. For one short moment, Gordon saw a devouring hatred glitter in Auger's eyes. Then it was gone. Julian was speaking to him in controlled tones. 'Tell me about the smoking.'

It seemed to Gordon that he had forgotten that that was why he was here – for his smoking problem, not to rile Julian with his thoughtless boasts. Perhaps he could repair things. 'You've worked a miracle.'

Julian had turned away from him – ostensibly to read something lying on his desk – so Gordon was unable to see how he received the flattery. ‘I haven’t smoked one *single* cigarette since you did your stuff.’

Julian slumped just perceptibly over what he was reading. His hands upon the desk supported more of his weight. ‘Have you been tempted?’

‘That’s what amazes me the most – no, not even slightly!’

‘Hmm...’

Julian still had his back to him. There was a silence while Gordon waited for Julian to pronounce his judgement – or something.

‘What you tell me is good, but...’ Julian turned to face Gordon ‘...there is nothing to be lost by reinforcing the work I have done already.’ His eyes made contact with Gordon’s. ‘Just to make sure the treatment sticks.’ His gaze dropped, appearing to stare at Gordon’s shoulder. ‘So I would like to hypnotize you again.’

‘If you think it’s necessary,’ Gordon said unsurely.

Julian looked directly at him. ‘Well you’re already here, aren’t you?’

There was no arguing with that. He shouldn’t have come.

§

He remembered that he almost hadn’t. But he was taking control of his life, which meant taking action; it meant carrying plans through. He had planned to give up smoking, so he had to see this through – just this last appointment. If he couldn’t prove his resolve now, all his ambitions would meet with the same failure.

He thought at least he could use the opportunity to return Nerine’s invitation and ask *her* out this time. They had clicked, he thought, but he was left in two minds about it when he remembered that she hadn’t wanted him to walk her home. He didn’t always trust his judgement when it came to women – least when the evidence was boozed-up. It was possible she was less keen now than she had been before the date. That was why he wanted to ask her out face-to-face – so it wouldn’t be so easy for her to turn him down if she was wavering. He still couldn’t quite believe his luck; he never got asked out by women.

His thoughts about Nerine were brought to an abrupt end. Julian pointed to the patient’s chair and said sharply, ‘Take a seat, Gordon.’

Gordon turned to take the seat and kicked his case. Finding it heavy in his hand earlier, he had rested it on the floor. He stumbled headlong into the patient's chair, managing to recover some of his poise on the way, and trying feebly to make it look as though he had intended to seat himself in that manner all along. He looked up at Julian, feeling his face redden.

Julian apparently ignored this as he approached him single-mindedly. His eyes stared intently into Gordon's.

'Listen to my voice. You are feeling sleepy, very sleepy...'

Later, Gordon didn't remember hearing any more than that. He awoke, feeling relaxed, but he was puzzled. He knew that he must have been hypnotized, but he couldn't remember actually being hypnotized. He couldn't remember seeing the red spiral that Julian had used last time, and so he asked, 'Did you use the spiral thing this time?'

'What?'

'The card with the red spiral that twirls round and feels like it's sucking you into it. Only, the funny thing is I don't remember seeing it.'

'There are other hypnogenic devices.'

'So you used a different one?'

'Yes... I see you're interested in hypnotism, Gordon.'

Gordon looked past Julian at the shelves of books behind him. Could they all be on hypnosis, he wondered, the secrets of the human mind. One book caught his eye, like the word 'sex' in a page. Martial Arts. What was that doing wedged between all those stuffy tomes?

His eyes lingered on the place in the bookcase as he replied to Julian. 'Well, I suppose. It's one of those things, isn't it. Everybody's interested in hypnotism.' *And martial arts*, he thought.

'I must be very lucky, then, to have such an interesting occupation,' Julian said sarcastically. He was perched on the end of his desk, tapping a pen into the palm of his hand.

Gordon looked at it.

'I could give you hypnotherapy for other things, Gordon.'

'No. No, Julian, thank you. I can't afford it.'

'Forget that for a moment. Everybody finds there are aspects of

his life he wishes could be better. If money wasn't an obstacle, what would you like to fix?

Gordon was absolutely sure that money was an obstacle, and so he didn't mind engaging in hypotheticals. He would have seen the last of Julian soon enough.

'Well I'm not addicted to anything else. Except drinking and caffeine, of course, but I don't count those.'

'I don't drink.'

'You don't drink?' Gordon said incredulously. *You can't trust a man who doesn't drink.* Where had he heard that? He couldn't remember.

'But you're being too narrow in your thinking. Hypnotism can be used to help in situations that perhaps you haven't imagined it could.'

'Well, I am having problems with my career, and that's putting it mildly. I'm up to my neck in debt, and my girlfriend seems to be getting fatter by the week.'

'Excellent...' said Julian slapping his thigh.

Gordon was gladdened, and bemused at the same time, to see that Julian found his problems amusing.

'But I can't help you with that last one.' Coyly he said, 'Perhaps you've already been feeling out a solution for that problem.'

Gordon coughed nervously. He didn't want the conversation to turn back to Nerine who was obviously – and understandably – a sore point for Julian. That must make working together fun, he thought. 'I don't see how you can help my career.'

'What is the problem with your career?'

'I don't seem to be that good at it.' Gordon wasn't sure he wanted to admit this to Julian, but what the hell. 'I recently lost the company a client.'

'Was it a big blow to the company?'

'No, but that's not the point. I don't seem to have the raw, natural talent. Only the best survive in the creative business. You have to have talent.'

Julian began to laugh loudly.

'What's so funny?'

'Oh, it just amuses me. Our problems are all the same. I can help you more than you realize. This pernicious little problem – the natural talent delusion – I've treated it many times.'

‘What delusion?’

‘This foolish label, natural talent, is really not more than an expression of awe by the awestruck, nor more than a pretension of superiority by the supercilious. How do you know you’re not talented? How do you know you’re not just a slow developer? Or that you haven’t just been quietly nurturing a talent that’s suddenly about to bloom?’

‘Well, maybe but... a one-legged man is never going to be a top sprinter.’

‘Things are rarely so clear-cut, but I’ll tell you one thing that is certain – a man riddled with self-doubt is a man who is his own worst enemy. The battle is not against your competitors, but against yourself. Life comes down to just faith and fate – hardly anybody gets exactly what he deserves.’

Gordon smiled to himself. Julian had missed his own pun, too caught up in his homily. That was something of the old Julian he knew. ‘That’s all very philosophical, Julian, but I’ve got real problems. Avoiding getting canned could be among them.’

‘I have a proposition to make.’

Gordon was listening.

‘I will treat you. I will give you more hypnosis to help you with your career and your money woes. And I won’t charge you.’

‘Why? What do you want?’

Julian laughed raucously. It reminded Gordon of happier times between them when he had been a willing participant in more than one of Julian’s schemes. But that was before...

‘Perhaps what you don’t realize, Gordon, is that I am bound in what I can and cannot do by a code of practice. I don’t think it would surprise you to learn that this code is rather conservative.

‘I, however, wish to experiment with some new techniques, perhaps push the bounds. I want you to let me. If you do, we will no longer maintain a strict patient-practitioner relationship. I would not be acting with professional accreditation, but rather as a layman.

‘Do you understand?’

‘Freedom has been lost to all-pervasive bureaucracy. Silent enslavement.’

Julian looked flummoxed.

‘Bureaucracy and Inveterate Ineptitude – a Despotick Cocktail,’ Gordon said with authority but, seeing the look on Julian’s face, added apologetically, ‘It was an article I read once, about somewhere in Europe.’

Julian’s raised eyebrows made Gordon feel embarrassed.

‘I suppose that’s not a title that’s easy to forget,’ Auger said dismissively almost to himself, and resumed what he had been saying. ‘And there’s something else I want, but I can’t tell you yet what it is.’

Gordon experienced a thrill of recognition, and smirked broadly. He hadn’t expected this. But in a blink, his grin was consumed by a new nervousness. OK, this was definitely the Julian of old. Make a slightly unusual proposal, and then put an intriguing sting in the tail. Something dangerously enticing.

Julian appeared to read his face and said quickly, ‘But it’s nothing onerous.’ He thought a little. ‘If – when I get round to telling you what I want – it sounds onerous to you, then the pact would be broken, wouldn’t it.’

‘I don’t know, Julian. What am I getting myself into?’ But he didn’t believe the reservation he had voiced. Julian’s proposition was mesmerizing. The magic solution of hypnotism was offered. It was irresistibly alluring.

‘Concentrate on what matters!’

Gordon stared at Julian.

‘I can help you with your career and money problems. I can help you as emphatically as I have helped you with your smoking.’

Gordon was about to agree, but one word particularly had been absorbed as Julian spoke. It had been comprehended and shuffled around unconsciously. It had touched old memories and recalled long forgotten images. His brain had quietly evaluated and weighed all this information in light of the new context. That word now resurfaced urgently to his conscious mind, exclamation marks attached and alarm bells ringing. The word was PACT.

His heart thumped hard for several seconds. Still, he felt a reluctance to rule out the possibility altogether, and so he said, straining to hide any emotion from his voice, ‘Well... can I think about it?’

CHAPTER 8

There was still one more thing to do before his working day was complete. Ewart Hammel's day had been busy, but there was nothing unusual in that. He had spent most of the day calling prospective clients. He knew some considered such a job beneath a person of his standing, but Ewart Hammel didn't feel any compulsion to conform with the thinking of others.

In the early days, they had all had to do it – Brock, Hardy, and he. Jacks-of-all-trades, account executives foremost, copywriting and dreaming up images in the quiet moments in between. No adman at Brock, Hardy & Hammel was a mere copywriter – he had never liked the term; it sounded like a person who was always looking over someone's shoulder for inspiration.

Hammel had never stopped following leads. He had long-ago decided that a call from a partner of the company made a good impression with prospective clients, and that won more business. It required a partner's judgement to decide whether to let slip the names of competitors who were already his clients. A main avenue to new accounts came from just the spread of word by mouth. The fact – which satisfied Ewart Hammel immensely – was that although they were an advertising company, they themselves spent nothing on advertising. They didn't even have a budget for it. They never had. And while Ewart Hammel had a say in it, they never would.

That was something he was careful never to point out to any client.

They didn't even advertise for staff. There was no need. Always there had been a reliable flow of speculative applications. The fancy for working at an advertising agency, he supposed, was one of those widely harboured dreams.

Back in the nineties, they had tried the services of a recruitment agency. That had been a bad idea – not his he was glad to note. The candidates hadn't been more appropriate than the ones they had chosen to interview themselves, and they had been tutored by the agency, which clouded things. Ewart had considered that the recruiter's fees were exorbitant, and they themselves still had to deal with all the speculative applications – you just couldn't afford to leave something like that in the hands of a third party; at all times, it was imperative to leave a good impression; who knew which of those hopefuls might present themselves again in the future, not in search of a career but as potential clients next time?

Not that he believed recruitment agencies didn't provide a valuable service to other companies. He had even hooked one of the biggest as a client.

Ewart Hammel had the office girls pick out candidates for interview when they occasionally had positions to fill. He personally didn't believe it was possible to read very much into a person's CV, nor reasonably compare one candidate against another on the basis of what might be written there. They got too many good applications.

One new office girl had asked him once how she should choose interviewees. Believing rather cynically that it was all a dishonest process of exercising one's prejudices, Ewart Hammel had told her, 'Pick the one that sounds like the one you'd like to date!'

'What if they're all women?' the girl had responded – quite cheekily, Ewart thought; she was very attractive though.

He had simply raised his hands and said, 'Hey, we don't discriminate on sexual preference here.'

The girl blushed profusely in a manner that Ewart found very endearing while her fellows cackled smuttily.

It was at an interview that Ewart Hammel believed he could spot his employees. He knew people. He could recognize whom he needed. It didn't matter what school they had been to, what accent they spoke with, whether they were black, white, or yellow.

What would their work be like? Would they be contented doing it? Those were the only two questions that mattered, the ones he struggled to satisfy himself upon. Everything else could be worked around.

Ewart Hammel had made the decision over perhaps half the people employed in the company. He rarely had cause for regret.

He wondered now about this problem he had left to the end of the day. He consoled himself as he stood up from his desk to pursue this final task. There were no certainties when it came to the taking on of personnel, and therefore it was inevitable, he told himself. It was unavoidable. Occasionally he made a mistake.

§

Gordon left Julian in his office. He found Nerine in reception outside, but she was engaged with a patient. He waited keenly to talk to her.

The patient was giving her a hard time. Gordon gleaned from what he overheard that the patient had come on the wrong day for his appointment. Nerine had explained his mistake to him, but he wasn't satisfied. He didn't think he was the one that had made a mistake, and he was demanding that his appointment be kept. Nerine had explained calmly that the appointment to which he was referring was booked to someone else who had already arrived and was waiting right here in reception. He demanded that she squeeze him in.

Nerine was beginning to be flustered by the man's confrontational attitude. Gordon guessed, with disappointed resignation, that now wouldn't be the best moment to ask her out. He waved to her over the shoulder of the man between them. She saw him, and smiled at him as though hugely relieved to see a friendly face.

Gordon beamed back with the pleasure at how welcome she had made his appearance before her feel. She lifted her hand to her face and gave a little wave, then returned to dealing with the man who seemed determined to continue being difficult.

Gordon left telling himself that he would definitely call to ask her on another date. He had almost forgotten Julian's proposition.

§

Hammel marched across the open-plan office to where he knew the problem lay. One or two noticed his deliberateness and looked up from their desks.

Arriving at his destination, he found the position unoccupied. He turned and surveyed the area around him for his quarry. No sign. He turned back to the desk. There didn't seem to be any signs of activity.

Nothing lay open. No half drunk cups. Well he was tidy, at least.

He looked up again, and more immediately around him. On the next desk, a fellow had his head down and appeared industriously employed. Jameson he thought it was. He turned to him and barked, 'Where's Lissope?'

Jameson looked up immediately. 'I think he's gone.'

'You think?'

'I saw him walk off. He had his briefcase in his hand.'

'When was that?'

Jameson glanced reflexively to the clock on the wall over the way from him and then back to Hammel. 'Er...'

'I see,' said Hammel, reading his expression. 'So it wasn't exactly just five minutes ago?'

Jameson looked uncomfortable.

Hammel turned away without waiting for Jameson to answer. He wasn't going to force him into the awkward position of having to turn telltale on his colleague. He knew all he needed to know. Lissope would keep.

§

Julian peeled the carrots Nerine had assigned to him. They nearly always cooked the evening meal together: she the culinary director; he the proficient lackey – nicely turning the hierarchy of their working day on its head. As his knife slithered under carrot skin, Julian's mind wandered from the menial task and recalled his encounter with Gordon earlier that evening. He had had trouble controlling his anger when Gordon boasted to him about his night out with her. He remembered the strong urge he'd had to grab Gordon by the throat and squeeze with all his strength.

'Gordon told me about your date,' he said, and he heard in his own voice an accusatory sentiment that he wished had remained hidden. He tried to add in a jovial manner, 'It seems you were quite a tease.'

'It's what you wanted, isn't it?' Nerine replied defensively.

Julian continued to prepare vegetables while Nerine measured her ingredients and put them together in a bowl. The two stood elbow-to-elbow in the small kitchen. Both were silent for a while.

Finally Julian answered, 'Yes. The higher you've lifted him, the

further he'll fall... So when are you going to deal the blow?

Nerine huffed. 'Can't I just not see him again?'

Long kitchen-knife in hand, Julian began to dismember the carrots, slamming the blade into the wooden board with each angry chop. What did he expect? Was it any surprise that she didn't have the stomach for the part he wished her to play in his little piece of nastiness?

'Aren't you jealous?' Nerine asked him, and Julian noticed her tone of annoyance.

Of course he was jealous. He hated the thought of Gordon – of any man – drooling lasciviously over his woman. But he thought it unreasonable to express this, seeing that Nerine had only done just as he had asked.

Nerine crumbled the margarine into the flour.

Julian failed to see the slump of her shoulders. He failed to see the sulkiness of her body language. He failed to see that she wanted him to be jealous, wanted him to hold her, and wanted him to reaffirm passionately that she belonged to him, and no one else.

His mind had slipped off elsewhere, drawn away by the agreeable thought of the proposition he had made to Gordon. He would take the bait. How could he resist? He had seen to it that that was virtually inevitable. The seed had been planted. It would grow there unconsciously. And then, Gordon. Then!

Absent-mindedly he replied to Nerine's question. 'No,' he lied.

Nerine's shoulders hardened. She wrung the pastry between her fingers. She didn't look at him, and she clenched with inflamed strength at the mass of dough.

§

Gordon pulled off his tie and flung it. He suddenly felt exhausted. He hadn't managed to ask Nerine out, and Julian's proposition bothered him, skulking in the back of his mind.

He slumped on the bed. There was a bottle of booze on the bedside table.

He hadn't seen that yesterday. He had slipped quietly into the bedroom, not putting on the light, relieved that Helen had been already asleep. He had been happy to avoid guiltily-made explanations.

This morning he had got up early, supposedly to arrive at work first thing, knowing that he would be absconding later to keep his appointment with Julian. But really he knew that his guilty conscience was the real reason. He had risen early to avoid Helen.

If he needed any proof to convince him that this was his real motivation, the fact that he hadn't arrived early for work, but late as usual, provided ample.

With the post, that morning, had been a credit card bill. It was part of his plan that he should tackle his financial situation head-on, and so he opened the letter. It wasn't pleasant reading.

He forgot that he had been just about to leave and went instead to make himself a cup of coffee and absorb the gravity of his financial plight. His coffee extended to a couple of slices of toast. Nevertheless, he had made it out of the door quickly after he heard the first sounds of Helen's stirring.

On the circle line, some idiot had broken their leg at the station ahead, and he had found himself trapped underground between stops for half an hour. It seemed that every day it was something.

And so he had arrived late. As usual.

He reached to pick up the bottle of drink. It was light in his hand. He saw the empty chocolate box on the floor beside. He realized he needn't have worried about waking Helen last night.

He flipped off the cap and took a swig straight from the bottle. He thought he should get out of his work clothes. He got up, unbuttoning his shirt, and walked round the bed to collect his tie. It had landed on a box. Blooming Naughty Bloomers. The box was empty apart from some tissue paper, and it was obviously new. There was a bag too, and it had a credit card receipt in it.

Gordon could tell by the box and the style of the bag that it wouldn't be an inexpensive purchase. He picked up the receipt to confirm his suspicion. The amount shocked him.

He studied the till receipt, disbelieving that the items listed could amount to so much money. Then he realized that the credit card used was their credit card, the one they used for their weekly shop at the supermarket.

Helen, you stupid bitch!

He marched out of the bedroom with the receipt in his hand.

‘What the bloody hell is this?!’ he said holding it out in front of him.

Helen sat slumped in the sofa in front of the TV. She had been there since she had returned from work and was weary from having spent half the day with a hangover. She looked towards Gordon’s out-thrust hand with a sudden dread.

‘Blooming – bloody expensive – Bloomers. Ring any bells?’

Helen looked worried. ‘Oh, look... that was for... oh... well, it’s your fault we didn’t go out last night. You weren’t supposed to find out like this,’ she said unhappily.

‘What’s last night got to do with anything? I just can’t understand how you thought this counted as being careful with money. And on our bloody-fucking, food shopping card as well!’

Helen fumbled for words to express herself, found she could articulate nothing adequate, and broke into tears. She rushed past him in sobs and slammed the bedroom door shut.

Gordon left her to herself and went into the kitchen. Under a work surface was a box that had contained six bottles of twenty-year-old port which he had bought last December just before Christmas. The box had cost him a cool hundred; the bottles were thirty quid each normally. It now seemed like such expenditure had been inordinately decadent. But he couldn’t take them back; waste not want not. He reached down and grabbed one of the remaining bottles and held it out to admire the label.

Glass in one hand and open bottle in the other, he wandered back into the living room, slumped in an armchair and started to drink. He reflected that perhaps it was better never to develop tastes for things beyond humble means. Was that a deplorable thought? It must be bad enough being poor, but it could not be improved any by knowing what one would be missing. He grimaced. There was something despicable contained in that idea. Maybe the only thing he had developed was the lack of grace to expect luxury.

He looked at the bottle in his hand and thought of the money Helen had just blown. I’m the pot calling the kettle black, he thought. What am I going to do?

He fell asleep pondering what Julian had temptingly offered him; and in his dreams, he was seduced by Nerine.

CHAPTER 9

Julian awoke early, the morning sun straining in through the curtains. Nerine lay in the bed beside him but still asleep. He stayed motionless and listened to his heartbeat counting out time – thump, thump, thump, three billion seconds for a lifetime if he was lucky. Three billion – a fantastic number, and yet six billion people were alive on the planet, one billion in China alone. Ungraspable numbers. If he slept through one billion of his seconds, that left two billion seconds waking. Enough to spend perhaps – if it were somehow possible to dedicate a life to such a bizarre task – maybe a moment gazing once upon each Chinese face in the world.

But he had only one face on his mind. His surface thoughts kidded him not that he had awoken thinking about anything other than his last encounter with Gordon Lissope. He replayed the events in his mind in the vivid, dreamlike detail that only first wakefulness can muster.

He savoured his proposal and remembered the willingness he had seen in Gordon's eyes before caution had got the better of him. He knew exactly what had caused his wariness, but he had had to say that word. The possibility of later escape had to remain an illusion.

He smiled and silently congratulated himself on his deftness.



Ewart Hammel was bothered. He was bothered because, through the glass that separated his office from the open-plan one outside, he could see a machine that was working less well than he knew was attainable. He was bothered particularly because this sub-optimal efficiency was down to the unsatisfactory performance of just one component.

This company was small, one he had helped found; every employee counted. Brock, Hardy & Hammel weren't large enough to carry deadwood, especially so in the creative department, the department that was, more than any other, responsible for the quality of the product on which their business depended.

The harmonious growl from the engine room of the business – the rhythmic throb of an engine that should be delivering comfortably at three quarters output – was marred by discordant spluttering, rattling, and bangs that intermittently jarred against his sensibilities. One of his admen was misfiring.

He looked down at the file open on his desk. He remembered that he had approved the employment of this individual. He reviewed the man's record of performance with the company – several years of service he saw.

His induction had gone acceptably. His performance under his mentors had looked promising. Their appraisal of his performance had been encouraging. But his accounts to date appeared only to have been performed adequately. That in itself was not cause for alarm, but his latest work was. Although the account was small, it had been lost. After his final proffering, the client concerned had taken their business elsewhere.

Really there were no small accounts. A small account today could be one of their biggest tomorrow. Many accounts started out as minnows but grew, as the client grew, into big earners for the company.

But if you lost a client, Ewart Hammel knew, chances were, that you wouldn't get that client's business again. The potential had been lost.

Ewart Hammel had asked his secretary Victoria – who had been with the company almost as long as he had – for a printout of the employee's recent attendance recorded by his swipe card. He looked at this now. What he saw displeased him, but it gave him a better picture of the situation – one he thought he recognized. Nearly twenty years managing a team of men and women, who did the same job he had begun his career doing, hadn't taught him nothing.

Of course, such a situation demanded action. It was time for him

to give one of his infamous motivational talks. It was time to give Gordon Lissope a serious ass-chewing.

CHAPTER 10

‘Afternoon, Gordon. Good of you to turn up.’

Gordon glanced at his watch. For a change, he wasn’t really that late today.

‘Funny,’ he replied, smirking at Ronnie Jameson.

Jameson lobbed his pen onto the desk in an exaggerated gesture and spun his chair to face Gordon. ‘Hey, Gordy. Hammel was looking for you last night.’

‘What did he want?’

‘He didn’t say, but he seemed a bit pissed off that you weren’t here.’

Gordon considered Ronnie’s news. ‘Oh shit. What time was that?’

‘Er, I don’t know. About quarter to five, I suppose.’

‘You didn’t tell him what time I left, did you?’

‘Course not. I did tell him that I thought he should sack you, though, and get someone with bigger tits.’

‘*You’re* a tit, Ronnie.’

Jameson chortled.

‘So really, Mister Hammel was in a bad mood when he came looking for me?’

‘Put it this way, Gordon. Severe weather warning – storms ahead,’ Jameson said and turned back to his desk.

‘Really? The shipping forecast said it would be plain sailing,’ Gordon said trying to make light of it. He looked away and sat down, not waiting for Ronnie to reply.

But Jameson’s prognosis caused him to dwell on his predicament. You could not lose a client and it go unnoticed. Of course he was going to have some extra attention for a while, he reassured himself, but that was all it was.

He remembered the claims Julian had made in offering his pact. No, it hadn't come to that yet. He didn't need to get entangled with Julian again, not after all this time. Maybe a decade ago he might have had less resistance.

He tried to get down to some work, but he found bottled water as uninspiring as ever. Buy bottled water because the landfill sites aren't full enough already. Why be environmentally friendly when we can screw everything all the quicker by driving lorry-loads of packaged water from one end of the country to the other. Great slogans. Highland Tarns would be thrilled.

Added to this, the prospect of being subjected to a most-likely brief yet uncomfortable scrutiny by Ewart Hammel loomed over him and made it impossible to concentrate. By midmorning, he wondered if Hammel might not have forgotten – or might yet forget – he had wanted to talk to Gordon. Mr Ewart Hammel was surely a busy person with far more pressing things with which to be concerned.

Unfortunately, Mr Hammel hadn't forgotten.

'I'd like a word, Gordon, in my office.'

Gordon jumped in his seat.

Mr Hammel turned on his heel, having delivered his message, and walked off towards his office. Gordon hastily grabbed his pen and notepad and started to collect together the file which he had spread over his desk. Hammel's tone had been ominous.

He couldn't find the head sheet of Highland's bullet-pointed requirements. He abandoned his flustered gathering. Who was he trying to kid? He didn't need the file because this wasn't going to be about Highland Tarns. It could only be about that other account, the one that had lost them a client. He had known there would be a repercussion of some sort at least. Something had to be coming. He just hoped it wasn't his P45.

§

His eyes scoured the office hungrily. There she was, standing by Julie's desk. He admired her pert curves and her upright posture. She chatted to Julie. She laughed. Oh, that laugh. It tugged at something in him. It was both delicious and unbearable.

She was moving now. His eyes followed her. Her head turned as she walked, and she looked directly at him. Both were caught – her

not expecting to find him staring at her, him not expecting her sudden purposeful glance. In that instant of eye contact, both had given themselves away.

Edmund Leekston felt a rush of pleasure boil under his skin. The glance only lasted a moment. She was heading for the drinks machines.

‘Go, Edmund, go!’ he told himself. He got up and strode hurriedly for the machines. He rushed across third-floor Asset Management, slowing occasionally with his attempts not to draw attention.

And there she was, standing by the coffee machine, waiting for it to fill the cup.

‘Hi, Louise.’

She had been waiting in a daydream. His words seemed to startle her. She looked at him, eyes wide for just a moment. ‘Oh hi, Edmund,’ she said and beamed at him.

He felt charged with electricity as if every hair on his body stood on end. He could smell her perfume. She smelt fantastic. Then he realized, almost in a panic, that his mind was completely blank. He could think of absolutely nothing to say.

Just the two of them, standing by the coffee machine on a floor of about two hundred people. It was all that came to mind, and they *were* alone. ‘You look ravishing today.’

Her face reddened, and her mouth opened to say something. Her eyes flicked sideways over his shoulder. Someone had joined them at the machines.

She turned and bent down to the machine to collect a flimsy cup from the hatch. Edmund couldn’t help being conscious of the rousing backside that was proffered to him as she leant over. Surely she knew how provocative she was being. Straightening, with the rim of her cup clasped in her fingertips, she touched him on the arm with her free hand and said, looking directly into his eyes, ‘It’s all yours.’ And then she rushed off.

Edmund was left motionless for a moment, his ostensible reason for being there forgotten. The guy behind him coughed.

Edmund almost walked away without using the machine, but thought better of it. He got himself a coffee. He pushed his steaming hot, plastic cup up against the sugar dispenser, paused, thought

perhaps he better have three sugars, and pushed up twice more.

He tried to clear his mind of Louise and think as he made his way back to his desk. It took a conscious effort to stop his eyes from hunting the office for her. He almost hoped he wouldn't bump into her – almost. He needed time to think. It would all be so much simpler if he wasn't married.

There had always been an unusual number of eye-catching women who worked on third-floor Asset Management at First Saxony Bank. The department's activities created a large amount of what could loosely be described as office work. First Saxony Bank only hired attractive young office workers, and nearly all of them female. It was a bit of a joke among the senior men. They referred to it as a perk of the job.

Louise Bunty had been just one of the office girls. Edmund couldn't remember how or when she had become so elevated in his awareness. He felt he was losing control. Chasing her across the office – what was he doing? He couldn't concentrate. Pleasurable as he had found it to begin with, it was becoming something of an unwanted distraction. Unproductive thoughts had begun to consume more and more of his day. He had work to do. And he had a wife he loved.

He took a detour from returning directly back to his seat, and picked up one of the office copies of the Yellow Pages. He already knew to which page to turn. All he needed to do was finally to decide to go through with it. He picked up his phone and dialled nine for an outside line.

§

'I tried to explain that you handle problems like his all the time,' Nerine told Julian apologetically. Usually she managed to contain inquiries and save him from what otherwise would be constant interruptions. 'But he insisted that I let him speak to you.'

'OK, Nerine. Put him through.'

'And there's another thing.'

'Yes?'

'He was very disappointed when I told him that you wouldn't be able to see him today.'

Julian realized that the man must have just decided to take the

plunge and wanted to get wet while he was still feeling in a bold mood. 'I see, Nerine. Thank you.'

There was a click as Nerine put the prospective patient through to him. 'Julian Auger. Tell me how I can help you.'

The fellow described his problem. Julian didn't find his concern unusual. People's problems always seemed special to themselves just because the problems were their own – that was natural. He sympathized with this. Experience had taught him, however, that in most problems one was rarely alone – he thought then of his own problem – but there *were* exceptions.

'Let me assure you that your situation is well within my remit... No, you weren't mistaken to think hypnosis could help you... That's right... No... We're very busy... I understand that... What I *can* do is call you first if we have any late cancellations... OK... That's quite all right... Not at all. Goodbye.'

Julian put down the phone, having transferred the call back to reception. He picked up his pen and sucked at it thoughtfully. He could be the one, he reflected. He would do just fine.

His suggestion was doing its quiet work on Gordon. He wondered how long he would have to wait for him to fold to the temptation.

§

Gordon left Ewart Hammel's office. His face had drained of all colour. He wandered feebly over to his seat and dumped himself there. Jameson opened his mouth to say something, no doubt with some witty crack in mind, but he must have judged that Gordon wasn't in a receptive mood because his mouth closed again, and he submerged back into his work.

Just as well because Gordon might have snapped angrily and told him to fuck off, and Jameson didn't deserve that, not at all. He stared bleakly at the cactus in the small pot on his desk, and poked a finger against the prickles. He had thought he could rein things back under control. He had been deluding himself, surely. He was in it up to his neck. The debts, his stupid fat girlfriend, and now this.

An idea had formed in his mind as he walked to his desk, and it had only grown larger, unchallenged by the usual objections. Surrounded by darkness, the light offered from that door made it appear all-the-more the obvious exit.

He had been offered a way out. Screw his misgivings about getting mixed up with him again. It couldn't be worse than this. He picked up the phone and rang Julian Auger.

§

The elderly lady finally tottered out of his office. He had treated her for insomnia, and afterwards she had kept him chatting longer than he would have liked. No sooner had he sunk down into his chair with a sigh, the phone on his desk started to ring directly from its rarely-used outside line. He picked it up without thinking, and the voice he heard on the other end surprised him even though there were only two other people he had given that exclusive number to. For obvious reasons, one of those was Nerine, and the other he couldn't imagine for what reason she might want to call him.

But who said instinctive reactions had to be rational?

So quick? Gordon could hardly have called any sooner. He glanced anxiously towards the door which the old dear had pulled to behind her. With luck Nerine would notice his line had become engaged before she sent in the next patient, or maybe the lady's loquacity would claim its next victim before she could do so. It would have been nice to have a moment to prepare mentally. No matter, he thought and felt a stab of pleasure. He was ready.

'How can I help you, Gordon?' he asked, but he had little doubt over the purpose of Gordon's call. Still, he would enjoy hearing him say it.

'About the other day, Julian.'

'Yes?'

'You said you could help me with my career.'

'I did. You'll be surprised at the power of hypnosis.'

'And you said you'd help me with my debts as well.'

'Absolutely.'

'And I don't have to pay.'

The conditions of the agreement weren't negotiable. Julian wanted to dispel any notion that this may be other than the case. He adopted a stern tone. 'You know my terms, Gordon. I made them very clear.'

He thought to himself, enjoying the dissimulation, he had done no such thing. Rather, he had made it perfectly clear that his terms would remain *unclear*.

‘Well, I’ve been thinking it over.’

‘Do you accept my...’ he chose his words carefully; he had been going to say pact ‘...proposal?’ He listened to silence from the other end of the line.

He imagined he had pulled a lever and could hear Gordon’s mind whirring like the fruited reels of a slot-machine, one that only ever paid out. Then Gordon replied.

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’ Julian balled the fist of his free hand. Strike while the iron’s hot, he told himself. It would be better not to leave Gordon with time to have second thoughts. ‘What time are you leaving work tonight?’

‘Er... half five.’

‘OK. Come straight from work to my surgery.’

‘You want to start today?’

The noose pulls tight quickly, doesn’t it, Gordon. ‘I’m not playing games here! Why do today what you can put off till tomorrow – is that it, Gordon?’ He feigned the irritation in his voice. ‘Are you *in* or out?’

‘I’m in.’

‘Excellent, Gordon. Come here straight from work, remember.’

‘OK... I’ll see you later.’

‘OK, bye.’

Julian hung up and sunk back in his chair. He tapped a pen into the palm of one hand. His eyes were distant and a smug expression hung on his face.

He lurched forward and grabbed the phone. ‘Nerine, call up that infatuation case and tell him I’ll see him tonight... Yes, him... Tonight, seven o’clock.’

CHAPTER 11

Gordon thought Julian was looking at him strangely. He stared into him in a most uncomfortable manner. He appeared to be weighing him as if trying to decide upon something.

Gordon cast his eyes down, recoiling from Julian's oppressive attention, and his mind wandered. Today, once again, he had left work before the office had really begun to empty. He always felt guilty doing that, whether he had put in a full day's work or not. As usual, people had watched him go. 'We are still here; you should be too,' their glances would seem to accuse. 'Part-timer!'

He had been looking forward to seeing Nerine again, but he'd had chance to say barely a word to her. She had smiled as if pleased to see him but had waved him through, explaining that Julian was anxious that he go straight in. So what was the delay now? Was it indecision? He could have been flirting with Nerine instead of being scowled at by this dour man.

'This pact, Julian, what do you want me to do?'

Julian awoke from his reverie. 'Don't worry, Gordon. It's nothing nefarious.' The decision had apparently been made. 'It's nothing you won't be able to do. In fact, I suspect you'll rather enjoy it.'

Enjoy it? Had he actually ever told Julian he enjoyed his work? He didn't think so. He wasn't even sure it was true. Work was just work. Still it had to be that. What else did he have to offer? Nevertheless there was a nagging doubt. What if it was... He didn't complete the thought; instead he asked, 'You want me to come up with an advertising campaign?'

'What?' Julian looked at him, puzzled.

‘For your practice here.’

‘What? No!’ His face darkened. Then he said, ‘You’re way off track,’ and threw his head back in a great roar of laughter.

Gordon thought that he should laugh too but found it difficult because he had been struck with a very uneasy feeling. Had the nature of this arrangement shifted somehow? If it had, he didn’t know how it had happened.

Julian seemed to read his expression and let rip another roar. He collected himself quickly. ‘A pact’s a pact. You don’t want to back out now, do you, Gordon?’ he goaded.

‘No,’ Gordon replied automatically, and immediately felt a deep suspicion he had made a mistake. Julian’s words had awoken some buried memory. A pact’s a pact. Oh, no, not again.

‘Where to begin?’ Julian was saying. He had joined his hands, as if in prayer, and was rubbing them up and down on his chin, touching their steeple to his nose. ‘You’ll have to indulge me,’ he said and looked at Gordon for consent.

Gordon smiled weakly. What had he been doing so far?

‘I want to talk to you about hypnotism.’

‘OK,’ Gordon agreed. He was forgetting his unease, and something about Julian’s manner aroused his curiosity. Where was Julian going with this? Why did he want to talk to him about hypnotism?

‘What do you think hypnotism is, Gordon?’

‘Well...’ he began hazily, then he realized Julian expected his best answer. ‘It’s some sort of altered state of conscious. A hypnotist can sort of program the person he’s hypnotizing...’ Gordon looked at Julian for approval but, seeing no reaction, continued anyway, ‘...to do things or believe things that the hypnotist tells him to.’ He waited.

‘That’s pretty much what I thought you’d say.’

‘And it’s right, isn’t it,’ Gordon said, feeling pleased with himself.

Julian looked at him, holding eye contact. ‘No. It’s wrong. It’s what nearly everybody believes, but it’s wrong.’

Gordon shrugged helplessly. He couldn’t argue. Julian must know what he was talking about.

‘But, Gordon, you know more about hypnotism than you realize.’

‘I don’t think I do, Julian.’

‘Haven’t you ever wondered about the influence your adverts have on people?’

‘Yeah, of course but –’

‘Haven’t you ever thought it’s a bit like hypnotizing them? You tell them what they want. They go and buy it as though, somehow, just telling them what they want has made it true.’

‘Well, I suppose I have, but it isn’t actually hypnotism, is it.’

‘Not by the definition you have just given me. But then hypnotism isn’t actually hypnotism either – by that definition.’

‘I don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me.’

‘Suggestion!’

‘Suggestion?’

‘Suggestion is the common element to advertising manipulation and hypnotism.’

‘But all suggestions aren’t hypnotism.’

Julian’s face became animated. ‘Just think about that, Gordon. Think very carefully. Perhaps they are. Perhaps it’s all just a matter of degree!’

‘But that would mean...’ Gordon’s face screwed up as he considered the possibility. Julian allowed him to think. ‘No, that’s crazy, Julian.’

‘The question isn’t what suggestions influence us. The question should be, are there any that don’t? We are all incredibly influenced by everything around us. The only uncertainty is about the effect it will have.’

Gordon was listening. Julian decided to spell it out.

‘Will the effect of the influence be that the shopper buys your brand of aftershave, or just that he goes and buys any aftershave?’

Gordon felt on familiar ground. This was just what his clients always wanted to know.

‘I’m going to tell you something now, Gordon. So listen! Hypnotism doesn’t just use suggestion. It is, itself, a suggestion!’

‘Hypnotism is a suggestion?’

Julian began to pace around the room. ‘There’s no change in the state of consciousness. If a subject is connected to a brain scanner while he is induced into hypnotic trance, no change whatsoever in brain function can be observed. The brainwaves don’t change.

‘I suggest to you that there is such a thing as hypnosis, and that if I hypnotize you, I will be able to change your behaviour and thoughts. In effect I suggest that you will be particularly susceptible to my suggestions.

Julian returned to his perch, leaning there against the desk in front of Gordon. ‘But you are susceptible to all suggestions anyway. It’s just a matter of degree.’

Gordon looked pained. ‘It just doesn’t sound right. There must be something more. We’re not all so easily influenced.’

‘Do you consider yourself to be fashionable?’

‘Of course. I think so.’

‘Just consider what that means, Gordon. Think what you are actually saying about yourself.’

Gordon frowned.

‘Of all the jokes you’ve ever told, how many did you make up?’

‘Well, roughly... about none.’

‘Doesn’t it seem to create the illusion that your own thought isn’t necessary?’

‘Maybe. Only in that particular instance.’

‘But that the attitude exists at all makes us receptive.’

‘Receptive – what, willing to listen? That’s just being open-minded, Julian.’

‘Do you listen to the weather forecast?’

‘Yes... Why?’

‘Have you ever heard them apologize for getting it wrong?’

‘Never.’

‘And why do you suppose?’

Gordon pondered this for a moment and wondered why indeed with some indignation. His eyes shot wide with a sudden feeling of revelation. ‘Because it would undermine the suggestion that they actually can predict the weather,’ he said excitedly.

‘Which of course they can’t because it’s a chaotic system,’ Auger agreed, ‘unpredictable in all but the most straightforward circumstances.’

Gordon found himself looking at Julian curiously. He reflected that this man before him was very much the same as the adolescent he remembered, but there were differences. It was still Julian, but

more so – he hadn't tamed at all with age. Surely he didn't believe now that all weather forecasting was some kind of big conspiracy.

'This has been very enlightening...' enlightening about Julian's state of mental welfare, he thought '...but why are you telling me all this?'

Julian smiled at him, apparently enjoying the moment. 'Because I want *you* to hypnotize my next patient.'

CHAPTER 12

Edmund Leekston ascended the stairs of the Regent's Park tube station and, emerging at the pavement, glanced at his watch. He saw that he had time to spare. The sun was still bright but without the heat. Regent's Park was close by. A lovely summer's evening beckoned – just right for a stroll to kill some time, but not too much; he wouldn't allow himself to become late. Tardiness wouldn't do him justice at all. In Edmund Leekston's mind, if he wasn't capable of being punctual himself, he had no right to be allowed to organize or order the lives of others.

Edmund Leekston watched the people as he strolled through the park, particularly the younger women. Their flowing dresses, their light and revealing summer garbs, gratified his appreciative eyes. A dependable seasonal treat – they must know it themselves.

They could be late, he reflected, at least socially. It must be a unconscious sexual signal – dizzy, disorganized, in need of a potent man to take the reins. It probably worked too, he thought with chagrin. God, Mary would skin him if he tried to suggest such an idea to her. Then again, would he have it any other way? *Vive la différence*. Ah, oui, he chuckled, not all her effort on him had been wasted. Thank God for the women in his life.

His thoughts reverted to Louise. Always Louise. He wondered if Louise arrived very late for dates with men. Perhaps she didn't have any. Perhaps she only had eyes for him. *Oh* and she'd be worth the wait.

She had watched him when he left the office. He had seen the surprise on her face: Edmund Leekston leaving before six – unheard of. He wondered what she would have thought if she had known

why; would she be disappointed? Because today he hadn't left to go home to his wife and dinner waiting in the oven. Today he had an unusual appointment to keep.

Edmund Leekston glanced down at his watch again and decided to turn about. He had been told by the receptionist, who sounded very nice on the phone, that his was the last appointment of the day. It was completely possible they had fallen behind with a day's accumulated overruns and late arrivals, but perhaps they hadn't. They might be waiting for him even now.

He crossed the Marylebone Road at a set of lights and set off down Harley Street. He kept on walking until he found the side street he was looking for. Not quite Harley Street, he reflected, but definitely a hanger-on. Still, the treatment wasn't going to be cheap. The expense had caused him to hesitate. He had decided to tell Mary, if only to account for the expenditure, but he didn't tell her the real reason why he was going. He said he hoped it could help him feel more satisfied at work. His wife's reply had surprised him. She said that she had noticed lately that he didn't seem happy about work, and that *she* hoped it would help him too. He had been so absorbed in his own plight; it hadn't occurred to him that his wife might have noticed his misery. It wasn't fair that she suffered. The thought only stiffened his resolve.

The door in front of him had a brass plaque by it. There was no doubt that he had the right place, but it was very low-key. He checked his watch. 'Perfectly judged,' he thought with smug self-satisfaction.

He took a deep breath and marched up the steps into the hypnotist's.

§

'What!' Gordon shouted at Julian. His heart pounded rapidly. He hoped to seek out some sign on Julian's face that he was joking. He found nothing. 'You cannot be serious!'

Julian waved his hand in conciliation. 'First things first. I've got to hypnotize you to give you your treatment. I think you'll find yourself more relaxed, more sanguine about the whole thing afterwards.'

Gordon calmed, distracted from his objections by a different concern. 'You think it will still work after everything you've told me?'

Auger gave him a pitying look. 'Knowing the illusion doesn't necessarily break the illusion. In fact, some illusions are inescapable.'

Gordon was just about to ask him about this, but found himself being motioned to sit down. He realized that he still had his case in his hand and awkwardly discarded it on the floor beside the chair. No wonder Helen made fun of him about it. He had grown far too attached to that briefcase.

'Besides,' Julian was adding as an afterthought, 'you don't think I've told you everything there is to know about hypnotism already, do you?' But he didn't wait for him to answer.

Gordon found himself once again slipping under the hypnotist's spell.

§

Julian gazed at Gordon and observed his tranquil state. His eyes were closed lightly. His breathing was regular and deep. His defences were down.

And the temptation existed again. He recognized it when it arrived. He had expected it. He knew how it would taste. It seemed to beckon to him insistently. Take a bite. Take a bite!

There was a pleasure to be had from denying the urge. He would have his revenge on Gordon, but there were rules to be obeyed – his rules.

Strictly speaking, Gordon was no longer a patient – or rather, his conduct with Gordon didn't conform to any allowed mode – but he still had principles about the purposes to which he allowed himself to put his hypnotic powers. Whether Gordon was now a patient or not, those principles held.

He swallowed with shame and some regret. Who was he trying to kid? He knew that even those principles he would violate in the end.

But not today. Today, at least that core of integrity would remain intact. Today, he would be helping Gordon yet again.

So, Gordon wanted help with his career. Perhaps he even needed help to avoid the sack, as he claimed. But Gordon worked for that traitorous enemy of the public. By making Gordon more proficient, he would be honing a wheel in the advertising machine, increasing the strength of what he despised, he thought bitterly. But then it would prove that he was still a professional. It would prove he still

deserved the esteem in which he held himself. He would subjugate his most immediate interest in the matter, despite how nauseating it felt to concede anything to that Goliath. He had the self-discipline, even though it would irk him to do so, to help Gordon become a more successful employee in the advertising industry.

The pride in his profession transformed the task in his mind. It was now just an intellectual challenge, a test of his skill. He thought about the subject, detached of his own emotions on the matter. He thought about Gordon's job. It was a creative one. He had it then, and the answer crystallized in his mind in the form of an aphorism he recalled. Creation is an act of faith.

'Gordon, do you play the Lottery?'

Gordon continued to breathe slowly. It seemed he wasn't going to answer, then, 'Yes,' he said.

'Why do you play?'

'Because it's a bit of fun.'

Gordon's answer agitated him slightly, and he expelled his breath heavily through his nose. 'No. Why do you really play?'

'Because I want to win millions.'

'And do you think you will win?'

'Somebody has to.'

'Do you think you will win?'

'I could.'

'Hope springs eternal,' ...*though the odds be infernal*. He regretted how often he saw precisely this sort of incongruity. People were prepared to put such hopes on such a pitifully slim chance – worse, a random chance over which they could exert no influence. Yet it received their faith out of all proportion. The real cause for regret was that so many were unwilling to vest any of that abundant faith in themselves.

In themselves – exactly where they had the greatest influence, the greatest control over events; exactly where the value of a bit of faith could be most greatly leveraged. Why did they squander their faith uselessly while leaving themselves bankrupt?

'Rationally you know the odds are utterly against you?'

'Yes.'

'But you have faith.'

‘Yes.’

‘Even though you realize it’s undeserved.’

‘It could be me.’

‘Gordon, I want you to take some of that feeling, that inescapable belief – that somehow, just somehow, despite what you know to the contrary, you could still win – and apply it to yourself. You will dare to hope for yourself. You will have faith.’

Now, what was it Gordon had called himself? Oh yes. ‘The best ever ad executive is inside you somewhere. You will believe it. You will feel it in your skin, and no number of losing tickets will be able to take that faith away.’

Julian reflected on the truth. Only one person could ever be the best. That left an awful lot of also-rans. But that didn’t matter. Although it seemed to matter the most – to be the best, to win – somehow it really didn’t, somehow it missed the point. If only everybody could be king for a day, then they would know how quickly the honour fades.

Life was an incommensurate lottery. No sure things unless you cheated. Self-belief never guaranteed a win. Hard work alone seldom paid. While some tickets you got for nothing, others cost a lifetime’s ambition. Losing tickets abounded. There were tickets worth obtaining whether they won or not. Others were worthless. And the reality was envy from all sides for a prize only the winner discovered didn’t live up to the dream, yet that remained paradoxically difficult to give up.

Gordon would be good enough.

Julian glanced at his watch. Leekston would arrive shortly. Time remained for one last thing before he brought Gordon round.

‘You will take what follows in your stride.’

‘I will take it in my stride.’

‘My relaxed manner will inspire your confidence.’

‘Yes.’

‘You will act, but the burden of responsibility will be mine.’ He brought him out of the trance, accompanied with a playful slap on the cheek.

Gordon blinked a few times and sat up, massaging his cheeks in his palms.

‘Now listen carefully, Gordon. My next patient, Mister Edmund Leekston, will be here soon. Just follow my lead. When we’re ready to hypnotize him, we’ll use this.’ Julian raised one pointed finger and led himself by it as he walked to the sideboard by the door. There he squatted on his haunches and opened some cupboard doors. He delved in and came out clutching what looked something like a slide projector. He walked back over to his desk where he placed it carefully, looking over his shoulder to align it with the patient’s chair. Then he plugged it in.

‘What does it do?’ Gordon asked.

Julian flicked a switch. On a bare piece of wall behind him, different coloured circles appeared and began to swirl. Julian slowly twisted a knob, and they began to swirl faster. ‘See?’

‘They’re rather faint aren’t they?’

‘Yes, because I haven’t drawn the blinds. When we hypnotize Mister Leekston, I’ll draw the blinds for you; you switch on the machine.’

‘Is that all I have to do?’

‘No. You’re going to put him into a hypnotic trance. You have to get his attention. Make sure his mind isn’t on anything else that could be distracting him. Get his total attention. The spiral-graphic mesmerizer will help you to do that,’ Julian said pointing at the device on the desk. ‘Suggestion will do the rest.’

Gordon nodded. He found himself strangely untroubled by what Julian was asking of him. The absence left room for another emotion, and his hands started to fidget excitedly. He was about to ask what he should do once he had the patient under hypnosis, when there was a knock at the door.

‘Yes,’ Julian called.

Nerine’s head poked around the door. ‘Mister Leekston’s here.’

‘Good. Show him in please, Nerine.’

‘But...’ Nerine looked unsurely towards Gordon.

‘Just show him in please, Nerine,’ Julian said patiently.

Nerine huffed and disappeared, reappearing a moment later with Mr Leekston. ‘Mister Leekston,’ she said gesturing. ‘This is Julian Auger, the practising hypnotist here,’ then she turned to Gordon, ‘and this is...’

‘...Doctor Lissope,’ Julian finished for her, ‘a colleague of mine, a very esteemed colleague in the profession.’

Gordon swallowed hard.

‘Thank you, Nerine. You may leave us now.’ Having pointedly watched Nerine leave, Julian smiled at Leekston and gestured to the chair before the device.

Leekston sat.

‘Now tell me how we can help you.’ Then by way of explanation he added, ‘Er... for my colleague’s benefit as much as my own.’

‘Of course,’ Leekston said and glanced at Gordon, though Gordon was pleased to see his attention quickly fixed on Julian. ‘The problem I have is with a girl at the office where I work.’

‘Yes,’ said Julian. ‘I believe she’s become an unwanted distraction for you.’

‘Er... unwanted... yes.’

Julian listened. In seven years as a practising hypnotist, he had heard all sorts of things from his patients. Very little surprised him now. He had heard this sort of thing before.

He rehearsed in his mind what he would say to Leekston. Would he just tell him that Doctor Lissope would be performing the hypnosis? No, he couldn’t do that, he thought. He would have to ask the patient for his permission. There was nothing wrong with that – apprentices had to learn somehow. But if Leekston agreed, he would be agreeing to be hypnotized by an esteemed doctor in the profession, not by Gordon Lissope, ad agency employee.

That was unavoidable, but Leekston could still refuse. What if he said he preferred to be hypnotized by him, Auger, rather than by his visiting colleague, however highly recommended he came – no offence intended to Doctor Lissope? He would have to respect his wishes then, and his plan would be in tatters. It would take time to recreate this situation with another patient. Gordon would have time to think. He would have time to get suspicious. He could back out of the pact.

It was all thrown to fate now, Julian realized. So be it. Let Leekston decide Gordon’s fate. Perhaps Gordon would escape on the whim of a patient who played an unwitting part in deciding his destiny.

His bubble of deluded resignation lasted barely a moment before bursting in his face. He needed Gordon. There was no one else. He couldn't allow himself to be denied by Leekston. Yes, he would ask his permission, but the question would be loaded in his favour. He would bring to bear all his wily powers of influence. Leekston had to say yes.

§

Gordon listened as the patient related to Julian the trouble he was having at work. He saw that he was embarrassed to talk about it. Gordon only half listened as the patient bewailed his predicament – it was clear he had a bad case of infatuation, the poor sod. The other half of him wondered why Julian seemed so keen for him to hypnotize Leekston. Nerine had complained to him that Julian was uptight about his hypnotism, about his professional standards. So what was this? Introducing an impostor to his patient and then even worse, having him practice on that patient. Julian had to have a very good reason to cause him to ignore such breaches of his principles.

What was all this about? He was getting more and more involved with Julian, getting closer and closer. That meant he was getting closer and closer to... other things. But he couldn't deny he was excited. Was he really going to hypnotize somebody? He was intrigued. He would go along with Julian for now. He could back out of the pact later if he had to.

He realized both Julian and the patient were looking at him. Julian was saying, '...so really we're very lucky to have him here. Not to mention he's one of the world's leading experts in neurypnology. I am very keen to observe his technique, of course.'

'Doctor Lissope has a very exclusive clientele, and a very long waiting list. You would be unlikely to have such an opportunity again, and certainly not at my fees.'

'I hope Doctor Lissope doesn't mind my putting it this way – when I say exclusive clientele, I mean they're rich, very rich.'

'No, I don't mind,' Gordon smiled weakly. They seemed to expect him to say more. He had to fit into the role. 'Granted my clientele are very well off. Some of them are famous too.' Should he drop some names? He had a brainwave. 'Of course I can't mention any names. Patient confidentiality is sacrosanct.'

Julian saw with pleasure the effect that Lissope's statement had on Edmund Leekston. That had clinched it.

'I have no objections,' said Mr Leekston.

'Good,' said Julian. *Thank you, Gordon, for putting a nail in your own coffin.* Julian looked at Gordon. 'If you're ready to begin, Doctor Lissope, I'll get the blinds for you.'

'Yes, thank you.' Gordon realized he had been given the stage. He placed himself by the machine on the desk. The room darkened. 'Ready, Mister Leekston?'

'Yes.'

'Please look at the wall behind me,' he said and switched on the machine. Behind him, intense different-coloured circles of light appeared and began to drift slowly.

'Focus on the circles of light. Concentrate on my voice.' Gordon turned the knob slightly, and the circles of light moved more quickly, tracing arcs. He focused on Mr Leekston's rapt expression. He didn't see Julian creeping away from the window, through the shadows, and around by the back of the patient.

Gordon turned the knob still further. The coloured circles were swirling quickly now. Mr Leekston's attention was fixed. 'Your eyelids are feeling heavy – so heavy you don't feel you can keep them open.'

Gordon saw his patient's eyelids begin to droop and was encouraged. 'You will not be able to keep your eyes open much longer. By the time they close, you will be completely hypnotized.' If Leekston wasn't, he thought, surely Julian would come to his rescue.

Get his attention, Julian had said. Suggestion will do the rest. It was obvious he had Leekston's attention. He could see that the suggestion was having an effect. The patient's eyelids appeared to grow steadily heavier.

He watched Mr Leekston's eyes close fully. He wondered, 'What now?' and jumped as he felt a tap on his shoulder.

'You did it,' came Julian's hushed voice from close by. 'He's under.'

Gordon felt a flush of euphoria. He'd done it! Had he really done it?

CHAPTER 13

Julian walked quietly over to the window and let in the summer evening sun. Gordon wondered whether he should turn off the machine. He didn't. Even the quiet hum that it made was entrancing.

'I'll give him his treatment now,' Julian said, 'then you can bring him back out of hypnosis.' Seeing on Gordon's face that Gordon had thought that his work was over, he added, 'That's the easy part!'

Gordon – Doctor Gordon Lissape – nodded. Of course he knew that. He *was* an esteemed expert after all. He looked on as his colleague picked up the old wooden chair and placed it next to the patient.

Auger sat down and began. 'Edmund... Edmund, are you listening to me?'

'Yes,' the subject replied. His voice was not loud, but it had sounded booming in the quiet of the room, and it made Gordon jump.

'You won't think about this girl any more.'

'No.'

'You won't look at her, and you won't...' Julian droned on in his hypnotic monotone.

So this was the treatment, Gordon thought. Instructions or suggestions or whatever. This was how Julian had enabled him to give up smoking. Julian had presumably just told him it would be so, suggested it to him. He had known that it had had to be something just like this, but that hadn't stopped him from suspecting that somehow there might have been more to it.

He remembered what Julian had alleged about the manipulating effect of advertising. What if he could suggest, in his adverts, with

this kind of effectiveness? He supposed it might be possible with the medium of TV to choose an audio-visual combination maximized for its entrancing effect. A devious finesse could be brought to bear rather than the usual gauche stand-by of bluntly raising the volume. He could use these mesmerizing techniques to increase the viewers' receptiveness to any suggestions the advertiser was making. Buy this car! Drink this brand of beer! Place your advertising accounts with Brock, Hardy & Hammell!

'That ought to do it,' Julian was saying to him. 'You can bring him round now.'

Gordon took his cue and stepped forward. 'In a moment I'm going to wake you from the hypnosis. You will open your eyes and feel completely refreshed.'

'On the count of three, you will wake up. One, two... three!'

Gordon heard a faint click and saw that Mr Leekston had opened his eyes. Gordon smiled at Leekston and turned around to face Julian. The swirling, multicoloured pattern had vanished from the wall; he realized that Julian must have turned it off for him.

Julian's attention, however, had already been attracted by an expectant glance from Edmund Leekston. 'That's all for today, Mister Leekston,' he was saying to him warmly. 'Make another appointment with Nerine, and we'll appraise your progress next time.'

'Thank you, Mister Auger, I will. And thank you, Doctor Lissope,' Mr Leekston said and got up.

'Not at all,' Gordon said. 'It's been a pleasure.'

Julian walked around them both to get the door for Edmund Leekston.

§

Nerine sulked at the thought of what was transpiring on the other side of that door. How many times had she begged Julian for exactly the thing he now seemed to extend so freely to his old school-chum Gordon Lissope. Julian was a hypocrite. It was so unfair; what reason did Gordon have to be present while Julian consulted a client? Absolutely none that she could think of.

She at least knew something about hypnotism. She didn't have Julian's experience but, well... she had hypnotized Gordon, hadn't

she? And for how many years had she been Julian's receptionist, dealing with the patients in her own restricted way. She had earned the chance if anyone had.

Doctor Lissope indeed! Gordon was in that room under false pretences. Julian could get struck off. Did hypnotist's get struck off? She sniggered at this thought. Hypnotists had hardly yet gained a reputable image with the majority of the public. Membership of the association, she knew, didn't require the Hippocratic oath to be taken. Removal from its lists couldn't stop any person from practising. Despite some attempts to create an authoritative body, so far it had remained without teeth.

So much then for all Julian's high pretensions about his professional code of conduct. There was no way that introducing one patient to another as a professional hypnotist could be regarded as proper conduct.

She had watched resentfully as the door was pushed closed from the inside, making her feeling of exclusion from the proceedings complete. Everything of interest was occurring without, it seemed, her presence being required. As she passed the time alone in reception, it grew more certain in her mind that Julian was going to perform the hypnotism in front of Gordon. She watched the door and willed Gordon to come out. But Gordon wasn't coming out, neither was the patient, and too much time already had passed. She burned with envy. She tried to distract herself from the source of her frustration and could find nothing in the reception that was up to the task. Julian had performed a hypnosis; she knew it with a resigned certainty. For the first time that she knew of, Julian was not seeing his patient alone in that mysterious room; there had been an onlooker, she thought with bitterness, and it wasn't her.

She looked desolately down at her desk and was aroused by the sound of the door opening. Julian and Mr Leekston were coming out. She forced herself to wear a welcoming smile. She doubted she had made a convincing effort, but they smiled back.

Were they smiling or leering? She thought, 'Am I just a pretty face?' She didn't think Julian appreciated her the way she deserved.



Gordon, finding himself alone, walked around Julian's desk and

slumped in Julian's chair with a heavy sigh. This had turned out to be quite an evening.

The voices outside were murmurs.

Julian's chair was the swivel type, but one of the deep leather reclining kind, the inordinately expensive kind. Gordon pulled the chair out of the reclined position as he strained forward attempting to make out the words in the voices. He found himself unable to distinguish anything, and his eyes dropped, falling on what now lay directly below his nose – the drawers in Julian's desk.

Gordon wondered what a hypnotist kept in his desk – assorted hypnotic gadgets perhaps. A remembered image flashed into his mind. He hadn't really thought about it at the time. There had been more immediate things occupying him. Uppermost had been the shock of coming so unexpectedly face-to-face with Julian. Then there was his general anxiety about the whole prospect of hypnosis. Now that he had time to reflect upon it, what *had* he seen Julian stuff hurriedly into this drawer?

It dawned on him then suddenly what that dark, heavy object resembled. But it couldn't be that, could it? Maybe it was one of those novelty cigarette lighters. You pull the trigger and... But then why had he hidden it away so hastily?!

He thought about prying. He glanced towards the door, and still he could hear the mumbling of voices outside. No one was about to come in and catch him red-handed.

He glanced back down at the drawers. His hand lifted towards the drawer and wavered. What if he was right? He was afraid to have his suspicion confirmed. If Julian did have that in his drawer, to be caught snooping would be so much worse. He was being silly. He must be mistaken. Surely he hadn't seen a gun.

He heard a noise outside. Or thought he did. His eyes shot towards the door. Then, inexplicably, he remembered something. Somehow his mind seized upon it, happy to be distracted. He spun his chair around to the bookcase behind the desk.

Its span exceeded that of the desk, which was large, by several feet at either end. It was filled with rum-looking tomes. The spine of one simply read *Psychology* in large crimson letters. He read the spines of a few others, whose titles were all obscure, and gave up with

boredom. Instead his eyes flicked across the shelves. Where was that book?

His eyes homed in on it quickly, white spine with gold lettering, Martial Arts. He plucked it from the shelf and opened it in the middle. A book of that size, he reasoned, was sure to be illustrated. It was sure to have plenty of large colour photographs. You really needed to see the positions. He wasn't disappointed in that respect. The shots were large and well taken. They weren't of the kata he had in mind, but they certainly illustrated techniques.

He flipped back over to the front cover. Was he dyslexic? Of course, it had been on its side when he read it. He had seen what he wanted to see. *Marital Arts*, it said, although it obviously only had one aspect of marriage in mind. It was a sex manual.

He began to flick through its pages again. There were no pencilled drawings of bearded, hairy men in this book. Neither were the photographs all of the same couple. And all the models were fit!

He turned to the front to look at the contents, but instead his attention was caught by what someone had scrawled in biro on the title page. *In sex the selfish genes, give pleasure by their basest means*. Curious. Gordon closed the book and put it back. It seemed an odd book to choose to keep on display in one's office.

Julian walked back in then. 'I hope I didn't keep you waiting.'

'No. I had a look along your bookcase.'

'Ah yes, books...' Julian said and grasped his chin in his hand. He considered Gordon and massaged his chin. 'I want to give you a book to read.'

Gordon felt an internal groan. The thought of the dusty old doorstops behind him didn't kindle any excitement. Did Julian really expect him to read one of them? Perhaps if it was the *Marital Arts*, he could bear to read it – for educational purposes.

Julian read his expression and said, 'Don't worry. I think you'll find this one interesting.'

Gordon wasn't relieved. Didn't people always think that before they thrust some dreadful book on you. He was a busy man, a man with a career on the rocks. He didn't have time to read stuffy treatises the size of the phone book.

Julian walked around the desk and pulled out a book – a slim one

Gordon saw with relief – from somewhere on the shelf behind him. He didn't see from where. Julian just seemed to produce it like some act of magician's trickery. He hadn't believed there was a book that weighed less than a kilo on the entire bookcase.

He handed it to Gordon.

'Maximilian Forslagg,' Gordon read aloud from the cover. 'The Mesmerization of the Human Mind.' Gordon looked at the rather uninspiring cover, which bore just the title and its author. 'It sounds thrilling.'

'Don't judge a book by its cover.'

'What should I judge it by then?' Gordon responded sulkily.

'By what it says, Gordon, you imbecile!'

'Or by the pictures,' Gordon mocked craftily.

Julian ignored him. 'In case you haven't realized, it's about hypnotism.'

'Well what else? I don't suppose you've got any books on Kung Fu?'

'It's true. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.'

'But you obviously think you've led me to some fine oasis, but to me it seems like I'm looking at some muddy ditch-water.'

'Why don't you taste it then?'

'Have you read it?'

'Of course.'

'Really?'

'Well... I admit I often slip into speed-reading if my interest flags. So I won't deny that there's at least a possibility, however slim, that there are bits I should reread. But, you see, there are other parts that I have read many times.'

'It sounds like the Bible. Everybody says they've read parts of it.'

Julian snapped impatiently, 'Religion is for the unevolved.'

'Have you read the Bible, Julian?' Gordon goaded him irritatingly, but the hypnotist replied calmly with a question of his own.

'Have you ever been to court?'

Gordon was thrown into wondering what possible connection there could be between his question and Julian's. He simply replied with a bewildered, 'No.'

‘Are you familiar with the image of a witness placing his hand on the Bible and swearing to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help him, God.’

‘Yes.’

‘Does such a thing actually take place in court?’

‘Why shouldn’t it?’ Gordon wondered.

‘In the Bible – not too far from the beginning, the first book in fact, Matthew, chapter five – it says never make oaths or swear to anything at all; only ever give your word. And, so that any reader could hardly miss it, it says the same thing again in the book of James. Now...’ Julian’s eyes glazed over in thought until he looked at Gordon again. ‘Isn’t it excruciatingly perverse, given what the Word of God has ordered – which is what a Christian must not refute the Bible to be, the Word of God, scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore God-breathed – first, not that a witness should swear just to anyone or anything, but that he should swear to God Himself; and, second, that he should choose to swear to God with his hand on the Bible, the very book in which he is told by God never to swear on anything at all?!’

‘Does it really say that? I would’ve assumed –’

‘Believe me,’ Auger interrupted, ‘it’s unequivocal.’ He paused then suddenly laughed. ‘Incidentally, given what I just said about the Bible being God’s Word, don’t you think it’s slightly audacious of publishers to have put a copyright notice in the front?’

Gordon began to snigger. ‘Heathens.’

‘So! Returning to the swearing in of witnesses, are we to believe that we have institutionalized such a blasphemous irony, balefully ignorant of the fact because nobody actually reads the Bible? Or is the act of swearing in, as I have described it, just a popular fiction?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Gordon. ‘Which is it?’

‘I think you miss the point, Gordon. Either we don’t read the most read book ever written, or we live in a fictional world of false assumptions of fact.’

Gordon listened to what Julian said. The thought struck him, ‘It’s really the same thing either way, isn’t it, Julian? We will doubt facts before we doubt the assumptions we share.’

Julian grinned mischievously. 'I'd have a hard time hypnotizing anybody if it were otherwise.'

Julian turned and strolled over to the window and looked out. Gordon was left staring down at the book in his lap. He felt a resolution. He would try to read it.

'By the way, I want that book back. Don't lose it.'

Gordon had opened the book. 'It seems very old.'

'Nineteenth century. It's irreplaceable.'

Gordon looked at Julian. 'You're saying there are no other copies?'

'I'm saying I've got no idea where I could get another copy.'

'But they'd still have the book in the copyright libraries, in the catacombs at Oxford, say.'

'Funny you should mention that place in particular. They did have it there. They don't any more.'

'Julian! You didn't.'

'What? Steal it. Don't be a fool, Gordon.' Julian sniffed. 'But I am reliably informed that their copy is no longer available. At least, they claim that it has been temporarily misplaced. But I say, misplaced for years, or permanently lost from their collection – how can they be sure which is the truth?'

'Hmmm...' Gordon saw the book in a new light. Why would Julian want to trust him with something so valuable? 'Julian, I can't take this,' he said extending it to him. 'I don't trust myself with it.'

'Nonsense. Besides, books were meant to be read.'

Gordon took it back, but reluctantly.

'There's something else.'

'What?'

'Don't leave it around where anybody might read it. I don't think that would be... responsible.'

CHAPTER 14

Gordon was absorbed in reading a book. She didn't know what, not that she cared, though she did note that it was unusual to see Gordon reading anything other than a magazine, or maybe a newspaper, or – most usual – a stapled document from work.

She hadn't forgotten last night, how Gordon had shouted at her in that accusatory way nor how he had sworn at her. Most of her day had been spent overshadowed with the feeling that the subject wasn't yet closed and that there would be more uncomfortable words to come. So it was a relief to find that her worries could have been for nothing, because Gordon seemed otherwise occupied.

She left him to his engrossing read, whatever it was, partly because she didn't want to chance that there was a lecture waiting for her about their shared finances, and partly because she was still in a sulk with him. He had actually sworn at her. And it was all his bloody fault even if he didn't realize it.

She wondered briefly whether he had been for the hypnosis that he had said he was going to have – he could have got cold feet or just forgotten his appointment, either of which occurrence wouldn't have surprised her in the least – and then she realized frustratedly that she couldn't ask him about it. The high cost of the trip would bring to mind other expense. Inevitably he would be reminded of the credit card receipt he had discovered last night.

So she scowled at him, knowing that he was too buried in his book to see her do it. Read your stupid book then, she thought and padded into the kitchen to see if she could find anything interesting to eat.

Three things had inspired Gordon to open Julian's book. Firstly, his curiosity had been aroused by Julian's mysterious instruction not to leave the book around for anybody to read. What had he said? Because it would be irresponsible. What could he mean by that? It wasn't as if he had handed him the activist's guide to home-made explosives.

Secondly, given how Julian had sprung Leekston on him, there was a likelihood, though he would like to deny it, that Julian had more of the same planned. Anything he could glean about hypnosis might calm his anxiety at such a prospect.

Thirdly, if Julian had given him such a valuable book, he could be sure Julian intended that he should read it. That was clear, and he didn't feel like defying him over it.

So he had decided at least to open it and attempt to read it. If the tedium became unbearable, therein he would have his excuse. He would be able to show that he had at least attempted to read it.

But he quickly forgot all that when he began to read Maximilian Forslagg's curious story.

He read how Forslagg had begun his ventures into hypnosis with the calming of animals, for his claimed profession was veterinary and being able to still a frisky pet was a considerable aid to his work. He had achieved this by various techniques of stroking and by effecting fixation upon bright objects.

It hadn't occurred to Forslagg, at first, that what he was doing had anything to do with hypnosis, but he had noticed the trance-like quality of the animals' demeanours after his manipulations. Natural curiosity had made him wonder if he could achieve a similar result with people – a compelling curiosity that he eventually succumbed to when he began his experiments.

The ladies of the town brought their pets to his premises, having both the leisure and the prosperity to do so. It might be described as having become the fashionable thing since the recent founding of the RCVS by royal charter. Their toy dogs and their purebred paragons of *Felis catus*, Forslagg noted, were as well kept as were they themselves by their wealthy husbands, and consequently he had uncovered a good living. Slowly it occurred to Maximilian Forslagg that, since his experience so far had been confined to creatures, a

strong will might present an obstacle to his experiments, and so his male chauvinism and opportunity led him to make his first investigations upon women.

In the privacy of his office, he discovered that he could produce the same catalepsy in his lady victims as he had seen in animals. He could move their limbs, and they would hold them where put – like living mannequins.

And victims they properly were because he did more than gratify his scientific curiosity, for Forslagg was a man lacking moral restraint – when he saw an opportunity, he found he had little will to resist his urges.

As Gordon was beginning to discover with growing glee, Maximilian Forslagg was an utter cad. In their yielding and unwitting state, Forslagg relieved the ladies of their clothes – in the interests of more objective science, he said, since the animals to which he wished to make comparison did not wear clothes. The following acts, which he referred to only as lewd, he admitted did not have good justification. But, he claimed, they did show the depth of the stupor he had procured, since no lady would consciously allow the liberties he took.

Amazingly, Gordon thought, Forslagg soon tired of such salacious amusement. The lifelessness of his subjects soon palled his interest. Until, that is, he had an idea that literally kept him awake all night.

There was something that just couldn't be done with animals while under trance, but something that was possible with his new guinea-pigs, something that offered mesmerizing new possibilities. What if, while they were entranced, he was to actually speak to his subjects?

Gordon could imagine that Forslagg would have found such a proposition titillating, but he was left in little doubt about the true seduction. It was clear that what invigorated Forslagg the most about his ideas were the sexual possibilities.

§

In the offices of Brock, Hardy & Hammel, two executives exchanged courtesies over a long-distance telephone line.

'Yes, I have received your brief. In fact, I have it in front of me now.'

‘We are very interested, Mister Hammel, to see what you can come up with. Wyfondoo are very excited about the prospects for sales in the United Kingdom. We have high hopes for opening up a large new market for the Matrix 1.8XG.’

‘Yes... indeed,’ said Hammel glancing down at the picture he had moved to the top. ‘Thank you again for choosing Brock, Hardy & Hammel. We hope this will be the beginning of a long and successful relationship.’

‘As do we, Mister Hammel.’

‘And may I say your English is excellent, Mister Chagawochi.’

‘Thank you. We have very good teachers in Korea.’

‘Yes, I’ve heard that. Well I won’t keep you any longer. I’m sure you must be busy. It only remains for me to assure you that your brief is receiving our immediate attention.’

‘Thank you, Mister Hammel.’

Ewart Hammel hung up and looked at the brief he had received by FedEx late the previous evening. Pictures were enclosed of the Wyfondoo car. A very similar model had sold well in Korea. This one had been adapted slightly for the European market. It had a unusual look. He wasn’t sure how it would be received by the British public.

Ewart had been excited when he received the parcel. The magic of word of mouth had turned up another trick, and he had managed to convert it into a new account. If they could blow the client away with the first job, then this could be the beginnings of another big earner for the company. That was when he began to worry.

Harkenén was busy with multiple accounts for Wittles Snacks. Toller was all tied up with washing powders. All his best men and women had their plates full. None had enough room to take on such an account.

Besides, most were engaged in established accounts, ones that had supplied a steady stream of business. He was loath to shuffle around the assignments so that he could free up a man. This may potentially become a very important client for them, but Hammel was a firm believer that a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush.

Existing clients always came first. New business was always fickle business. Even if everything appeared to have been resoundingly successful, clients could still inexplicably give their next brief to a

different agency. It had happened before.

Not that he wouldn't have plenty of volunteers to take on the account whether it would overload them or not, Ewart reflected with amusement. All his creatives loved to get their hands on accounts like this, accounts for cars. But he knew that, however willing they were, they would find themselves with too much work and only finite resources of energy. Inevitably, one of their less glamorous accounts would suffer, and that he would *not* allow.

The solution stared him in the face, though he didn't like it. It was for exactly this reason that he got so bothered when he perceived a problem among his staff. There was no room for duffs. Every man had to be able to pull his weight. There was only one staff member whose current workload would allow him to give this account the attention it deserved, and that was Gordon Lissope.

Gordon Lissope. Only yesterday he had wondered whether he was going to have to fire the man. Now he was going to be forced to give him the Wyfondoo account.

It would mark the other employees that he favoured Lissope with a car account. It would be seen by all as an undeserved perk. He didn't like that, but it couldn't be helped. Business was business. The alternative was to take on the account himself. It had been a few years, but he still had it. It wasn't something you lost easily, he thought. But no. He had other responsibilities now. If he was forced to, he could rearrange things so that he could find the energy to devote to it. He would keep that in mind as a contingency. If Gordon floundered, then he would take on the brief himself.

And Gordon Lissope's career at Brock, Hardy & Hammel would be finished.

He wondered if he should spell this out exactly to Lissope. Would he respond well to that kind of pressure? Ewart Hammel knew people, and he set himself to puzzling out the problem of Gordon Lissope. Finally he thought, No, he would brazen it out. He would pretend that Gordon was his first choice.

Would Lissope believe such a preposterous notion? Ewart Hammel smiled to himself amusedly. That was a funny thing about people.

The funny thing about Forslagg, Gordon reflected, was that although he was possessed of a genuine intellectual curiosity, he carried out his investigations in such a scandalous and unprofessional manner. And he did it consciously.

Gordon had stopped work for his first coffee break of the morning and couldn't resist taking out Julian's book to pick up from where he had left off last night, when it had unexpectedly absorbed the whole evening.

Forslagg was critical of supposed lovers of truth for its own sake. 'What possibly could be a more barren outlook?' he asked. For him the value of truth was in the exciting new possibilities it presented. The allure of truth lay in how it might be exploited.

The manner of his investigations meant that his work would never receive recognition from his more sober contemporaries. This fact bothered him not in the slightest. Recognizing it he said, 'Dispassionate rigour was my antithesis. I worked for goose bumps not glory.'

Now, instead of moving the limbs of entranced subjects, he instructed them to move them themselves. It worked, and he quickly discovered that he could make his instructions as non-specific as he cared to, just suggesting the general role, leaving to his subject the latitude to interpret how to perform it.

And the performances were very good. Particularly he was struck by the lack of inhibition – something that encouraged him to take his gratification with the finest ladies of the town, reserved ladies who were transformed into the most wanton whores under his influence.

But, despite all this illicit indulgence, he still wasn't satisfied – because whore wasn't such an inappropriate ascription. For all their proficiency in the role, it was still just the playing of a role. The real person lay hidden behind a mask, a mask that was most evident in their eyes. He wanted the real thing. He wanted to look into their eyes in those heights of passion and see something other than his own glazed reflection.

He tried to instruct not a role that would produce the desired behaviour, but a desire from which such behaviour might stem. But he was flummoxed at his first such attempt by the complete lack of

reaction from his subject. Until, that is, in disappointed resignation he brought her out of the trance.

Gordon realized that Forslagg had independently discovered post-hypnotic suggestion. Julian's pencilled note in the margin confirmed the same verdict.

The pencilled notes and underlinings showed Gordon which parts of the book had struck Julian. Also, from reading these, he was able to glean that the term hypnosis had yet to be coined in Forslagg's time. Although he seemingly made his discoveries independently, it was apparent that he hadn't lived in complete isolation of existing knowledge of hypnosis. One of Julian's notes in the book told him that the word mesmerization, used in the title, was derived from a hypnotist named Mesmer who was pronounced a fraud by the French government in the eighteenth century.

The subsequent impassioned assault of Lady B (Forslagg had just enough propriety not to reveal their names) surprised Forslagg so greatly, and electrified his mind so utterly that he was forced to entrance her again so that he could calm her and send her away so that he could think upon what had occurred.

He had suggested a desire, he reasoned, and the awakened Lady B had realized that desire. But she hadn't realized it as implanted by someone else and, unwitting of any other origin of the idea, had attributed it as her own. She identified with it as though it was in fact just an expression of her own identity, indistinguishable from any other thought.

The moment of what was implied set Maximilian Forslagg's mind spinning dizzily.

He could implant ideas.

And the recipient would have no suspicion that they were anything other than his or her own.

Gordon absorbed this, pondering the truth of it. He finished his coffee and thought he should really get back to some work. He scanned the next paragraph and saw that Forslagg professed that this revelation had greatly disturbed him.

Gordon's mind was, however, already elsewhere. Work beckoned; and better, he actually thought he had some ideas at last.

The phone rang. Gordon picked it up and answered it distractedly. On the other end, a voice commanded him, 'Come to my office.'

'Now?' he complained without thinking. The thing was, Julian's hypnotism seemed to be working again!

He had made it into the office this morning, on time and feeling enthusiastic, and had passed the first hour of the morning without becoming demoralized, which seemed like a breakthrough in itself. The coffee break he had taken at ten o'clock had felt like a reward instead of a consolation, and afterwards, the tap from which his ideas had been dripping ineffectively these recent weeks seemed at last to have been turned back on, and perhaps with more force than at any time all year. It was such a welcome change that he felt actually quite put out at the thought now of being dragged away from it.

'Is there some reason why it shouldn't be now?' Hammel inquired testily.

Gordon remembered who he was talking to. 'Umm, well no,' he said feebly.

'Well put the phone down and get in here then.'

Oh no, not another bollocking already. At least, he thought, this time he had something to give Hammel. As he walked to Hammel's office, he found to his own surprise that he was rather looking forward to telling someone his ideas.

§

Hammel gestured to the chair in front of his desk and watched as Gordon sat. He couldn't help having second thoughts about giving Lissope the account. He sat staring at Lissope for a while without speaking. It didn't displease him to see Gordon begin to fidget uncomfortably under his gaze.

He decided to put off making the decision and instead test the water. 'Tell me how Highland Tarns is going.'

'Well I've been having some ideas.'

Ewart Hammel, staring hard at Gordon, noticed a glint in his eye. 'Good. Let's hear them.'

Gordon cleared his throat. 'Well I got to thinking about going back to basics. Excuse the cliché, but I remembered that sex sells.'

'Go on.'

'I also thought about Highland Tarns. No bombshells here, but

it's Scottish isn't it. So I thought we could have a bikinied girl wiping her brow and saying that she's too hot. Standing by her is a guy in plaid. He pulls out a bottle of Highland Tarns from under his kilt and hands it to the girl, "Here, try this." She opens it and brings the bottle up, tipping her head back, mouth agape as though she's about to pour it down her throat, and instead she pours it down her front and lets out a moan of pleasure.'

Ewart noticed that Gordon paused, apparently waiting for approval to continue. Ewart nodded for him to go on.

'She looks at the man saucily and says, "What else have you got up your kilt?" The final caption is, "Highland Tarns. You can also drink it.'"

Ewart Hammel had been ready to over congratulate. It was his idea that Gordon might need some encouragement by way of flattering him. Convinced that he deserved no such, his mind had been occupied with the task of making sure that when he delivered his praise, he did it convincingly.

He let the silence hang to increase the tension and then said, 'That is a *fantastic* idea.'

It was only having delivered his well-timed line, and seeing the hoped-for effect it had on Gordon, that he thought to himself, I actually do like his idea.

He thought aloud excitedly. 'We could have the girl in a tartan bikini – high cut, big tits. The camera follows the liquid as it runs down her curves. Obviously we'll need a delicious body. I want to see Highland Tarns dripping from her. Then cut back to her face. We see her eyes flick up from his waist. She's chewing her bottom lip, then she says, "What else have you got up your kilt?"'

'Yes,' agreed Gordon.

'Hell, we could even get Highland Tarns to put their water into phallic shaped bottles. Nothing over the top, you understand. Just something so that the suggestion is there.'

'Suggestion, yes.' There was a pause while Gordon appeared to consider if he should say what he said next. 'I've had another idea, as well.'

'It's all right, Gordon,' Hammel reassured him. 'I want you to go ahead with this one.'

‘It’s an addition to this idea.’

‘Right.’

‘I want to have a swimming pool or something in the background. I want to use computer graphic effects to create a sort of mesmerizing rippling effect. The idea is that it’ll be able to capture the viewer’s complete attention.’ Gordon’s face dropped suddenly. ‘Oh no. That’s silly,’ he said. ‘If there’s a swimming pool there and she’s too hot, why doesn’t she just jump in?’

‘Oh to hell with that! I want you to do it,’ said Hammel, still caught up in his own excitement about the idea. ‘One thing you shouldn’t forget about advertising, Gordon – it doesn’t have to make sense.’

‘No... Who cares? Maybe she can’t swim.’

‘That’s the spirit.’

This was unexpected. Hammel hadn’t expected to be engaged by Gordon’s idea. In the most pessimistic part of his mind, he hadn’t expected Gordon even to have any ideas. When you dried up, sometimes you dried up utterly.

He almost thought he should keep the Wyfondoo account for himself. His enthusiasm had reminded him how pleasurable working on accounts could be. He then remembered – with some sympathy for Gordon, at last – how dour the job could be when all inspiration abandoned you. It seemed to Ewart Hammel that, coming the right side out of a mean spell, Gordon Lissope had perhaps earned the chance at the Wyfondoo account after all.

‘I didn’t actually bring you in here to talk about Highland Tarns,’ Hammel admitted.

Gordon’s face changed and Hammel saw the concern there, and so he added quickly, ‘I’ve got some good news for you.’

Ewart watched with amusement as he saw Gordon’s expression turn to one of bewilderment. ‘We got a brief from a new client last night – a Korean car manufacturer. They want us to launch their new car in the UK.’

‘That’s great news.’

Hammel saw from Gordon’s pleased, but only moderately pleased, expression that Gordon hadn’t clicked on to what was about to be delivered his way. He enjoyed the moment. ‘Gordon. I know I

had to chew your ass the other day, but I hope you realize that even the best of us need a good kick up the arse occasionally.' *Oh, this was rich.* 'But that doesn't mean that I don't recognize your talent. You could be one of the most talented guys I have. I knew that when I hired you, and I haven't changed my opinion.' *It was not necessarily so far from the truth. You just never knew. Sometimes people could surprise you.* 'I can see there is a lot of untapped potential in you.'

'I suppose I've been bottling it all up.'

Hammel paused. He gave Lissope a predatory grin. At first Gordon's look had been one of disbelief, but his outlook had quickly adjusted to accommodate the more appealing view of reality. He was buying it.

'That's why I'm giving it to you,' he said dealing the punch line. 'I'm giving the Wyfondoo Matrix 1.8XG account to you, Gordon.'

Hammel watched the effect his words had and noticed his employee's look of quiet exhilaration. 'I think this is just the account and just the moment to bring out your potential.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Hammel picked up the folder that contained the brief and handed it to Lissope. He winked. 'Go knock'em dead.'

He watched Lissope leave his office. He had laid it on thick and had almost ended up believing it himself, but he would be keeping a very close eye on how things proceeded. Something about his latest encounter with Gordon had given him hope. It wasn't just the idea that Lissope had presented to him for Highland Tarns; he had seen something else, something that wasn't there when he had hauled him over the coals yesterday. He prided himself on his ability to perceive such nuances.

At the first sign of doubt, however, he would take back the account and do it himself. There would be no more second chances for Gordon Lissope.

CHAPTER 15

Gordon floated back to his desk. From his cloud he noticed that Jameson watched his return.

‘Called into Hammel’s office again, Gordy. Tut, tut, tut. You’re turning out to be a bit of a bad-boy.’

‘Oh, I’m bad all right,’ Gordon smiled at him. ‘That’s why I get the baddest accounts.’

‘He gave you another account?’

‘He certainly did, and it’s one bad mother,’ Gordon said enjoying Ronnie’s astonishment. ‘Feast your eyes on this baby.’ He drew out a large colour shot of the Matrix 1.8XG from the file and held it up for Jameson to see.

Ronnie jumped up from his seat to take the photo from Gordon’s hands for a better look.

‘It’s Korean.’

‘Yeh, I suppose it must be. Not bad, Gordy. Not fucking bad at all.’ He turned round then, and shouted across the room. ‘Harry!... Harold, you deaf git.’

‘What?’

‘Gordon’s just been given a new account.’

Harold’s reaction expressed the sentiment ‘So what?’ but he walked up to the nearest partition and leaned over it.

Jameson continued. Reading from the title at the bottom of the picture, he called out, ‘It’s for the Wyfondoo Matrix 1.8XG.’

‘That’s not a car, is it?’ Harold called back.

‘Yeah, it’s Korean,’ Gordon put in.

‘Let’s see it then.’

Jameson held it out in front of him at arm's length in the direction of Harold.

Harold squinted at it, then he looked at Gordon. 'Gordon, you jammy bastard!'

Gordon grinned and took the picture back from Ronnie. 'Obviously Mister Hammel recognizes a great creative talent when he sees it.'

'Oh, it's mutual appreciation, is it?' Ronnie joshed. 'I wondered what you were doing in Hammel's office when I saw you knelt behind his desk with your head bobbing up and down.' Harold had already turned and walked away to relay the news.

'You've got a sick mind, Ronnie.'

Ronnie cackled good-humouredly. 'It takes one to know one.' After a moment's reflection he added, 'You know, if I were thinking rationally, I should be envious... but you see,' – he gestured to the account he was working on that lay about his own desk – 'it's not my time of the month.'

Gordon sniggered but then looked again at Ronnie slightly uncomfortably, but Jameson's eyes were glazed over happily in some thought or other, a smile still pasted across his face, and then he shook his head slowly and sat back down at his desk.

Gordon leafed through the brief. He started to read through some of the documentation, but his mind drifted. He reflected upon everything that had happened already today. First he had arrived early. Then he had started having ideas for the ad for the bottled water. Then Hammel had called him to his office again, he had thought for another dressing-down, but Hammel had actually seemed quite fantastically pleased with him. And, to top it all, Hammel had given him an account that half the office would be wishing he had given to them instead. It had to be Julian's hypnosis.

Never had Gordon expected to see such immediate results. The hypnosis had already been a fabulous help in giving up smoking – it had been an immediate cure. But helping with his career seemed a different matter. It seemed to Gordon that it was a less tangible problem.

He remembered Julian's confident claim that he could help Gordon's career just as markedly as he had helped him stop smoking

cigarettes. Gordon had wanted to believe it was possible. He had to give it to Julian; his claims proved to be absolutely justified. Julian was turning his prospects at Brock, Hardy & Hammel around in spectacular fashion.

He turned the pages absently and wondered how he was going to perform with the Wyfondoo brief. He found there wasn't a thought that could shake his conviction that things were going to go all right. With Julian's magic at work, how could he fail?

He considered the size his obligation to Julian had assumed. He was heavily indebted to Auger. No wonder his mind was really only half on what he was reading. A page of the brief spoke of the car manufacturer's enthusiasm for the venture and declared their commitment. Gordon picked repeatedly at the corner of it. Obstinate it refused to lift up from the next sheet, and his fingers trembled. He felt suddenly nervous about what Julian might want in return, nervous because he knew that he would be unable to refuse whatever Julian was going to ask of him. He couldn't back out now after what had been done for him. He owed Julian big time.

§

Various colleagues wandered over to Gordon's desk over the remainder of the morning. Advertising the more glamorous things like cars was what they all wanted to do. Unfortunately most accounts were for more mundane things such as household cleaning products and low-fat margarines. Gordon proudly showed them the pictures of the car, but the constant interruptions, mixed with thoughts about Julian, meant that he was unable to get down to any work.

He left the brief open on his desk for anybody who cared to pass by and take a look, while *he* went for a late lunch. In the afternoon, he had finally been able to immerse himself... until he got the call.

§

Helen knew she should be working. That was what she was paid to spend each day here doing, and technically speaking this wasn't work. Well screw work! Besides it was sort of a perk of the job, like the free coffee and biscuits. There was no point in such things being available to her if she didn't make use of them. And why else were they provided?

She was surfing the internet. Everybody's PC at Leeren Assurances had access, and she was employing hers to look at holiday sites, one thing there was no shortage of on the web. Another thing of which there was never a scarcity was sex sites, but accessing those was supposed to be barred at the gateway. You could manage it anyway somehow, but you were in trouble if you got caught because it was a disciplinary offence. She heard a tale that one guy in the IT department had been dismissed for amassing a huge library of pornographic material on one of the company's servers. No one she knew knew him personally though. Occasionally she received some amusingly lewd pictures from friends in attachments to their emails, which usually provoked a snigger or a guffaw, but which she always quickly deleted. It struck her as odd that corporations had appointed themselves as guardians of decent behaviour in this prudish way while busily fucking the planet themselves.

Her boss was walking her way, so she switched back to the document she had been writing. It didn't do any harm to give a busy impression. Once the incentive to pretend had passed, she decided it was time again to visit the coffee machine and biscuits. Three o'clock – still a couple more hours to go before she could go home.

As she drifted over to the drinks area, she reflected that Gordon hadn't mentioned his visit to the hypnotist's yet. She wished now that she hadn't been so negative when he had told her about the idea. That must be why he hadn't bothered to tell her anything about it.

And of course, she was quite interested; never mind what she had said about it originally. Maybe he would reveal all tonight.

§

Some calls, you always knew were pending; and others, you knew would become pending shortly; and still others, it was possible to relax into thinking would arrive no time soon at all. The call Gordon received on his phone was least expected.

The afternoon had drifted along quietly, and he had become enjoyably absorbed in his work. He had the details of the Highland Tarns account to draw up formally, and as he tapped away at the keyboard, occasionally he was hit with an inspiration for the Wyfondoo file which he would jot down in a notebook open by his side. Some afternoons, usually late afternoon, Helen would call him

for no particular reason, especially if things were a bit slow at her end. When he got the call, he picked it up casually, half assuming it would be her.

‘Julian!... What do you want?’

‘You sound surprised to hear from me, Gordon’

‘Well...er... I wasn’t expecting you to call. And I’d sort of got engrossed in what I was doing; you know how it is.’

‘Gordon, I’d like you to do something for me.’

‘As part of our deal, you mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘What?’

‘I want you to cover for me tomorrow evening.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I want you to see one of my patients for me.’

‘What, Julian? You must be mad.’

‘Just listen! Remember Mister Leekston from last night.’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, it’s him. He’s coming for his follow-up appointment. I want you to see him for me – as Doctor Lissope of course.’

‘Why? Where will you be?’

‘I’ve got other business, but that’s not the point. I want *you* to do it.’

‘Julian, I never thought you’d ask for something like this. I –’

‘How’s work?’

‘Er...’ Gordon hesitated. The answer would not help him wriggle out of this, but he wasn’t a cheat. And it was stupid, he knew, but he sort of worried that if he played down the truth now, he would jinx himself. Everything could vanish as though it had been just a mirage from the start, and it would be exactly what he deserved. He looked down at the Matrix 1.8XG and discovered he was fairly bursting to congratulate Julian for what he had achieved. ‘It’s amazing, Julian. Since you hypnotized me, everything has changed.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Well, first I come to work today, and I start having all these great ideas about the account I’ve been working on. And before I had nothing, absolutely nothing.

‘Then the boss calls me into his office. He asks me about

Highland Tarns, and I tell him my ideas. And he was really impressed.'

'That's good, Gordon. I told you I could help you, didn't I.'

'But that's not even the best bit, Julian. The next thing he does is to only go and give me a new account to work on – for a Korean car manufacturer!' Gordon paused for breath. 'That's like... like... around here, that's like being given three gold stars. And it all happened because you hypnotized me.'

'I'm glad you think so.'

'How did you do it?'

'The best art hides the artifice.'

'Your experimental techniques?'

'What?'

'You wanted to try out some new ideas.'

'Oh yes, I did say that, didn't I.'

'Well, I'd say it was successful.'

'So you admit I've helped you. I've kept my side.'

'Yes, I can't fault you there. It's nothing short of miraculous.'

'And you remember that I also said I would help you with your debt problems. And I will too. But you have to keep your side of the bargain.'

'But why, Julian? Why do you want me to meet your patient instead of you?'

'He's your patient too, Gordon – don't forget that. Doctor Gordon Lissope brought the patient into and out of the hypnotic state.'

'Yes. I still find it hard to believe I actually let you talk me into that.'

'Don't kid yourself, Gordon. You enjoyed it.'

'Yes. I suppose I did... But that still doesn't tell me why –'

'You always were a little slow, weren't you, Gordon. I'd have thought you could have worked it out by now.'

'Well...'

'I've been throwing you in at the deep end and seeing if you can swim. I want to see if I can teach you to hypnotize.'

Indeed, as Julian had just said, it shouldn't really have been anything of a revelation, but Gordon trembled with his excitement.

Hearing Auger aver it had made it more real. The phone shook in his hand. He squeezed his hand tighter to still it, but he couldn't hide the quavering in his voice. 'And that's what you want from me. That's the pact?'

'Not exactly. Put it this way, it's part of what I want.'

'So what is it?'

'I'm not prepared to tell you that yet. Just see Leekston for me. I know you, Gordon. You'll enjoy it. Nerine will be there. I may see you before I leave.'

'But what if I can't do it?'

'Nonsense! You've already done it once. You heard the kind of thing I said to him once he was under – a simple alleviation therapy. You've got the idea. Every apprentice has to make his first solo.'

'Apprentice?'

'Just say you'll do it.'

'OK,' Gordon said feebly.

'Yes?'

'OK, yes, I'll do it.'

'Good. I'm holding you to that now, Gordon. A pact's a pact.'

§

Immediately that Gordon had put the phone down, he felt an uneasiness which rose steadily as he reflected on the conversation he had just had. What the hell did Julian want from him? The word pact bothered him again.

He found he was anxious too, a sort of stage fright associated with what he had to do tomorrow, a nervous anticipation. Would he be able to do what Julian wanted?

He remembered then a saying he had once heard. The five P's – preparation prevents piss-poor performance. That was the answer. At least it might allay some of his nerves. He wondered if he might somehow find a conducive moment in which to grab Helen before tomorrow.

Of course if he really did turn up at Julian's tomorrow, Nerine would be there – a prospect which held the power to transform the next day into a far more appealing proposition. After he had seen the patient, maybe he could ask her out somewhere.

But only *after* he had seen the patient. He still had to treat Mr

Leekston. He returned to thinking about the coming evening and the part Helen might play in it – if she gave him chance – and this new problem distracted him superbly from his anxieties about the next day's business: How was he going to persuade his girlfriend to let him try it? He could do with a crafty inducement with which to tempt her. But then he thought, even if he found one, what was he going to do if she said yes?

CHAPTER 16

Nerine could be patient.

The TV sulked in the corner. Television was for morons – that was Julian's oft spoken view. Except when there was something *he* wanted to watch, she noticed. Anything with old men getting excited about something abstract and scientific – that's what he liked, though rarely was he accommodated. Oh... and films, which was good because she liked those too, and they could watch them together. But nothing else – he managed to ignore the television the rest of the time, or more accurately, he could blot it out entirely so that he wouldn't have a clue what she had been watching. What thoughts was he having that could so engross him? He never would say. If she asked him, he would give an answer, but it was never a whole one. It was always heavily edited, with the emphasis smoothly switched away from anything that might be revealing.

She sat on the sofa with her feet curled up beside her, and read a book – a paperback thriller from the bestsellers list. Every now and then, she emerged from the world of the novel back to the quiet sitting room to steal a glance at Julian, but still he sat there, in the armchair, staring into space.

She continued to read, and the TV stayed off – otherwise it invaded her head, whether the programme interested her or not. Even if it was only someone on the box guffing on about some philosophical puzzle presented by quantum theory, or another unsuccessful attempt to detect gravity waves, she wouldn't be able to ignore it. The insistent sounds from that attention-grabbing device would drown out her reading voice – though it slowed her down, she

liked to hear the words of what she read. Inevitably she would find that her eyes had fixed on the television. She would awake in the realization and not remember how her eyes had been drawn there. It could show a weakness of concentration, or maybe it only meant she was more alert to her surroundings – an evolutionary inheritance that had made her less likely to miss possibly important exchanges – but she *always* succumbed to the TV's unwanted influence.

Nerine's eyes flicked across at her comatose partner then back to her book. Even she had to admit Julian was weird – though since he was a hypnotist, being a bit odd she supposed went with the territory. For instance he never watched the news. She couldn't engage him in news stories. He would say things like he was fed up with being manipulated by the media, or he didn't need *impartial* journalists to tell him what he should be thinking. But the news was nothing next to his real axe to grind. What he couldn't tolerate was all the adverts, which was annoying because she used to enjoy them – well, the funny ones anyway. He would insist she hit the mute button or switch over, or he would walk out the room in disgust.

She glanced up at him again, but still Julian sat motionless in the armchair. Her eyes rested on him less than a full second before her gaze dropped again. His expression stayed in her mind as a mental snapshot. She pondered him in her mind's eye. She longed to know what really went on in his head.

Julian hadn't left her in any doubt of why he abhorred adverts. If she was to believe *him*, they were the root of all evil. He said some ancient philosopher or other had once noticed how advertisements painted on walls around markets made people miserable. Adverts could persuade a person to believe he didn't have the things he had a right to expect from life. Buy what they advertised and all would be well. Except it never was – there was always another advert.

Nerine knew that with Julian it was best to be patient. He would tell her what she wanted to know in his own time if she didn't probe. The previous evening she had waited for him to tell her why he had introduced Gordon to a patient, why Gordon had been present during the patient's appointment, and why Julian had called him Doctor Lissope. He had said nothing. But she was owed an explanation. She deserved one. Gordon had been allowed where she

had been refused. Julian had said that Gordon wasn't even his friend, so why had he done it?

Julian was complicated, a private puzzle set for her alone to solve. She knew there was a reason for what he did even if it wasn't apparent to her. And if anyone deserved to see inside his sealed book, it was her. She had been with Julian for nearly as long as he had been running a proper practice. She wasn't his first receptionist, but she had already become more than just his employee by the time they moved from the shabby premises in Whitechapel, a few years ago, to their current location in The West End. Her predecessor had left to train as a homoeopathist. Julian had never had anything much more to say about her. Working together every day in the practice, they swiftly grew close. The first attraction which had drawn her to him, she discovered, had been a lasting one, for though they had been living together now for five years, in her eyes he still held a dark mystery.

He had always been reticent about his past, and guarded somehow. And he was a man of stark contradictions. She saw his compassion for the problems of their patients – he wished to help them, and he usually succeeded – but it had gradually dawned on her that, at the same time, he was a man who held a deep contempt for the world. There were things he despised. Usually he managed to convey a dispassionate air, but she had learned to spot the edge of bitterness. He was angry at the world and lashed out at it. Life had done something to him. Something in his past had hurt him.

Suddenly she had a flash of insight. Her eyes unglazed, and although they stared at the page of her novel, she read nothing. Gordon Lissoppe was part of that past. Whatever reason Julian had for what he had done, it had something to do with his shared past with Gordon.

'Nerine, I want to speak to you about Gordon.'

Nerine jumped. She looked at Julian and put down her book, resting it face down and open on the arm of the sofa, and smiled at him hopefully.

'Remember the patient Edmund Leekston from yesterday?'

Really! As if she could possibly forget. Finally he was going to give her some explanation. 'Yes?' she said.

‘We booked his follow-up appointment for last thing, tomorrow evening.’

‘Yes, that’s right.’ She remembered because keeping such details was part and parcel of her duty, but in any case, she wouldn’t have forgotten *that* appointment.

‘Well, I’m not going to be there. Gordon’s going to receive him.’

‘In your office?’ Nerine was incredulous. She had expected an explanation, and instead she had got even more mystery.

‘He’ll arrive shortly before Mister Leekston is expected. Just show him straight into the office. He knows what to do.’

‘He *knows* what to do? Julian, I don’t understand any of this.’

‘There is something still... between me and Gordon Lissope.’

Nerine could see that he was struggling to find the right words. ‘But you said he’s not even your friend.’

‘He’s not.’ His eyes accused her. ‘But there’s something I want from him.’

‘It’s something to do with when you were at school together.’

Julian’s eyes shot wide. Nerine saw something there though she didn’t immediately comprehend it. It looked like fear, almost panic, but it was gone so quickly. She did see the hurt expression in his sagging eyes, and experienced a feeling of having betrayed him. She was leaning against a rail and risking that it break. She was testing an unspoken understanding between them. There was something in his past. Whatever it was, Julian feared an unreasoning fear that anyone should know it about him. Somehow wordlessly it had been agreed that she wouldn’t probe there. She wouldn’t explore his wound.

She saw the vulnerability in his eyes, and her heart went out to him. It infuriated her sometimes that he could never just be straightforward with her, yet it was those same complexities that she was so inextricably caught up in. She realized she wasn’t going to get any answers tonight.

She looked at him exasperatedly. She couldn’t help being tinged with annoyance. ‘OK, Julian. Thanks for the advance warning.’



Gordon turned his head slightly on the pillow and glanced quickly out the corner of his eye at Helen. How was he going to ask? He stared back at the ceiling. She had to say yes; she had to. He had to

find something to persuade her with, something that he was certain she would be unable to resist.

Helen was sat up in bed beside him reading a glossy. This was the first real opportunity he had been presented with, and it looked as well like it might be his only chance. Earlier he had arrived home to find Helen already rooting around in the kitchen for inspiration for the evening meal, and she had sent him straight out again for milk. When he returned, she'd had her hands full in the kitchen. They ate sweet and sour pork, made from a jar, in front of the TV. Helen had then become engrossed in several programmes that ran back-to-back, and he too admittedly.

His present circumstances were pressing, but still they didn't prevent his mind wandering into thoughts of Nerine. He imagined how he would feel if it was Nerine beside him instead of Helen. He fantasized that Helen could have been called away on a business trip. You'll manage for a couple of weeks without me, won't you, darling? Oh, he'd manage all right.

Regrettably he couldn't think for long about Nerine without being reminded of the hypnotist's surgery, and Auger. He was uneasy about what he had agreed to do for Julian. He had hypnotized Mr Leekston, but Julian had guided his every action. He couldn't shake the suspicion that he had been just a puppet in Julian's expert hands, that it was Julian's hypnotic powers that were at work, not any of his.

Julian expected him to hypnotize Edmund Leekston single-handedly, without anybody to turn to for help. Of course, Julian had said that Nerine would be there. He remembered Nerine's risqué game from the bar and his own complicit pretence of having been hypnotized by her. So, from her, surely he could hope for nothing more than moral support.

Gordon sighed and sat up. If Julian had left him with this responsibility, then Julian must have faith in him, and he was the expert. Auger couldn't be wrong, could he? Gordon's eyes glazed over as he imagined the scene. He would have total discretion over the treatment that Mr Leekston received. There wouldn't be anyone looking over his shoulder. A smile crossed his lips. Not everything about the prospect was troubling.

It seemed incredible. Julian apparently intended that he, Gordon,

should gain the power of hypnotism. He was tantalized by the idea, so much that he began to suspect that it might all be some kind of joke. He would struggle unsuccessfully to hypnotize Mr Leekston until Auger would appear from his hiding-hole splitting his sides with laughter. You didn't think I would really tell you how to hypnotize people, did you, Gordon?

§

Helen wanted to talk to Gordon. Though she flipped through the magazine in her lap, her mind wasn't on it. Curiosity had got the best of her.

Gordon's announcement that he was going to get treated to give up smoking she had greeted with enthusiasm until, that is, he mentioned hypnosis. She knew what her father would have said about such an idea.

They had argued when he had told her how much it would cost. Only weeks before, he'd had the hypocrisy to tell her she was spending too much money. He had complained in the end that perhaps she would prefer it if they waited until he got lung cancer. She hadn't answered.

She didn't smoke. She had never smoked. She tolerated it because he didn't smoke in the flat, but she always smelled it on his clothes, on him. And that was the difference – now she didn't.

She wanted to know if he really had stopped smoking and, if so, how. She chewed at her lip and glanced sideways at him. She had hoped that he would be the one to bring up the subject of his treatment – after all, she had been against the idea – but it didn't seem like he was about to, and she was dying to know what had happened at the hypnotist's.

'Gordon... have you stopped smoking?'

'Haven't smoked a single one for days.'

'Since the hypnosis?'

'Yep.'

She waited for him to continue, but he didn't. In fact he wasn't even looking at her and seemed pensive. She supposed he might be waiting for her to swallow her pride. Fine, if that's what it took to get the details.

'I hope it works. I know I said it was expensive, but I realize now

that if you carry on without smoking, it will soon start saving us money.’

Gordon looked at her, his eyes bright. ‘Would you like me to tell you about it, Helen? The hypnosis, I mean.’

She thought she detected something calculating in his manner, but ignored the intuition. She wanted to know what happened. ‘Yes, tell me,’ she said.

§

Fortuitous was the word three times over. Fortuitous because he had just been wondering how he could bring up the subject of hypnosis, and Helen had solved the problem for him without any prompting from him. Fortuitous because she was interested and clearly wanted to hear the details, which meant all he needed to do now was slip in the right motivation, and she might be persuaded. And fortuitous because he thought he had just come up with exactly the incentive with the sway to tempt her.

‘Well,’ he began, ‘the hypnotist had this card, about so big, with a red spiral on it, and he told me to look at it. When I did, it started to spin round. I got the sensation I was being drawn into it. It made my eyes feel funny – I don’t know – sort of like I’d gone cross-eyed, or maybe like someone had tipped the floor.’

‘So then what happened?’

‘That’s a good question. The next thing I know, I wake up just as though I’d been asleep for a bit – not long, you know, like when you fall asleep at work –’

‘Gordon, I *never* fall asleep at work.’ It was evident from her repressed smile that this wasn’t nearly the truth, and Gordon couldn’t stop a smile from pulling at his own lips.

‘...and he says it’s all done.’

‘So you’ve no idea what he said to you.’

‘No idea at all.’

‘And now you’re not addicted to cigarettes?’

‘Yeh...well no. What I mean is I still crave them if you make me think about it. It’s just... I just *know* I don’t need to smoke them any more. I can’t explain it.’ Then he added with a calculating glance, ‘It might be something you just have to experience.’

‘And you’re not worried you’ll start again?’

‘The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind.’

Gordon looked at Helen carefully. He could ask her now, but she still might say no. He couldn’t afford that. First he would have to explain why he needed her to let him do it, why he needed her to let him hypnotize her.

‘I’m going there again,’ he said.

‘What! Why? It worked, didn’t it? And it’s so expensive.’

He would have to tell her about the arrangement he had made with Julian if he was to furnish himself with a convincing reason why he needed to hypnotize her. The problem was that if he told her about that, he could end up having to tell her about Julian. He wriggled in his seat and pushed up the pillows behind him. That was the last thing he wanted – to have his past with Julian delved into.

‘I’ve made an agreement with the hypnotist. I won’t have to pay.’

Helen frowned and looked exasperated. ‘You have made an *agreement* with the hypnotist. What kind of agreement could *you* make with a hypnotist?’

Gordon went pale. He could see she wasn’t going to swallow what he had to say next, unless...

‘It turned out the hypnotist was an old friend from school.’

Helen sighed and slowly shook her head. ‘Who?’

‘Julian Auger.’

She didn’t know him and couldn’t ever remember Gordon having mentioned the name before. It was hard not to be envious – these big-city boys had old friends that turned out to be hypnotists; she had old friends that turned out to be single mothers.

‘So what’s the agreement?’ she asked.

‘He wants me to hypnotize someone. He’s showing me how.’

Helen’s mouth opened, but nothing came out.

‘I’ve already hypnotized one of his patients – under supervision, of course. You’ll never guess this: He introduced me to the patient as a visiting colleague in the profession.’

Helen could hear the excitement in his voice. She couldn’t help being infected by it, but...

‘Gordon, doesn’t any of this strike you as a little odd?’

‘You don’t know Julian.’

‘Mmmm...’

Helen seemed to be considering this. He didn't want to let the subject turn to Julian Auger. He was running too close to awkward questions. His face reddened, and he said quickly, "The thing is, the patient's coming for another treatment, and Julian wants me to do it on my own this time. He won't even be there."

"And you're going to do it? You think you can do it?"

"Yes... with your help."

"How can *I* help?" she objected.

Oh, she could be very helpful, he thought. Again his consideration slipped briefly to Nerine. If Helen agreed to be hypnotized, and if his attempt succeeded, then perhaps he could get Helen out of the way for a bit. But it was now or never. He must strike now while she was still interested. He stared into Helen's wide eyes. Julian was demanding a lot of him. Surely she would sympathize with that. It all depended on whether he could tempt her with his offer. And girls always wanted to be one dress size smaller, didn't they.

"Helen, how would you like to be slimmer?"

CHAPTER 17

Helen had been slugging drinks with a friend from work when Gordon first ever laid eyes on her. The two girls looked like they had the makings of a bawdy night out, and Gordon had remarked as much with a rakish grin.

The city was still new to Helen, it turned out – she showed that mixture of excitement and disorientation. She had recently rented a room in Bayswater. It had all been done in a hurry. She had come into London for just one day to get her accommodation sorted out. She had taken the first place she saw, relieved just to have it out of the way, and had spent the rest of the day seeing some of the sights. Actually, she corrected herself, she had soon tired of that. She told him how she remembered sightseeing as the thing she had been forced into on holiday as a child whenever it was too rainy to spend the day on the beach. Didn't want to do that, and you can keep the T-shirt. She had a similar impatience with museums and galleries. Sites of historical interest were categorically boring. Buckingham Palace – crap. Changing of the guard – yawn. Tower of London and beefeaters – was there anything to eat? History – who cared? Certainly not Helen. Apparently she had enjoyed feeding the pigeons in Trafalgar Square though, whether it was supposed to be banned now or not – Philistines.

A week later, Gordon had discovered Helen's reservations about her hurried choice of digs. The house was a white, three-storeyed terrace with large, attractive windows. Inside it was spacious and moderately clean, but the whole place had a smell of damp carpet which, combined with a general shabbiness, gradually accumulated on the senses. Gordon had turned on a tap and commented that there

seemed at least to be hot water. Helen's eyes had widened, and she answered, 'There is? I've been having cold showers all week!' Then she started to strip off. Gordon asked what she was doing, and she answered that she was taking a bath while the water was still hot. Gordon began to laugh, but in fact, they took that bath together.

Two months later they moved in with each other. Gordon had been thinking of moving anyway. He had a new neighbour who liked to watch action films in full-blasting surround sound. It was impressive – you could really feel the percussion of each round of ammunition. His favoured viewing time, midnight, was insufferable.

They chose a stylish flat together in Marylebone – one with modern furnishings and a great kitchen. The rent was expensive but worth it they decided. They spent many happy Sunday afternoons in nearby Regent's Park, especially in icecream weather, and everything was great, dispelling any qualms either of them might have had about moving in together so soon.

Two years had passed since then. Gordon realized the honeymoon period was over – and he suspected Helen did too – when they'd had a raging argument about money, a few weeks ago now. Of course they made up, but afterwards Gordon wondered how well they really knew each other.

He wondered this again as he waited for Helen to decide. Were things cooling between them? A year ago, there would not have been another woman on the fringe like Nerine now seemed to be. Did this mean it was the beginning of the end?

He didn't know. He wasn't ready to give up on Helen yet, but it would be nice to have her out of the way for a week – if he could just trick her into allowing herself to be hypnotized.

§

'Are you saying I'm fat?'

'No!' He realized he had walked into that one. 'If you want to know what I think – and other men – what did Queen sing about fat-bottomed girls and making the world go round? Not that you take any notice of us.'

'Yeah, but he was gay, wasn't he.'

'Bohemian.'

'Come off it; he died of Aids.'

‘Actually, I think he was bisexual.’

‘Oh yeah, big difference. So he was straight *and* gay – that’s still gay.’

‘Helen, you can’t just dismiss a rock legend.’

‘*Dead* rock legend. That was ages ago; fashions change. Fat-*bellied* girls were fashionable in the Middle Ages, but that doesn’t mean they still are.’

‘Fashion. Look, you women all just want to look like those poor starved girls they parade up and down the catwalks, the ones that daren’t go out because they’re scared the sun might shrivel up what’s left of them.’ Actually he thought Helen wouldn’t suffer from losing the odd kilo. In the last months, she had grown a double chin, which he didn’t find attractive. She had seen slimmer days – that much was beyond a doubt.

‘And anyway who’s fat bottomed?’ she mumbled in a grumbling voice.

‘Julian stopped me smoking. I can stop you having to count the calories.’ He didn’t know if he really could, but this was no time to be timid. ‘And you’d be helping me by giving me some practice. It would build up my confidence for what I have to do for Julian.’

Helen absorbed this but said nothing. She sucked her lip and turned it over in her mind. She wasn’t sure she liked the idea of being Gordon’s guinea-pig. But then again, what was the big deal?

She thought of the new clothes she would buy, temporarily forgetting that they still had money troubles. ‘OK. What do I have to do?’

CHAPTER 18

He knew he wouldn't have changed Helen's mind if her first answer had been no. He had wrestled to portray himself as calmly indifferent. Any other attitude would have spiked his bait with suspicion.

Helen sat up attentively now, her eyes wide. She watched him with curiosity to see what would happen next. He tried to appear unmoved by her willing show though inside his excitement surged. She had the bait in her mouth, but she could still spit it out.

He looked around for a prop, something which he could get Helen to focus on. There was a necklace of Helen's on the bedside table. It was too light. It wouldn't swing properly. He suddenly remembered his doubt that he could really hypnotize anybody. His eyes scoured the bedroom for something he could use while it occurred to him that he should have thought about this before. He should have had a prop ready.

Helen exhaled hard through her nose.

Gordon glanced at her. Helen didn't have unlimited patience. Each second he delayed increased the risk that she would change her mind. If he didn't want to miss his chance, he would have to proceed now, without a prop.

'OK, Helen. Lie back and close your eyes lightly.'

She didn't. She remained upright and looked at him intently. 'Don't you need one of those spiral things, or something?'

Yes, didn't he? Gordon placed his hands gently on Helen's shoulders and pressed her backwards onto the bed. 'No,' he said as reassuringly as he could. 'Now close your eyes.'

She obeyed this time.

When Julian Auger had lent Gordon his book, he had admitted after a parting question from Gordon that the prop – a spinning spiral, a pendulant pocket watch, or whatever – was really a convenience rather than a necessary contrivance. The important point was that you focused the subject's attention, that you prevented him from being distracted by his own thoughts.

You could do this by asking the patient to imagine a scene and concentrate on the mental image. A really good hypnotist could dispense with mental pictures and get the person's attention with just his persona – even with just his voice. Before Gordon left with Forslagg's book, Julian had added, tapping at the book in Gordon's hands, that the fabled Mr Maximilian Forslagg purportedly hypnotized several people just by writing letters to them.

'You are lying in a warm tropical sea,' Gordon began, 'somewhere in the Indian Ocean perhaps, or the South China Sea maybe – you decide. You are floating on a Lilo. It is quiet but for the sound of the water breaking on the shore, a white-golden shore of hot sand. The beach is lined with coconut trees. Behind those is thick green forest. Occasionally in the distance, you hear the caw-cawing of some exotic bird.

'The warm sun beats down on your sun-tanned body. You can smell a mixture of hot skin and salty air. You haven't a single care. Underneath you the water gently undulates, raising first your head then your feet. Your hands float coolly beside you as you drift lazily inshore. You feel yourself begin to doze. The sea laps and splashes at the soles of your feet, all the time gently lapping, lapping, lapping...'

Gordon regarded Helen. To him she looked transported. He had thought her a sceptic, but she had drifted off easily. It must be true, he reflected, When it serves you to believe something, you believe it. Helen wanted to be slim, and so she believed in him, in his power to hypnotize her.

He grinned to himself. The image he had chosen had worked fantastically. He had struck a chord there, it seemed. He smiled roguishly. It had given him an idea how he could get rid of her.

'Helen,' he said, then hesitated. A doubt surfaced. Had it been too easy?

He decided to reassure himself. He would check whether she was faking and check too that she hadn't simply fallen asleep.

'You will feel no pain,' he said, then he reached over to her and pinched her ear lobe as hard as he could. Not a flicker.

He removed his hand and trembled with a spine shiver that zinged his back. What had Julian taught him? He could do anything. The power was a thrill.

'Helen...'

'Yes,' his girlfriend replied vacantly.

'You need a holiday. You deserve a holiday. You're going to have a holiday.'

'I'm going to have a holiday.'

Even though she was under hypnosis, he thought that he detected a hint of enthusiasm in her voice. But he was doubtful. *You're just trying to ease your conscience.*

'You're not going to wait. You're going to tell work you're taking whatever last-minute holiday takes your fancy first. You're not going to leave the subject open for discussion. They owe you holidays, and yours is long overdue.'

No reply followed from Helen. It struck him that he was hardly doing better than trying to talk to someone in her sleep. 'Helen, when are you going to make the arrangements?' he asked her and wondered if she would know what arrangements he was talking about.

'...While I'm at work.'

Gordon made a fist and mouthed a silent yes. 'This stuff really looked like it was doing something. Then he added, 'And you won't let your manager put you off?'

'No... not that silly cow.'

Gordon started to feel he was already a step closer to getting into Nerine's pants. It would be easier to chase after her without Helen around to complicate things. He looked again down at Helen lying innocently before him, and gulped back a twinge of shame. Does power corrupt? he asked emptily. Why not try something next to assuage his uneasy conscience? So far his suggestions had been made solely to meet his own selfish interests, but Helen really did deserve a holiday.

'When you arrive at your holiday destination, you will find you

have an abundance of energy and enthusiasm. You'll do everything you dream of doing on holiday.' He wasn't sure he knew what she did dream of doing on holiday. No matter, he expected he would hear all about it from her when she got back. 'You won't feel the usual inhibitions. You'll have fun.'

'I will have fun,' she replied.

He wondered now if he should try to make good on his promise before he brought her out of hypnosis. He had said he could make her slimmer. He hadn't worried whether he could actually do it. It would be simpler just to bring her around, but then again, he was enjoying himself.

He could just blather the usual advice. At least he could keep her off those insane fad diets. 'You will eat a balanced and varied diet and exercise regularly.'

He thought about what else he could add. She was always going on about how many calories were in things. It was such a bore. 'You will have a subconscious calorie counter in your head. It'll keep a tally of the calories without you even realizing. And it will tell you how much you should eat, not your stomach.'

'And I won't even realize,' Helen responded.

'That's right. You won't even feel like you're on a diet. It will just feel normal.'

'I won't feel the diet.'

'No, not in the slightest.'

He liked that idea. He didn't think it helped you enjoy a holiday if you were constantly worrying about what you couldn't or shouldn't be eating.

He smirked at a mischievous thought that crossed his mind. 'With each pound of weight you lose, you will find your libido rising. It will make you very forthright about your desires in the bedroom.'

It couldn't do any harm, he thought smugly, and brought her out of her trance.

§

Gordon slipped out of bed and out into the living room, not knowing whether Helen was asleep yet but going quietly anyway. There, he paced up and down, his eyes not seeing, his thoughts racing.

He had hypnotized her. He had put her into a hypnotic trance, given her... what? A therapy? And then he had brought her out of it again, all unaided by Julian, unaided even by a prop.

Sleep was impossible while he was feeling this kind of excitement.

Everything had gone beautifully, but with one reservation. He couldn't help having the thought that maybe he had jumped the gun. What if he had said the wrong thing to Helen while she was under? Perhaps it could be dangerous. Perhaps there were rules to adhere to. He could have screwed her mind up.

Then again, wasn't Julian asking that he treat Leekston tomorrow in his absence? If there really was a risk that damage could be done, surely Julian wouldn't have proposed such a thing.

He still felt doubts. Perhaps there were things he should know but didn't. He picked up the book that Julian had given him. He didn't really expect that it would have all the answers, but anything it said might give him a better insight and might lessen the uncertainties.

He settled into an armchair and read about mesmerization if only to silence his own thoughts on hypnosis.

What bothered Maximilian Forslagg was the implication of his discovery that he could implant ideas and desires. Were not one's desires very personal to oneself? If one's ideas were not his own, one's very thoughts, then what was? The human mind should not be so malleable.

Because it was his mind that mattered to him most – not his position, not his appearance, not even his name, but his mind was what he held to be the thing that made him who he was. His revelation appeared to threaten the very heart of his identity. If one's thoughts and desires were cast into doubt, what else was left. Am I only a husk, he asked himself. Where is *my* mind?

He continued his experiments on his unwitting clientele, but his revelation forced a new perspective on what he was doing. Now when he entranced his subject, instead of making her perform some debasing act, he would tell her how cold she was, then he would tell her she was too hot. He would watch as she reacted to each suggestion accordingly.

Not only was one's mind in doubt, but the experience of one's reality seemed pliable too. The objective world appeared little more

than background scenery and stage props. The play was just invention – and not necessarily one of your own.

And he continued to suggest desires and wait for them to be evidenced in his awakened subjects. Here he found cause for encouragement; not all the women responded in the unreserved way that had the lady in his first such experiment.

At first he thought that maybe he hadn't practised his technique with equal proficiency, but further trials soon dispelled that idea. No idea exists in a vacuum, he thought, and realized with delight that the ladies who had responded most forthrightly were just those for whom the implanted idea had been the most acceptable.

He told them what they wanted to hear, Gordon thought to himself. The hussies. He glanced at the clock on the video. It was late, but he couldn't drag himself to bed yet. He wondered, Had he told Helen anything she wanted to hear?

Forslagg wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. There was more to the mind than thoughts and desires. Why had he forgotten about memories?

Memories could contradict implanted ideas. But it would require introspection. Forslagg realized from his experiments that people didn't often do this and suddenly saw why. We rationalized. It was culturally engrained into us that we should explain. That our thoughts were our own was unquestionable. It was the way that culture assimilated minds. It was the way that individuals were converted into a compliant herd.

Instead we should have been scrutinizing.

Forslagg's feeling of having arrived at some kind of crucial enlightenment didn't last. A very dark thought extinguished it and threw him back into pit darkness. He felt a sense of ominousness, renewed and multiplied. Now that he had thought the thought, he knew he would have to investigate it, and somewhere deep where he didn't want to acknowledge, he knew that he wasn't going to like what the investigation would reveal.

Memories provided the books by which thoughts might be scrutinized and audited. But what if memories weren't sacrosanct? What if under trance he could manipulate even those? In truth he felt no haste to have his disturbing suspicion confirmed, but events

conspired against him so that his answer was thrust upon him much sooner than he expected, under circumstances that he should have foreseen.

Gordon folded the book and hid it away in his briefcase. It wasn't quite the settling read he had hoped for, but he found it strangely compelling. Hearing Forslagg worry about the consequences of hypnosis somehow meant he didn't have to.

He trod lightly as he crept back into the bedroom. He heard from Helen's deep breathing that she was asleep. There was just enough light to see her face. Still gazing upon her, he eased into bed, trying not to bounce the mattress, and wondered if anything he had suggested to her would have an effect.

CHAPTER 19

Gordon arrived at Julian's practice expecting to find Nerine waiting alone for him in reception. It had comforted him to imagine that Julian would be hanging around anxiously to impart some final words of wisdom, but he knew in his heart it was a false faith. Julian wouldn't have waited.

Gordon had been distracted on the way over by a bearded and weary-looking, old beggar who smelt of piss and alcohol, who had given him the choice between feeling like an easy touch or a cold bastard. Another time a few years ago, he had thought he might escape the dilemma by giving a derisory amount. On that occasion, the beggar had looked at the seven pence as though he had been handed a turd, and had followed Gordon menacingly until Gordon had managed to duck away from him. It seemed as soon as someone begged for money from him, he could find no reply that wouldn't leave him feeling bad. Why? What was wrong with him?

As he stepped through the door, his apprehension resurfaced, and his stomach rolled.

His eyes found Nerine, and she was more gorgeous than he remembered. She looked up from her desk and smiled, and he temporarily forgot his anxiety again. She could cast a distracting spell.

'Hi, Nerine. You're looking very beautiful today.'

Her smile broadened. 'Hi-ya. So here you are; I was beginning to wonder,' she began in mock reproof. 'I've had to wait here alone for you, you know, Gordon. Julian left ages ago.'

'Oh.' He glanced towards the door of Julian's office. He had still harboured a pathetic hope that Julian might be inside. He looked at Nerine who looked back at him uncertainly. He was suddenly anxious

not to give her the impression that he was anything other than delighted to be alone with her. 'My mother told me that I was a late birth,' he quipped. 'I suppose it's a case of start as you mean to go on. I can't remember the last time I was early for anything.'

Nerine shook her head; her lips were pinched shut; and then she laughed. They looked at each other. Gordon was feeling a strong sense of desire and wondered if Nerine felt the same thing.

'You better go straight in,' Nerine said demurely. 'Mister Leekston should be here any minute. You'll want to be ready for him.'

Gordon noticed something in her voice. He couldn't quite decipher it. She wasn't nervous for him, was she? 'Nerine...' he began, but something in her expression told him now wasn't the time. 'Yes, thank you, you're right,' he said pointing airily at the door to the office. 'I'd better go in.'

§

Nerine watched Gordon enter Julian's office, and tried to contain the feelings that were inflamed. Not that it was Gordon's fault, but it was impossible not to resent him a bit for it. She yearned to be the one in there instead, to be the one on the inside.

And on how many occasions had she asked Julian for the same?

He had been stiff-necked about it the first time and refused her blankly. That was a long time ago, only shortly after they had first started going out. Since then his refusals had become more apologetic. She exploited his moments of weakness and her own moments of advantage to spring her requests upon him, but he never wavered – except once. There had been some kind of upset in his family. She hadn't dared to ask him about it – even by then she knew that much about Julian. She had been ready to listen, but he had bottled it all up. Finally he had held her and told her how he didn't know what he would do without her. He had been in a vulnerable emotional state when she struck. The moment that it seemed he might crack, she recoiled at her shameful opportunism and hastily let him off the hook.

Julian hadn't yet allowed her even to sit in while he saw a patient. He maintained that it would be inappropriate for him to turn his consultations into a spectacle, and that it was too important to respect a client's privacy. She said he could always ask for a client's

consent for her to be present; he had replied that it wasn't for him to impose upon clients who sometimes came to him with problems they found very embarrassing. She supposed that it was just the very embarrassing cases that she was most interested in.

She had not abandoned the hope of changing his mind – neither had she let him forget what she wanted – but reluctantly she admitted to herself, although Julian was being an uptight arsehole about it, perhaps he had a point. That was before the situation with Gordon developed. She saw with resentment that Julian didn't mind flaunting his high-handed principles when it suited *himself* to do so.

No, she couldn't blame Gordon. She wouldn't let herself be jealous of him. She fumed at Julian instead.



Gordon tried to rehearse how his appointment with the patient was going to go and kept being distracted by the thought that Nerine and he would be alone together after Mr Leekston left.

A light rap at the door drew his attention.

'Mister Leekston's here to see you now,' Nerine said. She turned away and gestured, and Edmund Leekston walked in. Nerine leaned forward to grab the door handle, and pulled the door closed, leaving Leekston entirely in Gordon's hands.

'Hello again, Mister Leekston,' said Gordon standing.

'Call me Edmund, please.'

They met in the centre of the room and shook hands. A sudden thought occurred to Gordon that he might not have to hypnotize Edmund at all. The disappointment that accompanied that prospect surprised him.

'Edmund, please take a seat, and tell me how things have been at the office this week.' He gestured to the chair and propped himself against the edge of the desk.

'I admit there has been some improvement.' Mr Leekston paused. 'I hope this won't sound ungrateful, but I had hoped for something more... well... unmitigated.'

Gordon clapped his hands together and smiled with pleasure at this admission. 'Not at all, Edmund. That's not an unreasonable hope at all. The treatment required depends very much on the individual. A strong-minded person such as yourself, well... let me excuse myself

by saying it's not always possible to give a complete therapy in one sitting,' Gordon continued confidently, but he was making it up as he went along, 'We have laid a good groundwork. Today's treatment will have a compounded effect on the last one. I fully intend to give you exactly what you were hoping for.'

Mr Leekston had been pulling at the ends of his fingers. Now he leaned back and interlaced his hands upon his stomach. He didn't smile, but he seemed satisfied.

With a finger over his lips, Gordon thought how he should proceed. 'If you could just provide me with some detail about how things were at the office,' he said stalling, '– anything that springs to mind, even small things that might seem of doubtful relevance. It all helps me to determine a more effective treatment.'

Mr Leekston cleared his throat and began. 'I wasn't bothered so much by so many unprovoked thoughts as before... and I didn't find my eyes scouring the office for her.' He stopped to think. 'While she was at her desk, I was able to get on with my work without constantly feeling aware of her presence.' Leekston looked up into the air and pursed his lips. 'Except when she was on the phone,' he said thoughtfully, 'when, of course, I would notice her voice and – but I don't consider that exceptional; you know how it is with people on telephones.' Mr Leekston looked for agreement from the hypnotherapist.

Gordon nodded sagely. 'So what then?'

'Well...' he said and paused, and his eyes unfocused as he recollected. 'It's when she walks by, I smell her perfume. But I don't just *smell* her perfume, I'm supersensitive to it. It's as if my nose drinks in every last drop. It's as if I can feel her walking by. I'm acutely aware of how close she is. The feelings return, and all I can think about is her, my desire for her, my desire just to grab her and squeeze her in my arms... And I'm very bothered by erections.'

Gordon had to catch himself. He hadn't expected Leekston to be quite so frank, but he thought quickly and nodded with understanding. He wished he could share this with someone – with Nerine! Something told him that she would really enjoy this.

'Thank you for your candidness, Edmund. I know how difficult it can be to talk about these things of a personal nature, but it does help

me to gauge the problem properly. Sometimes small details have large ramifications.’ Gordon tapped his lips with a finger as though he was giving the problem great consideration. ‘I am going to put you under very deep hypnosis this time.’

Leekston began to smile, though only briefly because his expression became controlled so that his mouth appeared devoid of merriness, but a hint of pleasure remained evident in his eyes.

‘If you are ready, I’ll begin straight away.’

Leekston nodded.

Gordon realized then that he had arrived at the moment of truth. The patient rested before him and was unaware even of the possibility that Dr Lissope had doubts. Gordon had hypnotized him before, but only under Julian’s supervision. Also, in Gordon’s favour, it did *seem* that he had successfully hypnotized his girlfriend, though nothing had yet been proved. But this was the real test: Was he going to be able to hypnotize a genuine patient – in total absence of Julian’s influence? He suddenly thought how acutely embarrassing it would be if he couldn’t get Leekston under, and he wondered if Julian had planned this all along – as some kind of deferred payback for what Gordon had unintentionally done to him, back when they were in school.

This was no good. He clung to the idea that he had hypnotized Helen – really hypnotized her. He had pinched her hard to make sure. If she hadn’t been hypnotized, if she had been just very relaxed or asleep even, she would have reacted. She would have had to react. Julian couldn’t know that he would go away and practice on somebody, or that he had succeeded. So it didn’t matter if Julian was only trying to make a fool of him, because now he really could hypnotize.

In any case, he thought, Wasn’t he being just a bit paranoid?

He leaned round and plucked up Julian’s spiral from the desk. He’d had chance to find it before Mr Leekston arrived. He discovered that there was a battery-powered motor on the back, a bit like one of those hand-held fans. He just had to flip a switch to start it rotating. It supplied the extra bit of confidence he needed. If he had managed to hypnotize his girlfriend without such an aid, then surely, with this little baby, Edmund Leekston would be no problem.

‘Look into the spiral,’ he said. Leekston looked at it, and Gordon set it spinning. ‘Concentrate on the spiral. You’re falling down, down – listen to my voice – down, deeper, deeper, and deeper into the spiral...’

Leekston’s fixed, unblinking eyes looked unnatural and, combined with the rest of his mien, created an aura which Gordon was beginning to recognize – Leekston was under. Perhaps he had already been mesmerized a whole minute. Gordon continued to let the spiral run, just to make sure. He could hardly now doubt that there had been a change in Leekston – his cheeks seemed to have gained in flabbiness and age. Remembering how he had decided he could check with Helen, he reached over to pinch Leekston. He withdrew his hand warily – it was one thing to pinch his girlfriend, another to... besides which, it was unnecessary; Leekston was definitely in a deep hypnotic trance.

He grinned then. Suddenly he felt ridiculous for having doubted Julian at all. Julian had made him into a hypnotist! He felt a shiver of excitement and considered what to do next. He could exploit the situation, and there was no one around to disapprove. Julian might be bound by a professional code, but not him; he had been an impostor from the outset. Public beware – charlatan at work!

He recalled the various stage hypnotists he had seen over the years and his scepticism which had always accompanied that kind of entertainment – was it all a fix? Were the audience-participants just show-offs encouraged to extremes by the occasional plant? Having proved that he could wield this implausible ability himself, it amused him to think that somehow it meant he had joined their ranks. He considered that his own natural leanings were more in that direction. He even had an idea for a name – ‘The Great Gordonzo! He couldn’t see himself as a therapist; he wasn’t like Julian. Maybe it was a desire to assert the difference – what he might do; what Julian might do – which led him inevitably to the idea he had next.

He snickered to himself and wondered if he dared. Getting this far hadn’t been without effort, so maybe he deserved a reward for the exertion. Was there any harm in having a bit of fun? No one would be any the wiser.

‘Edmund, tell me, what’s the name of this girl at the office?’

‘Louise... Miss Louise Bunty.’ Leekston’s voice had the dislocated quality of someone speaking lucidly in his sleep, and Gordon experienced a similarly peculiar sensation on hearing it: a second of surprise followed by a realization that no awareness of surroundings had gone into the articulation. Leekston’s utterance had been entirely uninhibited.

It was time to get something a bit more juicy out of Edmund Leekston.

‘Edmund, what would you like to do to Miss Louise Bunty?’

CHAPTER 20

Never mind the envy, the curiosity was killing her, but Nerine stayed dutifully behind her desk. She read a few emails, even started to reply to one, but her mind wasn't on it. She gave up without saving and shut down her computer. She consoled herself with the thought that, if Julian wasn't going to tell her what was going on, maybe she could pump Gordon after Leekston had gone.

She stared in frustration at the door that separated her from everything of interest. She had closed it herself, which was something she didn't usually do for Julian. He liked to choose the moment and, by doing so, emphasize his client's privacy. Silly really, she supposed, although if he could avoid making himself transparent, it might possibly be helpful. To her, affected body language was always a dead giveaway, and Julian knew better than to try it on her. She still remembered the once vogue consultancies that had done the rounds persuading everybody that it was OK to try to manipulate one another – as if no person could be other than delighted to discover he had been duped. Probably Julian had learned enough skill to work those gentle frauds on most who didn't know him well. But as for Gordon – she thought she hardly needed to worry that he wanted to try the same thing.

Simply, she had shut the door because she didn't want to be reminded that Gordon was in Julian's office doing what she wanted to do. Gordon had been given free reign, more than she had asked for, but her desires had been frustrated, so she had tried to shut out what was transpiring.

But it didn't work. She couldn't stop wondering what was proceeding between Gordon and Mr Leekston. How could Julian be

such an inconsiderate bastard? Couldn't he guess how galling this situation might be for her? She slumped, elbow on the desk, chin supported in her hand, eyes fixed resignedly on the hinged but crackless barrier, imagining what sensational goings-on might possibly be occurring in the room next door.

§

Silence. Gordon wondered whether he hadn't made the question direct enough for someone under hypnosis. Then the reply came, and he realized Leekston had just been considering his answer.

'I'd like to bury myself in her arms and hear her groan with longing,' the subject said in absurdly unemotional tone.

Gordon had to bite his cheeks. If Edmund Leekston continued to make his personal disclosures in this ludicrously deadpan voice, Gordon saw his self-composure would be in serious jeopardy.

One time at Brock, Hardy & Hammel, he had had to walk out of a meeting in hysterics, red-faced with embarrassment and shying from the perplexed stares of colleagues. He had felt such an idiot. It had started over something trivial, and all because he had thought, fatally, that he mustn't laugh. He stopped laughing and felt like a dickhead almost the moment he was out of the door. When later, drunkenly, he confided at the pub to Ronnie what it had been about, Ronnie agreed that, yes, he was a dickhead.

Gordon wanted more from Leekston. 'Tell me about Louise.'

'She's young... and full-chested. Very womanly. And she wears tight skirts.'

'Yes?'

'Yes... tight skirts. Curvy. Firm. She has a bottom that stirs the loins. And the way she laughs – my ears live to hear her laugh, or to hear her say my name. And that narrow waist...' Gordon imagined that Edmund would normally have made such observations with at least an appreciative sigh, but in his current condition, his words were expressionless '...I'd like to grab it in my hands and squeeze. And I'd press her body against mine. Then I'd show her how bonkers she's driving me.'

'She thinks about me too. I can tell by the way she looks at me that she's thought about it... just as I have.'

Gordon appraised Leekston. He had described the girl as young –

young enough to be his daughter perhaps? He wondered if the attraction was really as mutual as Leekston had convinced himself. What fools love could make of us. What could the woman see in this ageing man? The idea crossed his mind unkindly that she must be desperate or mercenary, but he discovered he didn't believe it. Leekston wasn't an unattractive fellow.

Someone had said to him that love enters and leaves through the eyes. That had set Gordon thinking when he had heard it because he didn't think it could be true. Surely love was blind. Lust entered through the eyes, and it stayed only transiently. Love made a far more unbidden entrance; it entered through the nose – and who could help that. Try falling in love if you were bunged up with a blocked nose – it just never happened.

Leekston's words had evoked for Gordon the image of a curvy, young beauty, but one ordered to his own whim. Instead he tried to imagine the woman attracted to Leekston. There always remained the possibility that it was just wishful fantasy on Leekston's part. Perhaps she had responded to him with nothing other than friendliness. Gordon, like Leekston, chose to ignore that far less interesting possibility.

He imagined the two, tortured by their pent-up desires for each other, greedily savouring as much of each other as office decorum would allow – tame flirtations, stolen lusty glances, close encounters in trembling electric air. He imagined how they might find themselves alone in the office one evening, by chance both having a piece of work that needed finishing before morning, and their surprise upon realizing it was just the two of them left. Together. Alone!

He remembered something he had seen a hypnotist do on a TV show. He wondered if he could do something like it himself. He looked down appraisingly at Edmund Leekston; his eyelids were sliding slowly down over his eyes as he lay passively on the leather couch. Yes I can, he thought. I can do anything. This would be better than just getting him to divulge it all.

'Edmund.'

'Yes.'

'In a moment I'm going to ask you to open your eyes, but you will not wake up. You will not find yourself in a hypnotist's office but in

your own office at work. You will not see me, but you will hear my voice, just as you do now.'

Nothing.

'Say, "Yes, Master,"' said Gordon irritably. All pretence at therapy was quickly vanishing.

'Yes, Master.'

'Open your eyes, Edmund.'

Edmund opened his eyes and looked around.

'It's the evening, and the office is empty. You've stayed to finish up. There're a couple of things you must do before the morning. But it appears you're not the only person who's stayed behind. There's someone else busy at the photocopier, but it's the only other person in the office... and it's Louise.'

Edmund appeared to be staring at something across the room.

Gordon continued, 'She turns round from what she is doing to see you looking at her, and she's as surprised to see you as you are her. You stare at each other across the empty room. Her eyes beckon you to go to her.'

Edmund walked across the room, the office in his mind seamlessly melded with the physical reality of the objects in Julian's office. Gordon wondered about this and thought, It's like a drama student improvising a set from the classroom furniture. Edmund had chosen as his photocopier the small table in the corner of the room by the window.

'She wants to know if there is anyone else around. Tell her, Edmund.'

'No, it's just you and me... thank God, at last.'

'She says since there's nobody around to see, there's nothing to stop you doing something that... would... you could kiss her, for instance.'

'Yes.'

"We might not get this chance again," she says.'

Edmund stood lifelessly like a dummy.

'She's standing there waiting for you to kiss her.'

Still no movement.

'Kiss her!'

To this command Leekston responded, reaching out and

enfolding a body of nothingness within his arms. Then reaching forward with puckered lips, he kissed the air.

‘She returns your kisses. She seems impassioned,’ Gordon prompted.

Edmund began to neck the ethereal body he had entwined in his arms. He kissed his imaginary woman untiringly, and it appeared he would carry on doing so until instructed to do otherwise.

Gordon watched all this gleefully. He wished someone could share this with him, and he wanted conceitedly for someone to see what he had done. He thought about Nerine outside in reception and considered what might be her reaction. Would she be conspiratorial, or would she be outraged and insist on giving a full report to Julian?

He remembered what she had said in the bar that night, but that was in fun with a drink in her hand. She might take a different line when faced with the reality.

He decided to risk it. If she reacted badly, he could promise to put things right and beg her not to tell Julian. What if he couldn’t persuade her even to agree to that much? Hell, he would just have to hypnotize her too. He was starting to believe that nothing was impossible.

Quietly he walked over to the door and opened it. He was surprised to find Nerine staring at him intently, as though she had found nothing to occupy her and had spent the whole time he had been inside wondering what he was up to. ‘Come and have a look at this,’ he said in a whisper.

Nerine was out of her seat and around from behind her desk like a bolt.

Both of them stared at Edmund Leekston. ‘What’s he doing?’ she whispered.

‘He’s working late with a girl at the office.’

‘Why’s he kissing her?’

‘I told him to.’

‘Wha...’ Nerine brought her hand up over her mouth. There was obvious delight in her eyes.

They watched him for a while longer. ‘Can I have a go?’

He needn’t have worried about her running to tell tales to Julian then, he thought. He turned to look at her. He could see the hope in

her eyes, the pleading. Evidently she had meant what she said in the bar.

He considered it. He didn't want to be a spoilsport. He really wanted to say yes to her, but he didn't know if it would work. What if it didn't? What if it broke the trance? Would Leekston realize what had been happening?

He couldn't bear to turn her eagerness into disappointment. He would let her try, and if it all went wrong, he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

'Edmund.'

Edmund gave his tongue a rest to reply. It had been working continuously for minutes. 'Yes.'

'Another voice is going to give you instructions now – a woman's voice. Listen to the voice, Edmund.'

Gordon turned to Nerine and smiled. 'All yours,' he whispered.

Nerine didn't waste any time. She didn't show any of the hesitancy that Gordon did. She launched straight in, in confident voice. 'Edmund. Your girlfriend is all hot and excited from your caresses. She's telling you she wants you.'

'Where?' Edmund asked his imaginary Louise.

'Right here in the office. Over there on that desk. You're both really turned on. Neither of you can let the moment pass.'

Edmund led his phantom to the desk. Gordon and Nerine both stepped back a pace.

Nerine continued, 'She perches against the desk and lifts her skirt up around her waist. She has skimpy nickers on. She's waiting for you to slide a hand inside them.'

Gordon found himself being aroused, and more than a bit surprised. He looked at Nerine's animated face as she observed Edmund's response to her instructions. God, he felt so attracted to her right now. Was she getting a kinky thrill, knowing he was listening to all the things she was saying to Leekston? She must guess what her words were inspiring. Was she talking dirty to him by proxy? Her eyes flicked sideways and caught him staring at her. She smiled. He thought, yes, it had to be that.

Gordon returned to watching Leekston. He was fiddling with something by the desk.

‘She wants you to pull them off and take her.’

Leekston withdrew his hand and unbuckled his trousers. He dropped them. They fell around his ankles, revealing blue and white, striped boxer shorts which thankfully he left intact. He jostled and began to sway his hips in thrusting movements.

Gordon looked at Nerine. She was staring wide-eyed at Edmund, and her eyes were aimed downwards, directed down below the belt. Gordon followed her gaze to see what had caught her attention. Mr Leekston was sporting a magnificently large erection. It was uncramped by his loose-fitting shorts, pulling them forward into a wigwam of cotton cloth.

Nerine had forgotten her whispering voice. ‘Oh my God, he’s got an erection,’ she yelped in amused delight.

Gordon thought they would have some explaining to do if Leekston awoke from the spell in this instant. He remembered Leekston’s comment about how he had been bothered by such unrestrained hydraulic activity. He turned to Nerine and whispered, ‘Do you mind if I take over again now?’

Nerine shook her head slowly from side to side, beaming all the while.

‘Edmund, pick up your trousers and fasten them up.’

Hearing Gordon’s command, Edmund stopped immediately and did as he was bid indifferently.

Gordon turned to Nerine and said in a hushed voice, ‘Blimey, control like that just doesn’t seem natural.’ Nerine gave the barest shake of her head and then made a dirty smirk, though it seemed to Gordon there was something appraising in the look she gave him.

‘Now return to your seat and close your eyes again.’

Nerine and Gordon followed him back.

‘You are back in the chair in the hypnotist’s office now,’ Gordon said and realized he felt relieved to have him back. He decided to seize more control of the situation. ‘You will hear only my voice now. You will hear no other voices. And you’ll only hear my voice when it’s you I’m speaking to.’

Nothing again – no response.

‘Say, “Yes, Master,”’ Gordon said, perhaps letting slip a tinge of impatience.

‘Yes, Master.’

He turned to Nerine to explain apologetically, ‘I still have to give him his treatment,’ and found she was giving him the most amused look, eyebrows raised, but whatever she was thinking, she let it pass.

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Well, he wants to forget about the girl – he’s married you know – so that he’ll be less bothered and distracted at work.’

‘What about the girl?’

‘Miss Louise Bunty. I don’t know.’

‘She’ll be a bit stumped when she finds that, all of a sudden, she doesn’t seem to register anything on him.’

‘Ummm...’ Gordon’s eyes were glazed in contemplation.

‘Can’t you give them what they want?’

Gordon turned to look at Nerine. ‘You know, that’s just what I was thinking.’

CHAPTER 21

The nearest tube stop was north, so Julian headed south, and then he waited at the end of the street. He looked down its length back the way he had come. He followed the progress of a pedestrian who had just rounded the corner at the top of the road, and continued watching until the pedestrian passed the door of his practice. He judged that the walk took about two minutes. Of course Gordon might arrive by taxi, but supposing Gordon arrived on foot from the Regent's Park tube, he would have to look up and down both sides of the street at least every couple of minutes until Gordon arrived.

It would be nice to satisfy himself that Gordon had actually turned up, but he hadn't wanted to hang around to greet him. He had suggested when they spoke that he might, but that had been a lie. He had no intention of giving Gordon an opportunity to try and worm out of what he had agreed to.

He waited for nearly ten minutes, carefully observing the street, feeling all the time uncomfortably like a loiterer, before he thought 'to hell with it' and stalked off towards Oxford Street.

Having arrived there, he walked aimlessly, staring into shop windows as he passed them, but he soon tired of weaving through the crowded pavement in the still considerable heat. Suddenly with an idea of where to go, he turned up a side-street so that he could traverse with less obstruction, and headed for a restaurant he knew.

The wood of the Georgian-style windows, the signboard, and the glazed door were painted in a livery of yellowish green. Silver lettering proclaimed the name, The Stoical Epicurean. Again as always, the sight of that name set his mind to wondering. On the

surface of it, and with the knowledge of the type of restaurant it was, the name required a patron who would give up a luxury without complaint or regret, but in the same breath nevertheless supposed that a typical frequenter would be just the sort of person who was most devoted to pleasure. At least, that was how he read it himself. But then if one considered the etymology of the words, the name curiously conjoined two infamously opposed schools of philosophy. Julian wondered, not for the first time, whether the namer had intended this and if so, what he had been getting at by it.

Inside only two tables were occupied. Literature decorated the walls, pinned up on notice-boards. One poster announced the time and place of the IVU's next biennial world congress. Several others contained graphic antivivisectional messages.

Restaurant was an inappropriately grandiose name to apply to the place. Café suited better the plastic chairs and the stapled menu sheets. He took a seat at an empty table, and a glum, dark-haired girl he hadn't seen before, with plaits and an apron, approached him. He looked past her to the chalked-up special, which was enigmatic as usual. Then he looked up at the girl again, and pointing back with his eyes and nodding, he asked, 'Does it contain any dairy?'

She glanced back at the chalkboard. 'Um, no. No cheese... or egg either. It's quite oniony though, but very nice.'

'I'll have that then, please.'

She smiled and was about to turn, but he added quickly, 'Oh, and a coconut smoothie.' The smoothies were at least half of what kept bringing him back. They were just like the ones he'd had on holiday in Indonesia, a long time ago before he had discovered his current profession. He remembered how he had set off alone on that big trip with the cliché in mind of 'going to find himself'. After two months abroad, when memories of people and things left at home had grown alarmingly dim, he realized instead that in fact it seemed he was running away from himself – an idea which might have had an appeal if he hadn't realized at the same time, that it was just the elements of himself he most wanted to leave behind that seemed most capable of following him wherever he went.

On the table next to him, two men were involved in an good-humoured argument. Auger was able to glean that one was the guest

of the other. The guest, not being a vegetarian himself, had no doubt accepted the invitation of his friend (who fervently was one) for a bit of culinary variety and adventure. However, it now had to be obvious to him that his vegetarian friend, admittedly on home turf, saw it as his duty to try and convert him. The guest seemed flattered by the attention he was receiving and amused by his friend's missionary zeal.

'Well, have you got a pet?' the vegetarian was appealing to him.

'No.'

'Well say you had one, a dog say.'

'I wouldn't have a dog. I don't know what I'd do with it during the day. I don't think I'd have time to walk it. I s'pose I might have a goldfish.'

'No, not a goldfish. Let's just suppose you had a dog.'

'All right.'

'Would you kill it and eat it?'

'Course not.'

'Why not? In the end, it's all just meat. I mean, they even eat dogs in some countries.'

'Well I wouldn't. I wouldn't eat a horse either.'

'And if you did have a dog, you wouldn't want to kill it, would you.'

'No. Why would I want to? Sometimes you read stories in the paper about people who've done things like that. I think they usually get prosecuted for it.'

'Well suppose one day you came home, and your girlfriend served you up a meal. You didn't recognize the meat on your plate, so you asked her and she said, Oh, it's the dog. I left a two-hundred-pound new dress in a carrier bag at the bottom of the stairs, and the bloody dog tore it to bits. I hit him over the head with a saucepan, I was so furious – and he didn't get up. I didn't know what to do with him; he was dead; I couldn't believe it. In the end, I thought, Waste not want not. The rest of him's in the freezer.'

The guest had begun to laugh at this far-fetched scenario.

'So would you eat the meat?'

'I think I'd call the men in white coats,' the guest chuckled. 'Look, I don't know what I've told you about Rachael, but I must have given you an entirely unfair impression.'

‘Yes... but you admit you wouldn’t eat it, even though it was perfectly hygienically prepared, is nutritious, and actually looks and smells quite appetizing. I mean, it’s going to be thrown away otherwise. It’ll be a waste.’

‘I wouldn’t eat it. If she hadn’t told me until after I’d eaten it, I think I’d probably be sick. I’m quite easily put off my food.’

‘OK, OK. So you wouldn’t eat your own dog, even though someone else had killed it and cooked it. Would you eat any dog if someone else had prepared it?’

‘I’ve already said I wouldn’t... nor a horse, or a cat. Not if I knew what it was, that is. You know, I’ve had a few curries where I wondered.’

‘So you wouldn’t eat anybody else’s pet either.’

‘No.’

‘All right then. Say instead of a dog, you had a sheep – a nice pretty lamb.’

‘I don’t think a lamb would make much of a pet, not like a dog.’

‘Haven’t you heard, Mary had a little lamb; it’s fleece was white as snow, and everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go. Lambs can be very nice pets if you find one that isn’t too timid. I mean it’s the emotional connection I’m talking about, like with a dog. I’m not saying they *make* a good pet.’

‘So you’re saying I could get attached to a sheep.’

‘Yes.’

‘You seem to know a lot about it. Is there something you’re not telling me?’

The vegetarian shouldered the tease and plugged on. ‘Hmm, very funny. If I accept hypothetically that I like sheep and always keep a pair of wellies in the boot of my car, will you accept hypothetically that you have a lamb as an adored pet.’

‘Umm... I know I’m walking into your trap, but go on then. Yes.’

‘Well say, instead, your lamb had chewed your girlfriend’s dress, and she banged it over the head with a saucepan and served it up to you. Would you eat it? Remember, you really loved that lamb, just like you did your dog. Would you eat it knowing it was your pet?’

‘I’m tempted to say I would, because it’s just lamb, isn’t it. I eat lamb all the time... But then if I wouldn’t eat my dog, I suppose to

be consistent I can't eat my lamb either.'

'So you wouldn't eat dead pet lamb?'

'I think I'd actually have to be faced with the situation before I could say so with conviction. I don't think I would... but maybe I would.'

The vegetarian who had been itching to leap now burst out with a delighted expression on his face. 'So you wouldn't eat a lamb that you knew, or at least you might have some qualms about it, but you have absolutely no hesitation about eating lambs you never knew.'

'And as long as it wasn't someone else's pet either, I s'pose. So what's your point?'

'Well that's like saying you wouldn't eat me because I'm your friend, but you'd quite happily eat someone that you didn't know and that nobody else was likely to know either – meat from another country say.'

'Ah... but that's cannibalism. That's different altogether. And it's not the same because I wouldn't eat a person in any case.'

'Not even if you were the survivor of a plane crash, and you had to eat those who died in the crash to stay alive until you were rescued?'

'Well that's different again because there would be no other choice. There's more holes in your argument than a Swiss cheese.'

'All I'm saying is, If you wouldn't eat a pet, then you shouldn't eat any animal whether it's your pet or not. But if you would eat a pet, then if a friend died – in a car accident say – you should eat him too to be consistent.'

'Why do I have to be consistent?'

'Because otherwise you're behaving irrationally.'

'If being rational means that I have to eat any friends that die in car accidents, then I think acting rationally is overvalued.'

'Well maybe it doesn't have to mean that. Maybe it only means that you can't eat meat.'

'I think I'll stick to my position – acting rationally is overvalued. Yeh, I think I'm onto something here. It's a lot easier to formulate an unsound argument than it is to spot the flaw in it. By specious reasoning, you can arrive at any conclusion you want. In fact it would be irrational to put too much faith in anything you arrived at by

reason... especially verbal reasoning – it's a minefield.'

Auger felt a strong temptation to interject at this point, but he held his tongue and continued to listen in on their conversation.

'That's like saying you won't be reasoned with. What chance have I got then?' The vegetarian's complaint contained a petulant tone that seemed to accuse his guest of having spoiled the game.

The guest relented. 'Oh, all right. Here's some reasoning for you. We live in a democracy, right – the desires of the majority rule. Well the majority eat meat, therefore it must be all right to do so. If it isn't, then democracy as a basis of government must be capable of producing immoral policies and laws, and therefore is fundamentally flawed. So if you believe that eating meat is wrong and act on that belief by not eating any meat, then to be *consistent*, you must believe the system of government of this country is unjust and must take action to overthrow it.'

'Just because eating meat is generally accepted doesn't mean that it's right.'

'So when's the rebellion against democracy then? When are you going to start the war?'

The vegetarian laughed this off. 'Not me. I'll never start anything, but the other side might. Even normally peaceful people can become very aggressive when they think something is going to be taken from them. It's funny that you should've mentioned war. It was to defend the right to maintain slavery that the Southern states of America eventually went to war.'

'What's slavery got to do with it?'

'You like meat, don't you. And you can sort of see the argument against it, even though you don't agree with it. And you'll admit killing animals isn't exactly nice. I mean, nobody wants an abattoir at the bottom of their garden, do they. But you enjoy eating meat, have always done so, and intend to carry on doing so. In fact, you would consider having to give up meat quite a sacrifice. And what would you get in return? Somebody to tell you you've done the moral thing – something you still aren't convinced about. I've got all this right, haven't I.'

'Yes, I think that's about it. So? You still haven't said what it's got to do with slavery. If you're going to try and put slavery on a par with

eating meat, I just don't accept that. People aren't animals. The rules are different.'

'No. What I want to say is, it was easy for those in the North, who didn't have any slaves, to demand an end to slavery. But in the South, there were four million enslaved blacks; a slaveholding planter had a lot to lose. Slaves were a great benefit to him; he'd always run his plantation with slaves; and giving up slaves would be quite a sacrifice. And for what? Because someone else who had nothing to lose from it thought it was the right thing for him to do. What did he know? It was like someone who didn't like meat and never ate it suddenly demanding that nobody be allowed to eat it.

'But the planters were a small but powerful minority. You can bet that if nearly everybody had been a slaveholding planter, they'd still have their slaves today, and there'd be a minority of bleeding-heart liberals insisting to the rest that slavery was wrong. Well that's the situation today with meat. Vegetarians are just the bleeding-heart liberals. What I'm saying is, the psychology that allows people to continue eating meat is exactly the same as the psychology that allowed people to keep slaves. What I'm saying is that if you had found yourself in the position of owning slaves, you would be fighting on the side of the Confederate States to keep them.'

Auger smiled. He believed he had made a similar argument one time, but not here. Now where had that been? He remembered then, and his grin broadened. It had been in another restaurant called 'The Silence of the Lambs.

'Oh that's utter bollocks!' The guest had lost his smile. 'For a start, I would've had to acquire the slaves in the first place in order to be in a position to lose them. I wouldn't have bought any slaves.'

'But it's perfectly acceptable. All the other planters are doing it. Why should you struggle on without slaves when everybody else is using them?'

'Slavery is obviously wrong to anybody with any conscience.'

'Oh that's easy for you to say when you haven't got any slaves. Abolition wouldn't cost you a thing. If you want to prove you're anybody with a conscience, try following it when you've got something to lose. Give up meat.'

The guest sat silently for a while. Then he said, 'So you're trying to

say, To prove I have a conscience, I have to follow it even when I'm not convinced that what it's supposedly telling me is right. That's crackers!

'What you're not convinced about is that you want to make the sacrifice.'

The guest breathed hard through his nose and stared thoughtfully for a moment. 'OK. Let's just suppose that you're right. Let's suppose that because I'm haven't made this sacrifice, I'm not anybody with a conscience – but since you have, supposedly you are. Let's just put that to the test, shall we. How many animals are saved from the slaughter because you don't eat meat? Whatever the figure, you could double it if only you could persuade me to abstain too. How could you manage that when clearly I can't stomach the sacrifice? Perhaps you could somehow shoulder the sacrifice for me, having already shown yourself capable of such things for your own account.'

'I can't stop eating meat for you.'

'No. But what if you were to offer to pay me twenty quid a week every week I ate no meat? I'm sure I could manage that. I don't think I'd feel I was making such a sacrifice in that case. In fact I think I'd find myself quite enthusiastic about the arrangement. And if every one of you lot with a conscience was prepared to do the same, I'm sure eventually you'd turn the tide and have done with the meat business. So how about it – are you going to give me twenty pounds a week?'

On hearing this final retort and, with a sideways glance, catching the expression on the face of the man to whom it had been delivered, Auger burst into raucous and unrestrained laughter. Turning to them, he said to the vegetarian, 'You won't convince your friend, I'm afraid. I'm sure it's the kind of thing one realizes alone, either as a result of a particular experience or upon quiet reflection.'

To which the vegetarian responded, 'I was laying it on a bit thick calling him a slaver, wasn't I.' He seemed embarrassed now at the thought that somebody had been listening in, and shovelled a large forkful of food into his mouth.

Auger turned to the guest now. 'Allow me to introduce myself,' and he handed the man one of his cards. 'I'm a hypnotherapist. If by

any chance you should wish to give up meat *without* the sacrifice, let me suggest hypnosis. I promise that after I've hypnotized you, you won't eat meat, and you won't ever miss it – not even very slightly, not even the Christmas turkey.'

The guest was studying the card. He looked up. 'You can really do things like that? I never knew that.' Turning to his friend he said, 'Did you know that?' The vegetarian shook his head, his mouth full again.

Auger smiled proudly. 'That's just the tip of the iceberg, I assure you.' His boast delivered, he turned back to his meal. He slurped through the straw at his coconut smoothie and no longer listened to the conversation on the neighbouring table. His mention of hypnosis had turned his mind back upon what must be occurring at his practice. He couldn't work out what had prompted the feeling, but he suddenly felt a grave regret at having left Nerine alone with Gordon.

CHAPTER 22

Edmund Leekston loved his wife – of that he was sure. He had loved her when he first clapped eyes on her as the young and beautiful language student he met at university. He loved her when he married her shortly after they both graduated. And he loved her as the mother of their three children, who were grown up now and had left home. All the important events in his life, he had shared with Mary.

But he couldn't get Louise out of his system.

She hadn't made any special impression on him at first. He had noticed she had a good figure. He wouldn't have said she wasn't attractive, but neither had he been struck by her looks. She certainly wasn't a beauty who had overwhelmed him at first sight. She was beautiful to him now of course, and that made it difficult for him to see how he had missed it before. She had slowly grown on him. Perhaps it was the flattering effect of perceiving that a younger woman was interested in him.

He could recall the first time he suspected having seen her look at him that way. How good it had made him feel. The idea of it energized him, but even as he had welcomed the injection of vigour, he knew there would be a price to pay. Pretty soon he was addicted.

It was impossible to stop certain thoughts from shooting into his head, but he wouldn't do anything to hurt his wife. He didn't want to; he loved her. But God help him, he had to get this out of his system. He dreamed of what a relief it would be to have it just washed out of him – brainwashed!

Perhaps he should trust somebody with such confidences – a specialist of some sort. Perhaps he could be freed by a hypnotist.

Nerine watched Gordon as he stared down at Mr Leekston. She glanced over to Leekston and back again to Gordon. Anticipation boiled in her, causing a delicious spine shiver that shot up and down and sent a wave of tingles round her ribs to her flanks where it reached down and mixed with the residue of her earlier feelings of sexual excitement.

Thank you Gordon! She was sure this was better than any dry session she would have had while sitting in with Julian and one of his patients.

‘Edmund, I’m going to free you,’ Gordon began.

Rather than having any qualms about what he was going to do, it felt more like he owed this to Leekston after the amusement they had taken at his expense.

‘You are going to seduce Miss Louise Bunty. You are going to catch her on her own and make a proposition.’

‘...A proposition,’ responded Mr Leekston.

Gordon thought he heard a slight edge to Leekston’s voice. ‘You are under very deep hypnosis,’ he stated in steady, evenly spoken words.

‘Yes.’

His assertion reassured himself as much as it convinced the patient. ‘You’re going to make a proposition,’ he resumed, ‘– a sexual invitation in no uncertain terms. If Miss Bunty doesn’t slap you in the face, make sure that she knows you are married and that you intend to stay that way. Tell her it can only be a one-off. Tell her it can’t turn into an affair, but that you can satisfy each other’s curiosity and get it out of your systems.’

‘What if they want more?’ Nerine asked him.

Gordon smiled at Nerine knowingly and continued. ‘You will persuade Louise that, afterwards, you will be able to look upon each other, not as the source of frustrated desires and missed chances, but as a pleasurable memory – the satisfaction of having wanted something and of knowing that you got what you wanted.’

‘You will both be happy to leave it at that rather than spoiling it with an awkward relationship that neither really wants.’

‘How do you know she doesn’t want a relationship?’ Nerine asked him.

Gordon lowered his voice to address Nerine. 'It works both ways, doesn't it. For Leekston, the thought that a nubile, young woman is sexually attracted to him appeals to his vanity. Equally Bunty gets a thrill from thinking an older, still attractive man-of-the-world is getting all flustered over her. She feels flattered that perhaps he's prepared to jeopardize his marriage for her. Maybe she even thinks she would like a relationship with him, but later she'll have time to reflect, and she'll be glad she didn't.

'That's my guess anyway.'

'Or maybe she'll just turn him down flat,' said Nerine reproachfully. She didn't like the insinuation that this girl – that *women* – were so unelaborately transparent.

'Not such a happy ending for our chappy here,' Gordon admitted, 'but either way, problem solved. 'Anyway he, at least, doesn't want a relationship. That's why he's here.'

'You're sure about that, are you?'

They exchanged smirks.

Gordon added, 'Well, what woman really wants a relationship with someone who doesn't want the same thing. I mean, why punish herself?'

'Yes, I suppose...' she agreed. He was off the hook.

Gordon turned back to Edmund. 'Whatever happens, you'll feel no regret, no guilt, and no need to confess all to your wife. Thoughts of the episode will never even occur to you in the presence of your wife. You will be your normal, untroubled self.'

'How do you know he's not a grouch?' Nerine quipped.

'In that case, I'm doing her a favour too.'

'How do you know she doesn't like grouches?'

'Do you?'

'No,' said Nerine and smirked. 'I like hypnotists.'

Gordon quickly decided he had finished with Mr Edmund Leekston. 'I'm going to bring him out now.'

Nerine nodded and let herself out.

'Edmund, I am going to revive you in a moment.' Gordon hesitated. The humiliating things they had made Leekston do, he wouldn't remember it all would he?

'You are not going to remember anything that has occurred to you

today under hypnosis, not consciously. But unconsciously you will not forget the instructions I've given you, and you will act on them.'

Gordon wondered if he could simply dictate something that sounded so self-contradictory. How much would Leekston remember, and which parts? He wondered if Leekston would be outraged, but have no idea why. There was nothing else to be done. He was tired of this game now, and inspiration had left him. Whatever the outcome, Gordon thought, he was going to learn something further about hypnosis. Then with a certain uneasiness, he was reminded of the old adage, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

'When I bring you around, you will feel groggy because you've been in such a deep state of hypnosis.' He found the idea that he might ordain his patient's frame of mind reassuring, but not reassuring enough. He almost wanted to add, 'You will thank me profusely and leave entirely satisfied,' but he didn't. If he did that, he would get no immediate feedback and might only have delayed an inevitable reaction until the patient reflected on things later.

He suddenly had a fit of regret. What had he been thinking? His mind began to race. Talk about a breach of trust. Julian was going to kill him.

He caught a hold of himself. Julian wasn't going to find out. Nerine wouldn't tell him. His girlfriend hadn't woken up and asked him why he wanted to pack her off on holiday... so... why should this patient be any wiser? He took a deep breath.

'At the count of three, Edmund, wake up and open your eyes. One, two, *three* !'

CHAPTER 23

Edmund Leekston opened his eyes and remembered where he was. His vision was blurry, and he blinked several times. He saw that the hypnotist was watching him intently. ‘Anything the matter?’ he asked him.

The hypnotist responded jovially, ‘No, no, not at all, Mister Leekston, I mean Edmund.’

Yet Mr Leekston saw something in his eyes, something he didn’t like. He didn’t feel comfortable with this fellow any more – he couldn’t put his finger on exactly why – and he certainly didn’t feel any enthusiasm about the thought of returning. ‘Has this been my last session then?’

‘I will have to consult with Mister Auger, but I should imagine so, yes.’

‘Good,’ he said, then realized that might have sounded ungrateful. He wondered resentfully why he should care if it did. He had begun to deem that the hypnotist didn’t deserve his friendliness, but he relented and said, ‘This kind of thing breaks the bank, I mean.’

‘I think you’ll find that you’ll have your value for money.’

‘What?’ Mr Leekston snapped testily. What was this doctor insinuating with that snide tone. Something narked about this guy that he hadn’t noticed the first visit. That time the other hypnotist had been here too, he supposed. Was this specialist being condescending or just blowing his own trumpet?

‘I mean I’ve worked hard on your case.’

‘Of course.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Christ! Is that how late it is? This took longer than last time.’ He seized upon the excuse to rush

off and avoid having to force out pleasantries. ‘My wife will be missing me.’

‘Undoubtedly, yes,’ the hypnotist smiled at him. Leekston contained a sudden, violent impulse to punch this fellow in the mouth. And he was surprised because such bursts of fury weren’t like him at all. They shook hands brusquely, and Dr Lissope opened the door for him to leave.

He gave an adios salute to the receptionist on his way out and felt a pang of embarrassment – but had no idea why – and hurried out. He hoped all this had been worth the trouble.

§

Nerine leapt out of her chair and was moving towards the office even before the door swung closed behind Leekston. ‘What happened?’

‘I think it was *all*, all right,’ Gordon answered noncommittally.

‘He seemed to leave in a hurry.’

‘Ummm... the wife he said.’

‘What a laugh! Thank you for that, Gordon.’

Gordon cheered up immediately. Gratitude was always nice – but nicer still, coming from an attractive person of the opposite sex.

‘That’s one of the things I’ve always wondered about hypnosis,’ she added.

‘What is?’

‘Whether a man is still capable of it. Whether he can still be aroused?’

‘I’d say he was aroused... and he wasn’t the only one either.’

‘I turned you on, Gordon?’

‘I’ll tell you one thing for sure, it wasn’t Leekston.’

Nerine burst into a quick laugh that began as a loud cackle and ended in a snort. ‘I think I like that,’ she said eyeing him coyly and watching his reaction. She continued, ‘And on the subject of being left all alone in the office after work...’

‘So we are,’ Gordon agreed, his heart beating faster.

‘She’s standing by the door, waiting for you to kiss her,’ Nerine prompted.

‘How did you –’

‘Kiss me!’

Gordon would have complied with this demand, but he barely

needed to because Nerine's lips had begun to advance on him the moment the words were out of her mouth. Their open lips touched lightly together, and he felt her breath on him. He was suddenly overtaken with a ferocious urgency. His arms enfolded her and squeezed her against him. Their mouths opened wider, and their tongues met and swirled round and against each other in a frantic instant of ecstatic pleasure. It was pure and fleeting, without that earthy, unacknowledged regret that sometimes hides itself in more premeditated pleasures.

Her arms were trapped by his embrace, her hands upon his chest, and now they pushed at him. He relaxed his hold of her, and she pushed herself away from him, her lips leaving him last.

He let his outstretched arms fall away from her sides, and she turned away from him. He couldn't read her, and he realized with great disappointment that she was heading towards the door. It seemed that might be all; he had been hoping for more.

He nearly called out her name in some desperate and imploring manner, but luckily she spoke first. 'Let me just lock the door,' she said without turning around. 'Hypnotists' surgeries attract some right nutters.'

Relieved, Gordon replied, 'Two good examples right here.'

'Now, now, be good or I won't let you fuck me.'

Gordon moved further back into the office and started to unbutton his shirt excitedly. He was already standing in his underpants when Nerine returned, and he felt momentarily self-conscious under her scrutinizing gaze until she too began to remove her clothes. She unbuttoned and removed her blouse while he stood motionlessly, separated from her by the length of the couch. He watched as she kicked off her shoes and dropped her skirt. He drank in her beautifully curvaceous figure, lingered on her high-cut lace panties, hunted out the dark shadows of her nipples in her semi-transparent bra. 'Oh God,' he said appreciatively.

Her skirt lay on the floor around her feet. She stepped out of it towards him, and he took a step forward himself, matching her advance.

'There's just one thing...' she said raising a hand in front of herself.

‘Yes?’

‘First you have to let me hypnotize you.’

Gordon froze and fell silent for several drawn out seconds. He finally said, ‘What? *Why?*’ He wanted to ravage her this very instant, and it didn’t appear she was joking.

‘Call it an experiment into male sexuality.’

It sounded as though it might not be as bad as he first thought. Perhaps she had something kinky in mind... but in which case, her earnest was weird. In a quick judgement of himself, he concluded reluctantly that he didn’t dare say no in case his refusal put an end to the proceedings. He had to say yes. ‘OK,’ he said, not hiding well his lack of enthusiasm for any dallying.

‘It’ll only take less than a moment,’ she consoled him.

‘What I had in mind first wouldn’t have taken much longer than that,’ Gordon said slumping onto the leather couch.

‘That’s what was bothering me. Close your eyes.’



Gordon awoke as if from a daydream. Nerine sat beside him, perched on the edge of the couch, one naked thigh pressing against his. She was looking at him.

‘What happened?’ he asked feeling dislocated.

‘I hypnotized you.’

‘You really hypnotized me?’

‘I really hypnotized you.’

‘I didn’t know you knew how.’

‘So you wouldn’t have agreed if you thought I could really do it?’

‘Hmmm...yes...no...I don’t know. What did you do to me?’

Nerine laughed, but it was a kind laugh.

‘So did your experiment work?’ Gordon asked, remembering what Nerine had said just before it had happened.

‘That remains to be seen.’ She ran a finger slowly down his chest, down his lean stomach, lower to where her finger hooked on the waistband of his underpants. She tugged on them playfully.

Gordon leant forward and pulled her onto him. They kissed, then he kissed her cheek, moving to her ear, then her neck. His nose nuzzled in her hair and caught the fragrant aura of conditioner. His hands reached around and fidgeted with the clasp of her bra before

one deft hand reached around behind and did it for him. They looked at each other as he pushed the straps off her shoulders and the bra fell. His blood rushed. They embraced again; his lips headed lower once more. Nerine's head tipped back, and he kissed his way down her throat. She leaned back pulling him forward onto her, and he kissed and sucked at her breasts. She moaned encouragingly.

He kissed his way down to the line of her knickers and began pulling at their band with his teeth. He glanced up at Nerine. From her reclined position on the couch, she gazed back at him with bated breath. He sat back and started to pull down at her panties, and when she adjusted her weight slightly, they slid away easily to her knees where, released, they fell to the floor. Gordon stood up and removed his own underpants quickly. Nerine began to part her knees slowly and widely, and Gordon's eyes were drawn. In that moment, he felt an overwhelming compulsion to do only one thing, but despite himself he knelt and kissed high up inside her thighs, first one side then the other, gradually working inwards until Nerine finally gasped and caught, and gasped again.



The experience still excited her. The tension mounted as she heard the aspirated whining pitch wind up even higher. Everything vibrated from the agitated thrust which trembled against the restraining brakes. Then release. Her seat pushed into her back. Every chair shuddered with the motion, and fittings rattled and creaked disconcertingly and excitingly. Outside the tarmac below became a grained blur, and grass at the side sped by ever faster. She felt like they were being launched by some huge, unseen catapult.

The scrolling world outside rotated as she was pitched backward. She noticed they had transcended to smoothness and realized almost with shock that it meant they were already in the air. The initial lift had been imperceptible. Now they were firmly in the soft, plunging terrain of thin air. The climb began to pull ever steeper, past the point she always imagined it should stop, until it seemed she was laid almost completely on her back and was being launched vertically upwards. Her ears hurt under a pressure deep inside, and she swallowed enthusiastically. She still found flying a thrill.

Family holidays had been nearly always taken in Wales or

Cornwall. Just occasionally they would go somewhere else, still in the UK, but those two remained the favourites. Her friends would return to school with tales from exotic locations and carrying strange souvenirs. She asked her mother if they could do the same, but they never did go anywhere foreign, and so she was already twenty-one before she first flew in an airliner.

She hadn't been away anywhere at all since she had started the job in London. She kept intending to, but there never seemed to be a right moment to go. Now she had finally broken away, and she was filled with holiday excitement. It had been so long that she had forgotten about the high spirits. As they flew within sight of the Channel she mumbled, 'First to see the sea,' under her breath. In a few hours she would touch down in Tenerife.

She amused herself by imagining the surprised reaction she would receive from Gordon when she called him. It struck her how incredibly mischievous she had been. Well, there just hadn't been time to tell him.

CHAPTER 24

After the unpleasant experience at Blooming Naughty Bloomers, she had phoned her credit card companies. Her Visa card was overspent. She asked what were the credit limit and outstanding amount on her MasterCard, and bit her nails as she waited for the answer. Her relief was palpable when she received the answer.

The day following Gordon's hypnosis for her diet, she had managed perhaps half-an-hour's work before she decided to take a break. She began surfing the web again, holiday sites as usual. She was scanning the late deals for bargains. One to the Canary Islands particularly took her fancy. It departed early that evening. Just for idle amusement, she imagined rushing around to make the flight, and dashing back to the flat to fling everything in a suitcase. She even considered what she would take. A crazy idea struck her then.

She added the page to her favourites and went back to work. By lunchtime she hadn't been able to get the idea out of her head. She had her credit card in her hand and the payment screen in front of her. 'Go on! Do it,' egged a voice in her head. And she did.

The confirmation arrived that her booking had been accepted, and she felt a surge of adrenalin.

She grabbed a piece of paper and scrawled down the check-in time and ticket collection details. Then she jumped up and almost ran to the stationary cupboard. She could hardly find the holiday slips fast enough. She dashed back to her desk and filled one in. It was only a request form, requiring a signature from her manager to be approved. She filled it in for the week anyway. Then she stuck a Post-It on it and wrote in red pen, 'Got to rush. See you in a week!' and drew a smiley underneath.

Most of the office had gone out for the lunch hour. She would have done herself if it hadn't been for her urge to have another look at the holiday; it was too nice to stay inside otherwise. Feeling exhilarated, she dropped the holiday slip into the in-tray on her manager's desk and hastily left the building.

At her flat, she began throwing clothes and a couple of books into a suitcase. She was being rather indiscriminate in her haste, and she soon had the suitcase filled and closed. She put her passport in her handbag. Money, passport, and ticket details – those were the real essentials, she reflected. Anything else she needed she could buy when she got there.

She picked up her suitcase and got halfway across the bedroom before she balked at the weight. She threw it open again on the bed and started flinging things out. Any piece of clothing with even the slightest bulk, she discarded. It would be too hot for those, she told herself. The case started to look a bit too empty then. She had a naughty idea. She opened a dresser drawer and took out her new lingerie, the lingerie Gordon hadn't even seen yet. She put it in her suitcase. It wasn't going to go to waste.

With her load much lightened, she caught the tube to Black Friars. There she caught a train that would go all the way to Brighton but which stopped at Gatwick airport. She made last check-in with time to spare and, now that she was sitting in the departure lounge, it had all seemed so easy that she couldn't think why she had never done it before.

§

The husband of Lady X was a big man, tall and broad, large headed. No aristocratic slightness of build was evident in this fellow. His features were ruddy as if through drink – though his words, and the venom with which he delivered them, showed that this redness was inspired instead by his fury.

He told Forslagg that he intended to use his influence to run Forslagg out of town, but not before he had punched him on the nose.

It was little surprise to Gordon to read that Maximilian Forslagg had exploited his new-found power to implant sexual desire in his lady clientele. The next time that a subject had thrown herself at him

on revival from the trance state, Forslagg had been ready to exploit the situation to the full.

Forslagg mocked himself: Scientific investigation had never been so gratifying.

But Forslagg realized he had been rather incautious. He should have entranced the subject again and erased all memory of the incident. Chagrined he realized why it hadn't occurred to him to do this. It would have meant admitting what he hadn't been ready to admit – that he could manipulate a person's memory.

Incautious, Gordon thought. Forslagg's disquiet resonated with his own. Had he been *incautious* with Helen, with Leekston? Oh God yes – Leekston! It had been fun at the time. It had won him a shag with Nerine – yes, that was the dirty truth of it. But who knew what the repercussions might be. What would Julian do if he found out?

Lady X had been such a delicate thing, rather retiring. It had surprised Forslagg what a voracious sexuality he had awakened in her. It seemed hard to imagine that she should be bound in wedlock to this eloquent, seething barbarian whom he saw standing before him now.

The thought of being punched on the nose wasn't appealing, but when one had been hooped in the bollocks by a cow, along with other such hazards of the veterinary profession, one became fairly equanimous to such things. What he couldn't allow was that this oaf should bring to bear his considerable influence to drive him out of town.

Apparently, in a fit of guilt, the woman had confided to her husband what had occurred in a private room at his veterinary surgery while her beloved dachshund looked on in shame. Forslagg reassured the man that there had been a great misunderstanding. His wife had agreed to aid him in a psychological experiment. The experiment had been to see if memory of some event could be implanted in the mind of the subject. Would the subject subsequently recall the implanted event as something real that happened in her life?

He did admit that, on reflection, the nature of the implanted event had been rather ill-thought, but it did provide a stern test of the theory since the memory was of such an emotionally charged nature.

Forslagg realized the irony that he was now claiming already to have achieved what, against reason, he had hoped would prove to be impossible.

Of course, the husband of Lady X wasn't convinced, but after persuasion he did agree to a demonstration of the mesmeric techniques which had supposedly been used. Forslagg knew he had him then.

With the aggrieved husband before him, passive and entranced, the bloody redness slowly dissipating from his cheeks and nose, Forslagg considered what he would do next. He realized that he had not only claimed to have already done the thing that disturbed him, but now his salvation depended on him actually being able to do it.

So be it, he thought. Let fate conspire to force this observation upon me, but if I save my living, I destroy my soul. What a perverse humour life has.

And so he implanted the false memory, that the husband hadn't believed his wife's story from the beginning; that he had come here only to discover the explanation which he already knew must exist; that the vet's explanation had completely settled his mind and that this little demonstration of mesmerization was solely for his own amusement.

When Forslagg began to bring the man out of the trance, he could feel nothing but indifference about what the result might turn out to be. He felt that the choice of action had been taken from him. His faith in the sanctity of his identity had gone.

The husband had converted into a model of congeniality.

Sometimes, out of the ashes of dark depression, rises a phoenix of soaring new hope. It was true that the departure of the happy spouse left Forslagg alone in despair, but reflecting on the incident he began to see things in a new light.

Hadn't the husband left a happier man? Perhaps the memories of our lives had been thought an inviolable and cherished part of what identified us, but what of bad memories – couldn't bad memories become our prisoners? By twisting memories one might be freed of the tyranny of one's own past. The rose-coloured spectacles could be made a lot rosier.

Gordon wondered what he might like to change about his own

remembered past. Imagine that – changing your life just by remembering it differently. That thing you never had but wished you did. Well now you did. You had it, enjoyed it, eventually even got bored with it. No more regrets over missed opportunities. You took them all, and you had a ball.

But wouldn't it all be the ultimate in self-delusion? So what! Delusion was de rigueur, wasn't it – for everything from lying about your age to taking solace in God.

He looked around the empty flat, closing the book. No Helen yet. Where had she got to?

He stared down at the peculiar book in his lap and wondered about it. He stroked his fingers over the oldness of the texture of the covering. Why did Julian want him to read this?

The Unspeakable Thing...

Somewhere a suspicion of a reason arose. It didn't quite make it to the surface. Some other part of him quickly quelled such a possibility, and he soon forgot that any thought had occurred to him.

But it ruminated around, unbidden and nibbling in the depths where light rarely penetrated.

§

She looked out the cabin window. The wing appeared to be bent upwards flimsily. Continental Europe lay ten kilometres below. There wasn't a cloud between them. It amazed her how distant she felt from the world down there. Life continued beneath her, but she was no longer a part of it. It made her think of the spiritual experience astronauts described having when they looked down on earth from orbit. It couldn't be that different from what she was feeling.

She returned to making her list. Very sensibly, she had started to draw up a list of things she wanted to do on holiday. Daddy would be pleased. Reading it back to herself, she realized that rather than being a wish list, it was more of a duty list, what a dutiful tourist should do while on holiday. Sightseeing tours of interesting landmarks – boring!

She remembered having packed her lingerie and thought naughtily of what she would really like to do on holiday. *No! I couldn't.* Her thoughts turned to Gordon instead. She remembered that he had hypnotized her so she could lose weight. She knew it was stupid, but

she had the funny feeling it had already started to work. She already felt thinner. She felt sexier.

Then she started to ponder something that she had so far avoided thinking about: the night Gordon had blown her off and ruined their evening – to work late. She had got wasted that night. She had woken in darkness, bursting for a pee and with a dry thirst. She had got up without waking Gordon. Her face had felt rubbery, and she realized she was still quite inebriated, but she wasn't completely out of it. When she flopped back into bed, she thought she could smell drink on him too. She leaned over him to take a closer sniff and that was when she smelt something else.

She heard Gordon leave hurriedly as she got up. That added to her suspicion. He could have been avoiding her. Surely she was imagining things. She had walked round to Gordon's side of the bed. She picked up his pillow and held it to her face. No, she hadn't imagined that. The smell had been on him. Perfume. And it wasn't hers.

But Gordon and London already felt remote. Although she had avoided thinking about the implications of the perfume, now that she did, she just couldn't get worked up about it. It bored her even to think about it anymore. She was on holiday. Soon she would be in Tenerife. She imagined gleefully phoning from the hotel reception to reveal to Gordon that she was in the Canaries. That would be a rather big surprise for him. She wondered if he would say anything about her spending a load of money on a holiday. All things considered though, she didn't think he was in the best position to complain.

There were two girls her age, sat beside her in the isle, who she had ignored up until now. They were engrossed in excited anticipation of their holiday. She looked at them now. 'I'm going to Playa de las Americas...'

The girl closest looked at her. 'Us too. We're staying at the Hotel de Fulanas.'

'That's where *I'm* staying. I saw Hotel de Full-on'ers and thought, That'll do for me because that's the sort of girl I am – full on.'

'Yeh, but it probably just means something boring. They probably just called it after the local flowers or something.'

Her friend piped up then. 'It means hotel full of slappers, actually.'

The girl laughed and turned to her friend. 'Sarah, that is bullshit.'

'No. I looked it up in a dictionary.'

'When did you look anything up in a dictionary?'

'In the bookshop in the airport... when I was bored. They had some next to the travel guides, so I looked it up because it was the only thing I could think of.'

'Yeh, well I bet it didn't mean that.'

'Remember the Hotel de la Pedorrera last year, Jen?'

'Oh yeh, I hope the place we're going to is better than that place was. I suppose you looked that up in the dictionary too.'

'Yep... string of farts.'

'It doesn't bloody mean that,' Jen said in a torrent of laughter.

'On my life, Jen, I swear.'

'Honestly, what is she like!' the girl said turning to Helen and shaking her head. 'Have you been to Tenerife before?'

'No.'

'We have haven't we, Jen?' said Sarah leaning around.

Jen glanced at her friend and back at Helen and smiled as she nodded.

'I'm Helen.'

'I'm Jennifer,' said the girl closest, 'and my best friend, scandals-in-sandals here, is Sarah.'

'Playa de las Americas is the best, isn't it, Jen. Especially if you're going for the three esses.'

'Sun, sea, and sex,' Helen volunteered.

'No. Sex, sangria, and STDs.'

Both the girls thought this was hilariously funny, and Helen couldn't help laughing along. 'But I've got a boyfriend.'

'So have me and Sarah. We've both got boyfriends.'

'My Steve went on holiday with his mates,' explained Sarah, 'and I heard what his mate Paul got up to. Steve says he didn't do anything, but yeh, like he never does anything his mate Paul does, does he? Not much. Paul has got a girlfriend too, and it didn't stop him. And I know Steve's just as bad as him.'

'Definitely,' Jen confirmed. 'Being unfaithful on holiday doesn't count. Everybody does it, and everybody knows everybody does it.'

Why would they go on holiday without their other halves otherwise?’

‘So are the Spanish men really hot in Tenerife then?’

‘Oh yeh,’ said Sarah. ‘Fancy a bit of Latin love, do ya?’

‘That’s Sazzer for you. She’s always chasing Spanish men... and she actually caught one once.’

‘Oy! And the rest. May key-air-ren como locos, I’ll have you know. You should come round with us, Helen. It’s better to hunt in packs.’

Jennifer had an attack of the giggles. She finally controlled herself, but when she turned to Sarah to say, ‘God, the things you say, Sarah,’ the innocent expression she saw on her friend’s face felled her again. ‘Honestly, Helen,’ she said struggling to get the words out. ‘She’s always like this. She’s always cracking me up.’

‘What did I say?’ Sarah asked.

‘You should come along with us, Helen. We have a right laugh.’

Helen had been scrunching her tour of duty as she talked. It was now just a crumpled ball in her hand. She remembered it there and dropped it. ‘Thanks, guys. I think I will.’

They grinned at each other. They were infected with the excited feeling that the holidays had just begun.

Helen thought, It’s only a week, but I’m going to make the most of it. She was going to throw herself into the spirit of things and have the best time. She said, half thinking to herself, ‘So... if you’ve been before, you must know all the best places to chase blokes.’

CHAPTER 25

Mary Leekston looked across the table at her husband, waited for him to speak, and hoped.

‘I’m sorry I’m so late, darling,’ he said finally.

She poked at her mashed potatoes with her fork. Reheated, they weren’t that nice. The lamb too was dry and tough. ‘Sorry about dinner. It got a bit dried up. The roast was lovely when I took it out.’

‘Not your fault, dear. I’m famished anyway. It’s fine with a bit of gravy.’

She grimaced. She knew he was just being kind, but it somehow cast into doubt all the praise he had ever heaped on her cooking.

‘That hypnotist,’ he said irritably. ‘It didn’t take half as long, last time.’

‘Did he say why it took longer this time?’

‘Not really. The proper guy wasn’t even there, which struck me as odd, just this visiting expert who was there last time. Said he was going to put me under very deep hypnosis. So I suppose that must have been it.’

‘Do you think it will work?’

Edmund choked on a bit of meat. It got him quite badly. He had to spit the contents of his mouth onto his plate while he coughed it up. Mrs Leekston was about to get up to slap him on the back, but he waved to her that it wasn’t necessary.

‘I don’t know,’ he said finally. ‘There was something about the whole thing that left me feeling uncomfortable. Maybe I was mistaken to think that somebody else could fix my problems for me.’

Mary’s heart dropped. It wasn’t what she had been hoping to hear, but she tried to remain positive. ‘Well it’s early days yet. You don’t

know how you'll feel tomorrow.' She didn't understand what ailed her husband, or was afraid to.

'Well, we'll see,' he said noncommittally.

She felt a sudden flash of hatred towards him. It surprised her, but it subsided quickly because her curiosity was now aroused. Her husband looked awkward, and she knew he had thought of something that he hadn't spoken.

'I'm probably going to have to work late at least one night in the next week.'

Mary was still wondering what his unspoken thought might have been. She now noticed that he seemed anxious to explain why he would have to work late. 'We're very busy at the moment,' he was saying. 'We've got an audit by the compliance department. Lots of documents to shred, files to lose, you know how it is.'

Mary flicked a pea at him off her plate. When was the last time he had tried to make a joke? 'I thought you had an audit a couple of months ago.'

He was stumped for a moment. 'Er...oh yes, of course. That was an *accounting* audit. That time I just had to cover my tracks to hide the embezzling I've been doing for our retirement to France.'

She didn't need any more convincing. Whatever Edmund said about it, something the hypnotist had done was having an effect on her husband. 'I was talking to Gene today. You know – Gene and David. They've invited us to visit them in their villa in France. They're going to be there all summer, and she said they'd be delighted to have us to stay any time.'

'Uhhh.'

'We haven't taken any summer holidays yet. I thought we should go. We could scout around a bit as well while we're there.' She realized her husband was no longer really listening to her. His eyes were slightly glazed, and she knew he was occupied with thoughts of his own, his problems at work perhaps. She couldn't help releasing a sad little sigh, then realized in depression that her husband didn't even notice. He had relapsed into his distracted state, the one of which she had come to despair. Mary Leekston wanted the old Edmund back. She still pinned her hopes on this hypnosis stuff returning him to her.

Having dropped her bombshell on Gordon, Helen looked around the lobby of the Hotel de Fulanas and spotted her two new girlfriends. They had walked out of the elevator behind a couple of men whom they were leering at sluttishly behind their backs. They saw Helen, and Sarah pouted her lips and made cross-eyes at her while she made grasping actions with her fingers in the direction of one of the men's backsides. Helen sniggered, and Sarah and Jennifer walked over to her.

'Hi, guys.'

'Helen! Ready to party?'

'Yeh. I just had to phone my boyfriend to let him know I'm in the Canaries. I didn't want him reporting me as a missing person or anything.'

'You mean you didn't tell him you were going?' asked Jennifer, eyes and mouth wide in a combination of astonishment and delight.

'...That's the girl. Treat'em mean, keep'em keen,' joined in Sarah.

'There wasn't time,' Helen answered.

'Oh my God.'

'She's more mental than me, isn't she, Jen.'

'Steady, Sazzer. No one's as mental as you. Or have you forgotten last year already? I hope we don't run into any of that lot again.'

'God! No, best that we don't,' Sarah agreed quickly, then turned and said cheerily, 'She's right, Helen. I am mental, especially on hols.'

'So what did he say?' Jennifer resumed asking Helen.

'Well obviously he was surprised,' Helen explained, 'but he was all right about it. He said he hoped I had a really good holiday. I haven't had a holiday for ages, you know.'

'You mean he didn't flip?' Sarah asked incredulously. 'You ought to watch out for him. While the cat's away, the mice will play. He could have someone on the side.'

'What – Gordon? ...Nah.' But then she remembered smelling the perfume on him.

Jennifer winked at Sarah.

'Come on. Are we going to hit some bars? I'm thirsting,' said Sarah.

The sun hovered low in the sky over the sea and reflected off the

water. The tide was high and turning, calm, and only the smallest waves broke on the sand. The wind had dropped and vanished. The seagulls strutted on the beach, grounded because the air was too lazy to lift them and the day too exhausting to beat about – they would have been easy meat. But on the beachfront strip, mayhem ruled. Bass-heavy music wailed out of the bars, and competing rhythms interfered with one another in hectic syncopation. Laughs and shrieks carried on the general hubbub from three sides of commotion. There was a smell of sea air and fast food which mixed with the cologne and alcoholic breath of the melee. This daylight confusion of the senses created an exhilarating augury of the night soon to fall. There was a crowdwide expectancy and a thrill for what revelry might lie ahead.

The threesome wended their way with a purpose. Jen and Sarah appeared to know where they were going. At the first bar, Jennifer ordered sangrias which they had to down in one – because it was traditional or something.

Then they moved on to another bar, scoping any blokes they saw on the way. In that one, they went for tequila slammers. The alcohol hit Helen hard, perhaps because she hadn't had chance to eat anything substantial before coming out. As they walked to the next bar, she realized she wasn't the only one. Sarah, seeing a fella she liked the look of, let out a great whoop and pulled up her top, revealing her naked breasts, before quickly whipping the top down again.

Jen turned to Helen in hysterics and said, 'Oh my God, she's off already. It's not even dark yet!' and just in that moment, Helen stood in somebody's dropped enchilada and almost slipped over – something that caused further hilarity.

Sarah repeated the action twice more before the fella passed them. Helen wondered, with a disloyal doubt for which she felt ashamed, just what sort of a night she had let herself in for, but by the time they shambled out of the next bar, arm in arm, all such reservations were long forgotten.

Helen found herself grabbing at the hem of her top and yanking it up over her breasts and yelling. But at least it was dark at last. Sarah by now had advanced – or degenerated – and would about-face and

bare her backside to any man who made the mistake of looking in her direction.

They were supposed to be pulling some blokes. Helen had begun to think that they were getting too wasted to be in with any luck, but it seemed the drunker they got the more attention they attracted.

Earlier they had sunk to sneaking up behind any man silly enough to have come out in shorts for the evening, from which position they would rip them down, underpants as well if he was wearing any. Later, they had raided the men's toilets and accosted blokes standing at the urinals by making comments about their equipment.

Now Sarah was sat astride some hunk on his bar-stool and was grinding away on him, though there was still at least one layer of clothing between them, and not that anyone looked twice. Jen had some man stuck to her face and didn't show any sign of coming up for air.

Helen felt drunk. She tried to keep her eyes in focus, but no sooner had she achieved this, they would slip off again in some drunken slur of their own. She also felt a bit sick and hoped she wouldn't be.

She looked again at her two, occupied friends and then scanned the bar. There were plenty of good-looking blokes in this bar, but she didn't think she would be accompanied back to her hotel room tonight. She was too effing drunk. Then abruptly she turned to the man nearest her and said shamelessly, 'Eh...I'd shag you... but I'm too effing drunk.'

§

Helen's call took him by surprise. It wasn't so much that he doubted his ability to have hypnotized her – since his encounter with Mr Leekston, his confidence in his skills had appreciated – it was just that he hadn't expected his suggestions to bear fruit in such dramatic manner.

She called him and told him casually as though nothing could be more mundane, 'Hi, Gordon. I'm in Tenerife.' It was so utterly out of the blue that his first suspicion was that his hypnosis hadn't worked and that she was taking the piss out of him.

He quickly realized that her understatement was a deliberate jest; she really was in Tenerife, and she expected her revelation to be a

huge surprise. He could tell by her voice that it wasn't a ruse. It occurred to him that he should be demanding an explanation. Even though he knew exactly why she was there, she didn't know that he knew, and to behave in any way other than flabbergasted could not possibly sound more cold or indifferent. He didn't want to upset her.

He didn't want to disappoint her either – he could hear how she was relishing explaining it to him – and it went without saying that he didn't want to arouse her suspicion, so he feigned shell-shocked acceptance, and he finished by wishing her sincerely to have a great time on holiday.

He knew he should have felt guilty at having manipulated her so categorically – especially since he had done it just so it would be easier to cheat on her – but hearing the kick she was getting from being there, he couldn't help feeling pleased for her... and oh so pleased with himself.

Ten minutes after Helen's call, and a lot of excited pacing about, he had phoned Nerine and told her that his girlfriend – who he had been in the process of splitting up with for weeks, he assured her – had run off on holiday without even telling him she was going. He said Helen had called him from abroad to tell him she needed to get away and think. Then he asked Nerine, Would she mind coming round to his flat and getting stinking drunk with him?

His lie, the little scenario he painted for her, seemed to do the trick because she came straight round. They kept up the pretence for the first couple of drinks, but then abandoned the booze and got started with what had really been on both their minds. By the time they stumbled into the bedroom, they had pulled off most of each other's clothes. They humped away crazily, oblivious to the fact that clothes still lay discarded and strewn underneath them on the bed, left from Helen's hasty departure.

It was embarrassing when later Nerine had to hunt for her own clothes among Helen's. Gordon swore to himself to clear away and hide all signs of cohabitation before the next time Nerine came round.

§

Helen regained consciousness, and for a moment she couldn't remember where she was. Some light came in through the window,

but she could tell it was very early. She froze for a moment when she realized she wasn't alone in her bed.

She wondered whether she was in her own room or somebody else's and had a moment of panic that she couldn't remember. She looked around, remaining very still, for some detail by which to identify the room as hers or otherwise.

She saw the novel on the bedside table and then the washbag on top of the chest of drawers and realized that the room must be her own. She glanced sideways at the man beside her, who was asleep on his side facing away from her, and then slid carefully off the bed.

She stood there looking at him in his nudity and, as she looked at his face, everything came flooding back. She put a hand to her mouth in quiet glee.

Still naked herself, she decided in the cold light of flourishing hangover that more than anything she wanted to get rid of him. She quietly gathered up his strewn clothes, then she walked round to the other side of the bed and shook him by the shoulder.

'Come on. It's time to go.'

'Whaah?'

'It's daylight, and I'd like you to leave now, please...'

She thought she should add his name, but realized she couldn't remember it for sure. Her head pounded.

The guy let out a deep breath and seemed to have gone straight back to sleep when unexpectedly he said, 'OK.'

He sat up on the edge of the bed, his eyes opening barely a crack, and Helen thrust his clothes into his lap. Arms crossed over her chest, she suddenly felt very naked. 'I'm going to the bathroom. Don't still be here when I come out.'

She heard the shuffling sounds of someone dressing outside and then heard the door click as he left.

Helen looked around her room. She remembered thankfully that she hadn't been too drunk to forget to insist on using a condom. She hunted around and found both of them, one in the bed and one on the floor. Her head throbbed again as she leaned down to pick up the one off the floor. She disposed of them in a ball of toilet roll and then lay down carefully back on the bed. She thought to herself, I've

already scored and that was only the first night. She wondered if Jen and Sarah had had similar luck.

Another thought occurred to her, which amused her, though smiling seemed to be another thing that made her head pound. She would have to find a chemist... and buy a bigger box of condoms. But that would have to be later. First she had to sleep off what she was sure would be a hangover from hell.

CHAPTER 26

Mrs Leekston heard the key turn in the door. 'Dinner's almost ready,' she called without looking up from her favourite magazine, *La Foule Etrangère*, which she had become engrossed in while she perched on a stool in the kitchen and somehow still kept an eye on the cooking. She had first bought a copy over two years ago in January – fresh in her mind had been her new-year's resolution to take an evening class in French, just a conversational class to brush up – and had bought every monthly issue since. She was reading the latest instalment about a retired couple's life in the Loire Valley. They were commenting upon how, these days, new neighbours were always English – never French – and how, unlike the early days when their fellow expatriates arrived with a working knowledge of *la langue*, recent incomers arrived barely able to string three words together. They were full of good intentions to learn the language but, finding themselves with so many English neighbours, showed no propensity to do so. Of course, said this old couple of Francophiles, their countrymen hadn't integrated into the community-as-a-whole as well as they might – a fact which was a source of embarrassment to them before *le maire*, who *naturellement* was their *très bon ami*.

'OK, darling' he called. Then she heard him begin to climb the stairs. 'I'll be right down.'

It was the same routine as always, straight upstairs to change out of his work attire. For months now, so long that she hardly remembered that it hadn't always been so, her husband had trudged up those stairs. She had got used to the sound of it from the kitchen. She had become too acquainted with that slow, laborious plod which flattened her spirits.

‘How about the Loire Valley?’ she called up to him.

‘Loire?’

‘It would be better for you. Plenty of English already there, apparently.’ Her husband had always complained that he must be genetically unpredisposed to learning languages. He was naturally good at things like maths – didn’t even have to try, found calculation a pleasure – but French had always been a struggle against incomprehension at school, despite his desire to succeed. He said foreign languages were for him unfortunately destined to remain no more than an unintelligible babble and a source of mystery. He had always shown a kind of awe of her own fluency in French.

She had tried to gently tutor him twenty years ago. She remembered what he had said to her. If she spoke to him in a proper thick English accent, he might conceivably understand something she said, but if she persisted in talking like a real Frenchwoman, the only thing she would succeed in would be in making him randy.

Such remarks epitomized the quality she missed in him of late, and their absence had filled her with an awful dread of what it might mean. She had grown to fear that somehow it was her fault. Edmund had told her numerous times that it was just problems at work, despite which she failed to avoid feeling responsible for her husband’s unhappiness. She tried to appear cheerful, but his perpetual torpor was gradually wearing her down.

A couple of days after his last visit to the hypnotist’s, she had noticed a difference. He had come home unconscionably late that night, but he had sprung up the stairs when he arrived. She hadn’t attached a great significance to it – he was late home; she supposed he was just in a hurry to salvage something of the evening. He had attacked his dinner with a ravenous appetite. The day after that, he hadn’t charged, but he hadn’t trudged either. She began to hope that the hypnosis was having a positive effect, but still she didn’t let her hopes run away with her. Not knowing anybody else who had tried hypnotic therapy, she was naturally sceptical of its merits.

But now she was more sure. The weightiness had gone out of his ascending footsteps. Whatever the hypnotherapist had done to him, it must have worked in some way.

Having changed clothes, her husband came back down and

walked into the kitchen. She turned to greet him. 'Hello, darling.'

His expression reaffirmed what she had half convinced herself of already. He was far more content. She noticed her own happiness and was reminded of when it had always been like this. It made her realize just how miserable recent months had been. It was as if a huge burden had been lifted.

'I've made your favourite. Liver and onions in gravy with bacon on top, savoy cabbage, and sauté potatoes.'

'Do you fancy a bottle of wine with it?'

'Yes, I think that would be nice.'

'Since we're having my favourite, I thought we might open a bottle of sparkling wine. I fancy a bit of fizz.'

'You know what fizzy wine does to me,' Mary said coyly.

Edmund winked at her. 'That's the bit of fizz I fancy.'

It struck her as ridiculous to find herself blushing, but she supposed she had become unaccustomed to such trifling. 'Well we better hope the bottle hasn't gone flat then.'

Her husband smiled back at her.

'I'm really glad the hypnosis... well, *you* know.'

'Ah, yes. The hypnosis.'

'Oh come on, Edmund. You have to give credit where credit's due.'

'I don't suppose it's done me any harm.'

'Oh, you are rotten. If I ever see that hypnotist, I'll shake him by the hand.'

'Have I been awful?'

'Well never mind about that now.'

Edmund popped the cork off a bottle of specially-selected-for. It ricocheted off the ceiling. He caught some of the overflowing champagne in two flutes held in his other hand. He handed one to Mary.

'Let's have a toast,' Mary suggested. 'To hypnosis.'

Edmund pursed his lips and hummed. 'No. I've got a better idea... To us!'

They chinked their glasses together.

'To us.'

On the street below him, two men in short-sleeved shirts, youngish and wearing ties, were taking it in turns to push at each other. One would say something animatedly, then jut out his chin and jab with palms out against the chest of the other who would lean in to receive the blow so as not to give an inch.

Julian watched from the bedroom window and wondered if the men were drunk. He imagined fanciful sources for their dispute. They were arguing about the price of petrol. One was saying that if people didn't stop burning petrol, climate changes would cause a global famine that would kill four billion people, i.e. all the poor. The other was saying that it was people like him spouting crap who were the reason he had to pay so much tax on petrol.

He wondered if they would resort to fists and then lost interest. It occurred to him that he could pop downstairs and glance over tomorrow's appointments, and he had consciously to tell himself no. That was the problem with living in the flat above the surgery. Highly convenient as it was, it made it harder to leave work behind at the end of the day; you couldn't put any distance between it and yourself.

Earlier in the day, he called Gordon and found him busy. He had been eager to arrange their next encounter to happen soon, but they had had to leave it till next week because of Gordon's work pressures. He had been mildly disappointed, but on reflection, he supposed it was better to let things take their course. And he should call Leekston, before he saw Gordon again, to see if Leekston was overcoming his infatuation. It was stupid of him to have forgotten that.

He turned away from the window to the empty bed. He wondered idly what Nerine was doing. He curtailed that line of thought immediately by slumping onto the edge of the bed and pulling out a journal and a pen from a drawer in the bedside table. He read from where he had left off.

It had occurred to him that space-time had been subtly misconceived. Time could not be a fourth dimension, owing from the simple observation that it had no extent. The mistake had been in not distinguishing a useful model from the reality it modelled. The whole idea of time as anything other than abstract was flawed. It promoted the paradoxical belief that time travel might be possible,

the notion of a past and a future that was somehow already determined – a clockwork universe.

But if one looked closely enough, time simply vanished; things occurred uncertainly; which of two fundamental events had occurred first could be impossible to determine.

He elaborated on these thoughts in his notebook and then sucked on his pen. So if whatever *it* was wasn't time, what was it? Changes – it was incontrovertible that things changed. And sequence – if all changes were not to occur indistinguishably, and therefore meaninglessly, there had to be order. So if there were changes and sequence, a sense of progression would inevitably create a notion of time – convincingly real, yet inherently intangible.

But changes take time was his mind's insistent protest. He knew he would have to confine that objection to its colloquial sense if he wasn't to be straited by it. He lay back on the bed, resting the journal open on his chest, his eyes wide but sightless. 'Time isn't real,' he whispered, and smugly deluded himself he was an undiscovered genius.

§

Gordon lay back and was sweaty. Summer light streamed in through the thin curtains. Sex with Nerine was exhausting and endless. She was insatiable.

He turned his head on the pillow to look at her. She was naked beside him. Her body glistened with perspiration. She was still recovering from their last orgasmic climax together.

The phone rang and Gordon picked it up from the bedside table without thinking.

'Helen,' he blurted, caught completely off-guard. He glanced at Nerine, but she didn't appear to be taking any interest. She continued to gaze upwards at the ceiling as if more engaged in her own thoughts than anything else.

Helen proceeded to rave about what a great time she had been having all week in Tenerife. He had time to think that if she asked him what he had been doing, he had been lying on the bed reading a book. He had been doing a lot of reading while she had been away, he decided.

But he needn't have worried because she was too full of her

holiday to be much interested in how he had been spending his time without her. She was doing a lot of enthusing about how great everything was, he noticed, without getting into too many specifics about what exactly she had been doing that was so great.

‘So what *are* these great things you have been getting up to then?’ he finally asked her.

She was silent for a moment. She had been inexhaustible up to this point. Finally she said in a deliberately coy voice, ‘Ask me no questions, and I’ll tell you no lies.’

She said it in a sort of friendly, playful way that made Gordon feel it would be uncool to try to pursue the question – uncool as in ‘you’ve got a jerk for a boyfriend’ if he did try. So he said reflecting her manner, ‘It sounds like you’ve been a naughty girl.’

He suddenly remembered that Nerine was lying right beside him and thought, You utter pillock, Gordon!

He tried to effect a colder voice after that, one more consistent with someone who had broken up with his girlfriend, but it was a difficult balance because he didn’t want to sound cold to Helen.

She asked him if he would meet her flight on Saturday when she came home. He didn’t see why, if she had seen herself off so efficiently, he needed to be there to collect her.

‘Oh please, Gordon. Going isn’t the same as coming back. It’s always nice to have someone waiting for you to come back, to greet you when you get off the plane.’

Gordon imagined the scene. ‘Yeh, I suppose it is, isn’t it.’

‘Yes, it is. It’s not the same when you’re going. You have to persuade yourself to take the plunge and get going. And then once you do and sort of feel you’re committed, you start to feel excited. You don’t need a lot of people looking on after you and looking miserable.’

Gordon laughed. ‘Yeh, I know what you mean. It always makes you feel like such a selfish bastard for leaving them. It’s silly, but it does.’

‘So you’ll come then?’

‘Yeh. Don’t worry, Helen. I’ll be there waiting for you when you arrive. Bring me a present won’t you.’

Oh why did he have to go and say that! It just sort of popped out

before he could think twice. You don't ask a girlfriend, who has supposedly gone on holiday to get away from you, to bring you a present when she comes back. Not only did it give away his lie to Nerine, but it was a pretty insensitive way to do it too.

Having put the phone down, he turned to Nerine again. She was gazing upwards at a spot on the ceiling. He leant towards her and kissed her on the shoulder.

She spoke without looking at him. 'Gordon, there's something I've got to tell you.'

CHAPTER 27

Nerine lay back on the bed in Gordon's flat. She was hot. She stared up at the ceiling and lay absolutely still, uncovered and naked, waiting for her body to cool.

The phone rang and Gordon picked it up.

So, he wasn't bad in bed. She was sure her hypnotism of him in Julian's office had a good deal of the responsibility for that. His ejaculation dribbled out between her legs; she shifted uncomfortably. There was a cold heat in the muscle of her thighs and buttocks. Sex, she reflected, induced odd behaviour for intelligent beings. Instinctual compulsions befitted the beasts that lived by them, not beings with minds that could be stirred by poetry. In humans it was an anomaly, albeit a vital one. Every time, an almost irrepressible urgency would overtake her and absorb her single-mindedly in the pursuit of that incorrigible pleasure, and afterwards she could reflect how important it had seemed at the time and, in contrast, how absurd any pretension of significance seemed afterwards. How could anyone think reverently about an act that left you naked and sticky. And she knew the next time the drive took hold the reins, she would find herself on the same urgent course, and somehow it wouldn't occur to her to recall that she had ever had this thought. And even though she knew this, she knew knowing it now wouldn't change how anything happened the next time – because if the thought occurred at all, it only ever came afterwards – and this puzzled her.

She didn't love him. She liked him, obviously. She was grateful to him too – she realized that. But she was angry with Julian, and she knew that was what had allowed her to do it as much as anything. Contrary to how it might appear from her actions, she still loved

Julian. It was because of love that she had become so angry with him. It was because of anger that she had wanted to betray him.

But betrayal! For Julian especially, it might be by far the most acutely felt of blows. Why she sensed this, she didn't know, but it was distressingly obvious to her now. She supposed that, in her anger, she hadn't wanted to see it.

She had realized it must be the refugee girlfriend that Gordon was talking to on the phone, though she hadn't been conscious of listening. Something so intriguing should have distracted her, but other thoughts pressed more insistently. She had wanted to teach Julian a lesson, not devastate him. She could hardly believe how her anger had blinded her into being so rash. It was as if she was only capable of seeing this now. She absolutely couldn't see Gordon any more.

She could dump him as Julian had intended her to from the beginning. If Julian discovered she had slept with Gordon, she could retort that at least it would hurt him more now when she dumped him. That was what Julian wanted wasn't it? Maybe he would realize then what he had asked, and forgive her. Oh God.

It seemed now that she had done exactly the opposite of what Julian had got her to agree to. But in her mind, she had never agreed. She'd had her own ideas about what she was going to do from the outset. She hadn't had the stomach for what Julian wanted her to do to Gordon then, and now less than ever did she.

Parts of Gordon's conversation on the phone did manage to intrude on her thoughts. It was pretty clear that Gordon wasn't as broken up with this girl as he had made out. It suddenly occurred to her, 'He hasn't broken up with her at all, has he!'

She suddenly felt a lot easier about what she had decided to do.

§

'Something you've got to tell me? What?'

'I don't think you'll like what I've got to say.'

'Oh no. I knew it.'

'Knew what?'

Gordon shrugged awkwardly.

'No, it doesn't matter. Just promise you'll give me a chance to explain.'

‘Oh no – I mean, OK.’

‘Because I want to ask you to do something. It’s important to me. Do you promise?’

‘OK,’ Gordon said warily. He was convinced this was because of the phone call he had just had with Helen. But Nerine was being very mysterious about it.

Nerine propped herself on her elbow and looked him in the eyes. ‘I never broke up with Julian. I love Julian.’

‘You mean you’re going to go back to him?’

‘No, I mean I never left him. Julian lied to you, Gordon. I never dumped him, and neither did he break up with me.’

Gordon absorbed this. He wondered if it was some kind of joke, but it didn’t seem to fit. ‘What are you doing here with me then?’

‘I didn’t say I don’t like you. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t like you, but there’s something you don’t know.’

‘What?’

‘Julian wanted me to go out with you. He wanted me to go out with you a few times, get all flirty, and then dump you and tell you I was going back to him.’

Gordon said nothing. He felt very bad, but it wasn’t exactly because of what Nerine had admitted to having done, and it wasn’t just because of Julian’s petty spite either.

Nerine seemed to read his expression and naturally attributed herself as the cause of his misery. ‘He didn’t tell me to sleep with you,’ she consoled him. ‘I wanted to sleep with you. I just went along with his stupid plan because I was cross with him for asking me in the first place.’

‘He didn’t tell you to sleep with me,’ Gordon mumbled still reeling, and he thought, *It might have been better for me if he had.* ‘No, of course not... So what now?’

Nerine looked sorry. ‘Julian has a knack of asking for things in a way in which he’s sure to get what he wants.’

Gordon said weakly, ‘I know,’ and grimaced. ‘Or more.’

Nerine’s eyes were downcast. ‘I’ve told you I love Julian. It’s not like it hasn’t been fun, Gordon. I mean it... And I heard you on the phone.’

He felt relieved somehow. He knew this all had to have something

to do with the phone call. 'What do you mean?' he said innocently, and uselessly.

'Come on, Gordon. Be fair with me. Don't let it all be my fault. You haven't split up with Helen either, have you.'

'Yes, I suppose it was pretty obvious, wasn't it. I'm such a jerk.'

Nerine laughed and punched him in the arm. 'We're both jerks. Jerks who love other people.'

'Yeh,' Gordon said and found he was able to smile at the idea.

Nerine was still looking at him though. It was clear she hadn't said everything that was on her mind yet. 'Remember I said I wanted to ask you for something.'

Gordon nodded.

'Will you pretend to Julian that I did what he wanted?' she asked him with a look of desperation. 'Would you pretend I dumped you horribly?'

She obviously thought she was asking a big deal of him. Gordon didn't think so though. He suddenly felt sorry for her. He understood the position she was in better than she probably suspected. The thought brought confused feelings. Of course he wouldn't drop her in it with Julian.

And he wouldn't mind pretending to have been dumped for Julian's amusement, knowing privately that his little plot had backfired. Something much, much weightier played on his mind. What worried him now was the sure knowledge that Julian had it in for him one way or another, that Julian had already snared him and begun to reel him in. This thing with Nerine had surely been intended as no more than a mere shot across the bows – Julian had always had a peculiar sense of what was sporting – but the pact!... Oh God, the pact.

CHAPTER 28

Things had all happened very quickly. He had kept a close eye on Gordon just as he had promised himself. Things were proceeding better than he had dared hope. The guy was having ideas. He wasn't sure what he thought about all of them, but they were coming thick and fast. He could see that Gordon Lissope's creative juices were in full flow. Such fecundity had to be taken advantage of.

He decided he should call up Wyfondoo Motors UK and get some of their guys to come over and have a look at some of the ideas Gordon had come up with. It would be an ideal opportunity to feel the customer out. And he couldn't lose anything by doing it. If the client didn't like what he saw, nothing would have been lost because they had only had the brief a matter of days; Wyfondoo would understand that it was very early days yet. But if Gordon managed to capture their imagination, if he managed to seed an expectation of the final offering, then success could be almost assured.

He had phoned Wyfondoo's UK headquarters in Maidenhead with the intention of arranging the meeting to happen in a week's time or so. It was a big surprise to find himself being put through to Mr Chagawochi. What time was it in Korea anyway?

But Mr Chagawochi wasn't in Korea. He had flown over to the UK to oversee things for a few days. Furthermore, he was flying back in a couple of days, and naturally he wanted the meeting to be arranged so that he could attend. He re-emphasized his great interest in successfully breaking into the UK market. It was impossible to turn him down.

That meant that the meeting had been scheduled to take place not in a week, but in two days' time. It meant that instead of receiving a handful of middle managers from the UK office, they would be

presenting to Mr Chagawochi – one of the top brass from Korea – and the director of UK operations whom Chagawochi intended to drag along.

It was with great trepidation that Ewart Hammel had dropped that bombshell on Gordon Lissope. However, Lissope's reaction to the news had dumbfounded him.

'Cool,' Lissope had said, apparently shrugging it off.

Ewart couldn't leave it at that. Although he was relieved that Gordon hadn't blown up on him, he had to be sure the guy was actually aware of what was at stake.

'So that means you have two days to pull together a presentation. Two days to prepare to face off the big guns. No fuck-ups.'

'Yeh, I sort of gathered that.'

OK, Ewart, don't undermine the guy, he thought. Build him up, remember. That's the approach you decided upon. Don't communicate your own doubts. 'I know you did, Gordon. Your presentation will go great. I just wanted to make sure you realized I appreciate what a great job you're doing.' Ewart let this sink in before adding, 'And you know we reward such things here.'

Every new advertising bod at Brock, Hardy & Hammel quickly learned that the partners didn't make empty promises. Such words weren't bandied about cheaply. Hammel meant them. It would make him a very happy man to have to make good on them.

He thought about Gordon then. From the verge of being canned, to the verge of earning a big bonus, in the space of a week. Ewart Hammel thought amusedly to himself, you just never could tell with people. They could always surprise you.

§

Ewart looked across at the three men and one woman from Wyfondoo. Mr Chagawochi was the only Korean. The UK director of operations was an affable guy called Duncan Haffield. Ewart liked him but his underling, Charles somebody, was a kiss-ass. He grated. The woman was, Ewart guessed, mid-thirties. She was dressed in one of those pinstripe skirt suits, shoulder-length auburn hair, fantastic figure. Ewart just knew she would be wearing expensive lingerie under that business-like veneer.

No wedding ring, he noted. Now which of these three men was

fucking her, he wondered idly. Maybe none of them. He had just noticed to his pleasure that Venessa Wirrel occasionally eyed Gordon. Perhaps another woman not immune to a man of flowing locks. To his mind, a man with hair any longer than collar length had a certain shabby look about him. Maybe that was part of the attraction; maybe she wanted to tidy him up. No gem had ever been unearthed ready-cut. It pleased him that Wirrel showed signs of finding Lissope attractive. How could it fail to help? Now all he needed, Ewart thought sarcastically to himself, was for Haffield to turn out to be queer for the shaggy masculine look, and they could have this one in the bag here and now. The kiss-ass wouldn't figure in this.

Ewart looked over at Gordon. He examined his face and tried to read his state of mind.

He was concerned that Gordon might foul up through nerves. It could happen to anyone. If anything, looking at Gordon, he saw somebody who was slightly distracted. His judgement wasn't infallible though. What could Gordon have to think about that was big enough to turn his mind away from this? He must have misread him.

Ewart was struck by doubts again. Some of Gordon's ideas had sounded wacky. With his original audience in mind, that hadn't bothered him, but with these guys the stakes – and expectations – were higher. It could turn out to be embarrassing.

No. That was wimpy thinking, he told himself. Half the battle was just to be convincing. Gordon's ideas would provide adequate bullshit for them to buy into. Gordon just had to do his job and sell it to them.

§

'The Wyfondoo Matrix 1.8XG looks peculiar,' Gordon began.

The director of UK operations coughed into his hand and glanced sideways at Chagawochi. Charles Roe looked ready to chime in with indignation at the first cue from his superiors. Chagawochi was inscrutable. Well, he *was* Korean. All was as Gordon had expected in his mental rehearsals.

He couldn't fail to notice the disappointment that dropped over the eyes of the ravishing businesswoman called Venessa. It gave him

an urgent desire to redeem himself immediately. She was unexpectedly good-looking, and he was aware of how she had *looked* at him before. But he had intended to start this way, and he let his words hang.

How long now had he been standing in silence? He realized he had been thinking about Julian again. Julian's treatment for his debt problems was still to come, but all that had been arranged before Nerine had made her revelation. A question had bothered him ever since. What was Julian going to ask him to do in return for all this? He had a growing dread of what Julian might really be up to.

He panicked momentarily as he struggled to recover his thread. 'That is not a personal criticism. What I am saying is that, to British eyes, the car will appear peculiar. That is a fact that we must accept if we are to sell this car to the British public with success.

'This is the obstacle that we must overcome in the British minds: Peculiar car, very highly spec'ed, appears low-priced compared to the competition, it comes from Korea so it must be crap.'

Gordon looked at his audience. Haffield looked like he was getting ready to protest. The others sat frozen. Gordon noticed that Mr Chagawochi remained very cool. He suddenly wondered whether the seemingly magnanimous Korean had understood all that had been said.

He raised a pointed finger of his left hand, just to hold Haffield off, and glanced to his right at Hammel who sat at the end of the desk. Hammel appeared to be grinning at him. Gordon hadn't actually had time to run his presentation by the boss. Whether Hammel was grinning in pain, he couldn't tell.

Could he back out? You could never back out with Julian. He made you think you could until it was too late. He should have remembered that about Julian's schemes. You only realized you wanted to back out after you realized you had become committed. Wasn't that just how all this had started in the very first place?

Hammel wasn't grinning anymore. Gordon came back to the immediate with a jolt. 'Some of our best-loved cars looked odd to many at first. Those same quirky looks later became the very looks that such cars were often adored for.'

Gordon thrust his pointed finger to emphasize the point. '2CV's,

Beetles, Minis, Porsche 911's. To inspire a fanatical following, a car needs to be just a bit peculiar to stand out from all the rest.'

Having begun by suggesting that their car was a no-hoper, he now twisted that condemnation into the dream that this car could be the next driving icon. Temporarily he had taken them to an unpleasant place only so that he could offer his own vision as their salvation. He looked into their faces. He could see they wanted to believe.

Gordon had wanted to believe that Julian wanted to help him. He hadn't wanted to contemplate that Julian might still bear him a grudge or that Julian might want revenge. But Nerine's admission had burst that happy delusion. Deep down somewhere, where he had been able deliberately to ignore it, he had known the true score. He had known what he was getting into but had chosen to deny it.

Perhaps Julian had become a hypnotist solely to embroil him in this way. Perhaps he had planned it all for years. Oh, come on, Gordon! It was surprising what a bit of anxiety could do to one's ability to think rationally.

'It's too cheap,' he said absently and then realized hurriedly that he should follow up. 'People don't want what they can afford. They always want what they think they can't have. Buying cars isn't about buying what you can afford; it's about fulfilling your desires. If it was just a matter of buying what one could afford, nobody would buy a new car. Everybody'd buy a three-year-old car at half the price.

'And when you desire something, you don't desire what you *can* afford. You lust after what you can't. We will allow the punters to gratify their desires. "Drive an icon of the future!" we will proclaim. "You can afford to think differently." The price will be higher than any of the competitors' models – because it's the best is the obvious insinuation we want to make.'

'Mister Lissape, the market is extremely price –'

'Mister Chagawochi, please let me finish. I assure you it won't be a problem.

'We can lower the price by a combination of the usual means – offering an unusually generous trade-in, or bigger reductions for cash, or special prices on the colour that the customer wants – because too many models were ordered in that colour. Whatever. The car will end up being much more competitively priced. The intention is to

persuade the customer that he is getting a much higher quality, much more desirable car for his money.

‘This is where the second part of the campaign comes in. I want to redesign the badge to something martial arts. I want a designer key ring with the same theme. Martial arts are big. They’re pop culture. They’re cool. The car is Korean. Some martial arts come from Korea. I want to tie these things together in the public conscience.’

Gordon could see he was succeeding. He was enjoying himself. He would have enjoyed himself more if it wasn’t for the thought that, with each success, his debt to Julian was growing larger. It was hard to conceive that he could back out now that he had received so much. And how on earth would he justify it? Sorry, Julian, but I feel suspicious. No, he was on an irrevocable course. Things would just have to play themselves out.

‘Here’s the TV advert. Korean in a fighting suit. Close-up on his head, showing his bandanna with Matrix 1.8XG written on it. Zoom out. He’s balanced on one leg, and he’s lifting the other to perform a kick. He’s screaming, “Wyyyyy!” as he lifts his leg. Then he’s shouting “Fonnnnn!”’, and he punctuates the kick with “DOO!!!”

““Wyyyyy-fonnnnn-doo!” accompanied by this very loud, smashing-glass sound as he kicks out at the viewer.

‘And he hasn’t got bare feet. He’s got on some big hefty, mean-looking boots – big boots are very in at the moment – and the sole of the boot has tread cut in the same emblem as that which we’ll come up with for the badge and the key ring.

‘There will be a loud stamping sound, like a rubber stamp on something, and the foot will be taken away leaving an imprint of the emblem – sort of as though we had just stamped it on the forehead of the viewer. Then the caption, “The Wyfondoo Matrix 1.8XG. You can afford to think differently,” or maybe, “The Wyfondoo Matrix 1.8XG. A car for fanatics.”’

Mr Chagawochi said, ‘A car for those who kick hard, and drive harder!’

‘Yes. Yes! That’s fuc... – that’s *brilliant*, Mister Chagawochi,’ Gordon said excitedly and leaned on the desk to scribble it down.

Mr Chagawochi smiled and turned to Hammel and nodded. ‘Very entertaining, Mister Hammel.’

Gordon looked at Venessa and saw from her approving gleam that he had redeemed himself. He felt about seven feet tall. He blushed with pride, happily suspecting that she was imagining him without any clothes on.

Things were looking very positive. It had been agreed that a brief be formed for a design consultancy to come up with a key ring. Venessa had given Gordon her card and told him that he could call her any time to fill her in.

Ewart Hammel was seeing the clients out, but before he followed them out of the meeting room, he turned and whispered, 'Brilliant job, Gordon,' and slapped him on the back.

Gordon had been putting his file back together, which had spread around the desk during the course of the meeting. He didn't have chance to more than turn and glance a quick smile back at Hammel before the boss rushed eagerly after his clients.

He would have found himself unfittingly at a loss for words, in any case. Now that he had been relieved of the great pressure he had been under for the last two days, that distraction from other preoccupations had vanished, and his mind was suddenly engulfed by dread thoughts of Julian and their next encounter.

CHAPTER 29

‘So how many blokes have you had so far on this holiday, Helen?’

Helen tried to remember, but her thoughts were obscured by cloudiness, alcoholic vapours of so much volatile liquid consumed. She tried to remember names, but they blurred together with events from one night and another into a mingled confusion.

‘A lot!’ she said. She took another slurp from her drink, hitting the rim of the glass at her lip and having to home in. ‘A lot more than I thought I would. I can’t believe how horny I’ve been feeling. I don’t think Gordon could’ve imagined what I would get up to.’

‘Don’t tell him.’

‘No don’t,’ agreed Sarah. ‘Learn from the pros...’ then, hearing her own words, she pulled a sour face and added, ‘Oh no, that sounds terrible.’

‘Yep,’ said Jen thoughtfully and glanced at Sarah who appeared to be staring at something in her glass. ‘I think we’ve done a good job of corrupting you.’

‘Yeh, it’s all your fault. That’s my story anyway, and I’m sticking to it. I can’t believe what a slapper I’ve been.’

There was a moment of silence, and then all three erupted into a giggling fit.

Sarah looked first at Helen then at Jen, the effort in refocusing her eyes clearly evident. ‘I am shit-faced.’

‘I know the feeling.’

‘Maybe we should get something else,’ Helen suggested not really knowing why she said it.

‘What d’you mean?’ Jen asked.

‘Well alcohol’s a good drug, but we could try another one.’

‘Nah. We have a rule, don’t we, Sarah. No drugs on holiday. And who knows what you’re buying when you’re in somewhere foreign.’

‘Besides,’ said Sarah. ‘What happens if a sniffer dog picks up a trace of something on your clothes when you’re going through customs. I have no desire to have my arse probed by some man in uniform.’

‘That’s not what I’ve heard, Sarah.’

Sarah leaned over and elbowed Jen in the ribs, although it was such a drunkenly pathetic attempt that she momentarily lost her balance on her stool. ‘I am *so* wankered.’

Helen convulsed as she tried to retain the mouthful of rum and coke she had just drawn from her glass. She failed, and what didn’t spray through her teeth dribbled down her chin and, finding the need to restrain her laughter had passed, found her desire to hoot diminished and laughed embarrassedly. Jennifer’s mirth had however compounded at the sight, and she laughed so hard that only a few loud cracks of laughter escaped from her as she fought for breath. Sarah looked mystified for a moment, then broke into a long trilling laugh which descended until punctuated with a hiccup, which provoked another short round of laughter.

‘Tell Helen your secret mission, Sazzer.’

‘You tell her,’ Sarah slurred at her.

‘What mission?’

‘Sarah has these secret missions. This year, it’s she wants to sleep with three men at once.’

‘Three dicks at once,’ Sarah added, ‘à la porn star.’

‘Really? That sort of thing just doesn’t... I don’t know. It sounds so sordid.’

‘Yeh, she’s mad, isn’t she, Helen.’

Sarah made an exaggerated and drunken pout, ‘Well I’m just curious, that’s all. At least if I’ve done it, I can say whether I liked it or not. What’s the big bloody deal?’

‘No big deal,’ Helen said patting Sarah on the back. ‘I can’t wait to buy all the drinks when you tell me and Jen all about it.’

‘Yeh!’ agreed Jen. ‘To doing what the hell you want on holiday,’ she said and thrust out her glass, and the others chinked their glasses

to hers, feeling a soulful solidarity, united in a level of inebriation that might have floored clean-living men twice their size.

§

Could this be what Julian had been referring to? He had said it wouldn't be responsible to leave the book lying around where anyone could read it. What Gordon read now wasn't quite a list of ingredients for a bomb, but the book did contain certain notions with potential for abuse. What was divulged was a bit like revealing that it was possible to make an explosive from household ingredients, but without actually saying what the ingredients were.

Forslagg had started to worry over how many of his thoughts were his own rather than ones absorbed from unremembered sources. Were his memories of real events, or were they unrecognizably corrupted by the passage of time? Memories of memories filled with invented detail, gradually deteriorating like Chinese whispers.

It appeared to Gordon that Julian must have lost interest. The pencilled notes and underlinings had petered out as Forslagg's writing appeared to become less about his hypnotic experimentation.

Forslagg's thirst for answers had led him to seek out what had been written by other men, hoping to find what others had concluded about human nature from this strange human susceptibility. Instead he was repulsed by the mysticism that confronted him. He found that entrancement was the domain of faith healers and spiritualists and ridiculous attempts to explain the phenomenon with the likes of animal magnetism and magnetic fluid. What he did discover from his reading was a universal agreement that those subjected to this variously explained hocus-pocus had to be willing participants. From the ancient Egyptians with their sleep temples, the Greeks with their shrines of healing, and Jesus of Nazareth with his blessings to 'Go in peace; your faith has healed you', right up to today all were agreed – it could only be done if the person submitted to it.

This struck Forslagg as a rather convenient thing to claim as a fact. It provided an implicit reassurance – don't worry, you're safe, you're still in control. It can only be done to you if you want it to be.

Practically, yes, if you didn't want to be entranced, you *could* resist.

But the conclusion that you therefore had to be willing subtly concealed the more unnerving truth. Forslagg realized that perhaps he knew something that no one else had ever openly admitted to knowing.

A subject could resist entrancement, yes, but *only* if he realized that he was in fact being entranced.

This was where the ingredients for the bomb were missing. Forslagg claimed to have entranced an unwilling person by not letting him see that this was what he was trying to do. But how exactly he had managed it, he didn't say.

Aggressive hypnotism, Gordon thought. Jesus! That's brainwashing.

And he thought in a flash of inspiration, Maximilian Forslagg may have been shy about revealing his insight in the nineteenth century, but by now the cat was well and truly out of the bag. Cult religions and weird sects with their indoctrination techniques had found their own ingredients.

Funny, Gordon thought, that the mumbo-jumboists should still be among the modern adepts of hypnotism. The mystics, though, had taken a much more insidious turn by exploiting this far from innocuous power.

'Had Auger read this or not?' Gordon began to wonder. If it had been underlined, then he could have been sure. Would Julian have thought it irresponsible to highlight such a thing? Maybe he had already developed his own techniques to enable him to hypnotize with duress.

Gordon suddenly remembered something. At the start of all this, hadn't Julian said he wished to try out some experimental new techniques on him. Were they these types of techniques? Maybe Julian had already been using them on him. How could he know if he had?

He relaxed. He had let himself be hypnotized by Julian... hadn't he? So there was nothing for Julian to gain by having forced him. But what if he only believed himself to have been willing? But then if he believed he was willing, wasn't that the same thing as being willing. What if it only felt that way because he was unwitting of the craft by which he had been manipulated? Maybe he wouldn't have wanted

what he had wanted if he had known the real reason why he had wanted it. Suddenly he understood some of Forslagg's resigned vexation. These thoughts were doing his head in. He remembered something else then, something Julian had said when he had given him the book. He said that he had speed-read parts of it.

Gordon turned back to where Julian's underlinings had stopped, and he wondered, 'What about the stuff you cannot underline?' Writing sometimes was a coy method of communication. There could be messages between the lines that a hasty reader would miss.

Forslagg's accounts of his salacious escapades tended to hide the fact that he was, in other respects, a reticent communicator. So much of what he really had to say he only ever insinuated. Gordon glanced over the first and last sentences of several paragraphs. Speed-reading surely would present only the shallowest assay into the text. Julian could have missed some of this.

He could have, but then what could his remark have been about?

Maybe he thought the book was subversive and contained thoughts that were better left unthought. That could fit. Julian wanted to help people with hypnosis, not disturb them with it.

Or maybe his concern had simply been a sort of inclination not to leave medicines within the reach of children.

This new uncertainty didn't do anything to calm Gordon's feelings of uneasiness. The possibility that Julian had a much more menacing power at his disposal than Gordon had ever suspected was discomfiting. He tried to set things in perspective and found that he couldn't establish one. Sometimes he thought of Julian as a friend to whom he had become perhaps unwisely beholden; other times he was a spectre who hung on his mind, portending an as-yet-unknown but unpleasant and unavoidable future.

§

Nerine might disapprove, but it felt good in his hands. The fingertips of one hand slid over it while the palm of the other hefted its hard weight. Right now, he didn't have to consider Nerine's feelings; she had gone out for lunch with a friend – a girl with whom she once used to share digs. She had offered to bring him back a sandwich, but he told her he lacked any appetite – which wasn't exactly true. Having waited impatiently for her to leave, he opened the desk drawer and

took the thing out the moment he heard the door close behind her. Its heavy feel was reliably comforting, and its familiarity was immediately soothing.

He let it rest in his lap.

He wondered if Gordon would show up for his final treatment. Gordon was dumb, but even he might be beginning to have suspicions. Lissope had already got most of what he wanted, as well. Only the treatment for his debt problems remained. The efficacy of the treatment for Gordon's career had been surprising. It had been such a swift and impressive success. He wondered if Gordon might not be tempted to quit while he was ahead.

He dragged his thumb along the shaft, feeling what was imprinted there in the cold metal.

He didn't think so. Gordon was weak. He wanted quick fixes. He wouldn't be able to resist the prospect of an easy solution. He would come for his debt problems. The success of Gordon's treatment might even be to his advantage. Surely Gordon could only feel that much more indebted to him for it. Which was good because he needed Gordon to feel indebted to him. His plan depended on it.

But *what if* Gordon didn't show up? He looked at the gun that he caressed in his hands. Simple. If Gordon tried to worm out of it, he would shoot him. Then he would shoot himself.

He sniggered fitfully. His shoulders heaved up and down, and his deep leather chair creaked. Yes, that would be suitably dramatic.

A final and dramatic conclusion to what had been born on that night. The image of the audience assaulted him first as always. Then came the image of Gordon looking across the stage at him, his expression of disbelief and... what? It was Gordon's fault.

Gordon getting ideas and thinking for himself. Now he remembered turning back to the person standing closest to him. He remembered the excruciating embarrassment. He had watched her try to struggle free of him, but she was entangled. And then she had begun to gag, and she had gagged and gagged until she vomited. He had wanted to reach her, to help her, but instead his every movement had increased her distress.

Michelle!

And then he heard something. He heard it, and he couldn't believe

the heartlessness of it. It came from just a few in the audience, but that sound stung like gunfire in what had been deathly silence. He had heard their laughs.

They had been exactly the wrong age, Auger had thought since. Any younger and a crucial element would have been lost; any older and they would have been equipped to deal with it. Michelle dealt with it by refusing to speak to him. She wouldn't even look at him. He hoped that given time they would at least exchange words again, but it didn't happen. Her parents moved her to a another school, leaving him to the unsoftened memory of the revulsion he had inspired in her.

Gordon would pay for that. When he gave Gordon his final treatment, he would make him pay.

The head teacher had forbidden anyone to talk about the incident. That had given Gordon his name for it – his Unspeakable Thing. He had watched with resentment how Gordon had hidden behind Haughton's ruling, and he began to hate the head for having made it. Haughton should have forbidden anyone even to think about it. It did remain unspoken, but... it was on their minds; it was in their eyes; and every time he saw it there was like an assault.

He grew to despise Haughton. He was domineering and self-opinionated, and it was clear he regarded himself as a font of knowledge; but he hadn't known enough. Hadn't Haughton ever heard of Gandhi. What had Gandhi said? Something like, if it can be shameful to say something, 'thinking it' is worse.

The Unthinkable Thing.

He stole the gun for comfort. The following day, he had slipped into the assembly hall. At the end of school, and alone, he stood on the stage, somehow compelled to revisit the scene of the previous night.

He looked out from the stage into the empty hall. He tried to replace the scene that was seared in his mind with the one that greeted his eyes. It wasn't possible.

He turned then and went behind the stage. He didn't know what he was looking for. All the props from the previous night's performance were stored there, and lots more from other productions. He rummaged around a bit, and when he saw it, he

knew he had found what he was looking for.

He didn't understand it himself. Why would he want a memento of such an appalling experience? He knew, to say it that way, it didn't make sense, but on some emotional level it did; it made perfect sense. He felt absolutely no qualms about his act of theft. He smuggled it home, and he stowed it away in a private place, safe from prying eyes.

Now he cocked the gun. With his thumb still hooked on the hammer, he squeezed the trigger and uncocked it again. He pulled back the hammer a fraction and spun the barrel with the flat of his fingers. Nerine believed it was real. He hadn't felt like setting her straight. He preferred to avoid getting into any explanations, and so he allowed her to continue to believe what she had readily assumed.

He examined the piece. Even if you handled the thing, you would have to know something about guns to spot that you couldn't shoot anybody with it. It was a good gun – a work of art – too good to be lying around in a storage room behind a school stage. He found out later that it belonged to the metalwork teacher. The old fart had lent it for the play, and he was exceedingly annoyed by its disappearance. There had been an announcement to the pupils a couple of days later when it had started to look like it wasn't just lying around somewhere. Haughton had admonished the assembly, demanding that the person who had made it vanish make it rematerialize pretty damn quickly.

Julian felt absolutely zero regret at having taken it. It pleased him to have been given a way to defy Haughton, and he was resolute that he wouldn't return it. How dare they even make such a tangential reference to that night. Some similar thought must have eventually struck Mr Haughton because he didn't pursue it.

No, he couldn't shoot Gordon with it. It wasn't loaded with real bullets for one thing – not that it meant he couldn't still kill Gordon with it. It was heavy. He could bludgeon his bloody brains out with it.

Messy.

A man is a reflection of his thoughts: what he allows himself to think, he will become. His eyes fell. Was Gandhi right? What then had he become?

He took the gun by the barrel and slammed it down hard into the

desk. With the first impact, he saw that it left a deep mark on the desk, but he continued anyway, punctuating his cry with it, 'Bas-stard!'

He sighed deeply through his nose and slumped forward. He explored the new indentations in the surface of the desk with his fingertips.

Could he give it up? This part of him.

This part of him he wanted to deny. It had been such an essential part of him for so long. It was terrible to have to admit that Gordon could be the only one who could help him.

Memories make the man.

Manners? Pah! It was the kind of banal expression that Haughton clung to. You hypocrite, Auger, he told himself. You think you're any better? He felt ashamed. What good had ever come from this hatred.

Memories make the man. Change the memories, change the man. That one abhorrent memory, that so deliciously anguished moment that was so impossible to let go. It had been kept keen all these years by the irrepressible urge to relive it over, in some kind of nihilistic way. Free him from that memory, and free him from what that memory had destined him to become.

'Let Gordon expunge it,' he thought. And then, he brooded, *then* he would expunge Gordon!

Gordon may be the only one who could amputate his gangrenous limb, but it was Gordon's cut that had infected him, that had made the amputation necessary. Green and stinking it may have grown, but like all parts of him, he was steadfastly attached to it. Though better he would be without it, he still mourned that he must lose it. His consolation was the thought of what he would do to Gordon afterwards. The tortured part of him resented the idea of its own passing. It could not allow such butchery to go unavenged.

Julian grimaced. First he had to extract from Gordon what he needed. He patted the gun, his eyes unfocused and gazing. But Gordon would be made to pay. His old friend had got himself into money problems, and now he wanted someone just to snap his fingers and make them go away. 'Well *you* asked for it, Gordon,' the hypnotist sniggered vindictively, 'but I don't suppose it's quite the fix you had in mind.' He reflected dolefully: 'And I don't think I rate

your chances much.’ Then he laughed hysterically at an image of Gordon his scenario provoked. ‘Gordon, you’re in for a hell of a *fix* the next time you walk into your bank, you dumb bastard.’

CHAPTER 30

Louise Bunty resisted an urge to look at Edmund as she passed him. She found that her numerous trips across the office were becoming more circuitous as she avoided routes that would take her right by his desk. Now that the habitual intrigue had been sacrificed, she realized how much a part of her day it had become. Still, it *had* been good to get something she had wanted. Eddy had been right about that.

That was her intimate name for him, it transpired. She hadn't addressed him that way before. She certainly couldn't possibly do so again; it would evoke all the wrong feelings. She had called him that when he had been on top of her, when they had pounded and gasped together. She had been going to take him to her flat, but he said they should go to a hotel instead. Room service had brought them champagne as they lay recovering from the first heated clash of pent-up frustrations. Then emboldened by the intoxicating bubbles, she had climbed on top of him and ridden him wantonly – and vocally, she remembered now with slight embarrassment. The anonymity of the surroundings had been strangely liberating. And then she had gone home to her own bed, and there were things lying around her room. She was suddenly hugely relieved that she hadn't taken him there and glad that she hadn't let him into her life. It was over. All thoughts about the liaison had to be quashed. She would have to address him impersonally as 'Mister Leekston' whenever she met him now, even if people around looked at her oddly and mistook her deliberate distance for deference. She reflected on what unexpectedly had been the thing she had most taken away from the experience – it had made her feel human again, and contented to be flawed.

She hadn't really thought of Leekston's wife before, but

afterwards she began to feel guilty. She had trespassed. She didn't even know Mrs Leekston, though what difference should that make. How could she deserve what they had done? She prayed the poor woman would never find out. She didn't want to purloin other women's men, she assured herself now. She wouldn't convince herself that wives who couldn't hold on to their men didn't deserve to keep them. She liked to think she was a nice person, but she had done a bad thing – not out of malice, but out of weakness, ordinary human weakness.

She bumped into Sarah Hath and bounced off her ample breast.

'Oh sorry, darling. You were in a world of your own there, weren't you,' Hath said to her smiling.

Louise gave an embarrassed little laugh. 'Sorry.'

Of course, *she* had a boyfriend. Not surprising with a chest like hers. She probably had to beat the men off if she went out unchaperoned – not that there was any great danger of that; Hath was a favourite of everybody's, men and women both. What I need, Louise thought, is a man of my own... and some bigger bazongas. Though on second thoughts, Eddy had certainly liked her tits; he had seemed hardly able to keep his hands off them. He had even poured champagne over them and slurped it off – but then, he had poured champagne over *everything*... and the thing he had done with the bottle when it was empty... and, oh God, she had *let* him! She couldn't keep reminding herself of goings-on like that. Leekston was off limits – for good.

She reached her desk. There was a letter in her in-tray – no stamp and only a partial address on the envelope meant it must be an internal one. She opened it and was pleasantly surprised to see that her latest performance review had resulted in a pay rise. She had already had a cost of living raise that year, which everybody had received in January. It was strange that that old tradition continued to run on at First Saxony when the final-salary pensions and the discounted mortgages had already fallen by the wayside.

Her eyes scanned forward to find out how much. Seeing the figure, she felt a palpitation-inducing surge of excitement, immediately followed by the suspicion that she must have made a mistake.

She read the whole thing from beginning to end, twice. No, she hadn't made any slip. *Wonderful!* Her eyes glazed over as she started to imagine how she might use the extra money. She snapped out of it. Somebody must have made a mistake.

She laughed at herself for being so ready to believe it. She thought back to her last review. How long ago had it been? Not long. They had them every three months at First Saxony, though the appraisal on one's anniversary of starting at the company was the main one. That was when she had been given any increases before, but she hadn't got one last year.

Most of Louise's reviews were less than five minutes long. She struggled to remember what had been said three and a half weeks ago. It had been with Maria Carlyle as usual. Maria was the manager for several team groups, one person above her immediate supervisor. Louise had never been made to feel conscious of the fact that Maria was her boss. Carlyle was a very calm and accommodating person. She always told you that if you had any problems, to come see her. She liked problems, she said, and joked that it gave her something to worry about other than her children – they were rather wild apparently.

A very satisfactory performance – hadn't those been her words. Hardly justification for the amount she saw written in the letter.

She would ask Maria about it. Maria was very approachable. She would just hand her the letter and ask her to check there hadn't been some silly blunder. After all, she couldn't go creaming her knickers about what, it seemed, must be a typo or a temporary slip of the brain.

She spotted Maria talking with Sarah Hath. She was laughing at something Sarah had said and cupping a hand over her mouth. It made Louise wish again that she could be a bit more like Sarah herself. She was probably telling Maria about something amusing that had happened to her boyfriend. She was full of stories like that, and her impulsive boyfriend didn't seem to leave her ever short of material.

Maria finally disengaged from Sarah and continued to walk along the isle. She stopped further on at the printers to collect her printout from one of the lasers. Louise managed to catch her there alone while

she was still checking that all her pages had come out satisfactorily. 'Hi, Maria.'

Maria straightened from stooping over her document. 'Oh hi, Louise,' she smiled pleasantly. 'How are you?'

'Fine. I got a pay review today.'

'Oooh, very nice for you.'

'Well, yes. I was wondering if you could just check it for me.'

Maria gave her a quizzical look, and Louise handed the letter to her. Maria examined it. It was signed by herself, but the signature was scrawled so badly that she might easily have denied it. She thought for a moment, looking into the distance. Then she looked at Louise. 'No, it's all fine.'

'I just thought —'

'Yes, I can guess,' Maria smiled. 'Someone very senior put in a very good word for you,' she said in a hushed voice.

'Oh, I see,' Louise said and blushed.

Maria grinned in a lopsided way at her. 'There isn't something you want to tell me is there?' It was clear she wasn't really asking. She handed the letter back to her. 'Remember what the company handbook says about remuneration.'

'Oh, yes.' Louise folded the letter up tightly still feeling quite hot in the face.

'Anything else I can help you with?'

'No. Thank you, Maria.'

She rushed back to her desk, conscious of how red the heat in her face must look, and hoping she hadn't made herself a spectacle. She avoided the curious glances she was sure she must have attracted, and wondered about what had happened. Obviously she had heard that such things went on — not at First Saxony, but... places. Though she never suspected that it would happen to her. She had sort of believed it was something that had only really gone on in the past. It must have been him. Who else very senior could it have been? And why would anyone else have had a good word to put in for her?

She unfolded the piece of paper and read the numbers again. Oh my God, she giggled to herself. I must have been good.

§

Gordon started to think that if Julian didn't give him some answers

the next time he saw him, he should threaten to call the whole thing off.

Somebody jostled him as they pushed past with suitcases in each hand. This month was the busiest time of the year, the annual height of the travel season, dozens of package-holidaymaker filled flights in constant arrival and departure.

Gordon felt a snap of annoyance until the man turned and apologized for bumping him. 'Not at all,' he told him and forced a smile. He looked up at the screens and found Helen's flight again, but it was still forecast to arrive at twenty fifty-two, nearly two hours late.

Since Helen's call (and Nerine's departure), he had noticed that he was quite looking forward to greeting Helen at the airport. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Apparently it was true after all.

He had rushed to find Helen's flight on the arrival screens, clutching a scrap of paper with the flight number and the time on it. He wanted to be waiting ready for Helen to see him when she walked out of arrivals weighed down by her suitcase, and he remembered as well that Helen had said she would bring him a present. When he saw the flight had been marked delayed – and by two hours – the excitement receded allowing his attention to slip back to less lighthearted concerns.

The discovery that Nerine hadn't in fact split with Julian had grown to disturb him. Nerine had slept with him. Surely Auger couldn't have intended that when he hatched his plan. Could he? Could Auger really go so far? If he was prepared to go to such lengths, Gordon was in big trouble.

It was possible Auger might not yet have discovered what had gone on between them, but Gordon couldn't bring himself to believe it. Something like that would never slip by him. He was too shrewd, too suspicious. He would have smelt him on her. He would have seen it in her eyes. He would have heard it in her voice. No one pulled the wool over Julian's eyes – he had never been anybody's fool.

That thought prompted Gordon's flashback to a lurid memory. As it had done frequently before, it occurred to Gordon that what had happened that night was... was as though he had tried to steal a loose brick from a teetering, towering stack that belonged to Julian, just to

diminish Julian by that much. But instead he had watched in horror as almost the entire thing had come toppling down. Then it was as if, in impotent retribution, Julian had tried to take a brick in turn from Gordon, but it had only slipped from his hands and landed on his foot, the pain of which had unbalanced him into the last standing remains, crashing them down on him and that unfortunate girl, burying them both. The indignity of how they became entangled in that debris and their struggle to disentwine themselves in front of an audience was the final mortifying blow... 'Enough!' Gordon reproved himself angrily. Why did he always choose to sicken himself with this irreverent parody? *Because the uncaricatured truth is too ghastly.*

He hadn't slept with Nerine before Julian had offered his pact. So it *could* all have been part of Julian's plan then, but perhaps incredibly it was by-the-by. Was Julian so single-minded in his desire that he had been unmoved by the possibility that Nerine might sleep with another man? If she didn't, so what. If she did, it was just further fuel for his vengeance.

Vengeance!

The word thumped him as though only now had he grasped the nature of his relationship with Julian.

He had become so engrossed in his thoughts that he had forgotten where he was. He looked around to remind himself, and was almost surprised to find himself at Gatwick airport. He looked at the arrivals screen again. Only twenty minutes to go now and he would be able to hug Helen and take succour in her embrace.

A mollifying thought suddenly occurred to him. Julian didn't know that he knew. He might be astute, but he wasn't a mind reader. He didn't know that Nerine had told him about Julian's unkind prank. Julian didn't hold all the cards.

With that thought he regained his grip. Were things really as bad as he imagined them? His fling with Nerine was over. It had been nice while it lasted, but her revelation had killed it off. The sex had been incredible. He wondered then if Venessa might provide another adventure. He still had the card she had given him. He was aroused by the memory of her reaction to him and how her prim business attire failed to disguise fully the voluptuous figure beneath.

He thought of Helen. Would she want to make love tonight after

being away? She might make a poor second after Nerine. Helen would probably notice his lack of enthusiasm and be disappointed that he wasn't more arduous after their whole week apart. Suspicious? Nah. He would get her nice and drunk. Maybe she would simply fall asleep.

The airport terminal's screens announced Helen's flight had landed. That still left customs and baggage collection for Helen to go through, and only then would she be out, so he wandered casually over to a news-stand and bought a can of cola. The cashier was young and pretty. He guessed she was about twenty. She had straight, chest-length, black hair and thick, long eyelashes. She held his eyes seductively and offered him a nice smile as she handed him his change. Their hands, it seemed, caressed deliberately as the coins passed. What was it with him and women lately? He had never received this much attention before.

The passengers of Helen's flight were coming out by the time he returned to his spot. His eyes searched the crowd in case Helen had already come out, and darted back and forth to the exit to check if she was coming out there.

'Hi, Gordon.'

His gaze homed in on the position from which the voice had emanated. He didn't immediately recognize her. She was standing in front of him and smiling at him amusedly.

His eyes widened at the sight of her. 'Wow! I hardly recognize you.'

Her dark brown hair was now filled with blonde streaks, the result of the sun and salty seawater. Her shoulders were bare and beautifully browned, her face too. She had lost weight – the natural curviness of her frame had been emphasized by it – but she hadn't lost too much; she wasn't in danger of looking emaciated. Her eyes were vital. Through her smile, her teeth gleamed at him surrounded by all that bronzed skin.

She walked towards him. 'What do you mean?' she said, though obviously she knew exactly what he meant and was pleased by his reaction.

'A week without you and I'd forgotten how drop-dead gorgeous you are.' He opened his arms, and she put down her case and her bag

of duty-free and stepped into his embrace. They hugged and kissed briefly. Then they drew back from each other's lips just to look in each other's eyes before they kissed again, and their mouths opened passionately. Suddenly it seemed like it would be a long train ride home back to the privacy of their flat.

'I love you,' he said. The words slipped out effortlessly, seeming to fit the moment, and he realized he meant them. He now found his earlier thoughts about the executive of Wyfondoo ridiculous. Why had he thought he wanted *her*?

'I love you too. Did you miss me?'

'Every night,' he said, which was true. Nerine hadn't slept over a single night. He had missed someone by his side in that big empty double bed. Nerine had always left however late it had gotten. He should have realized. He could have read something into that if he'd had more than half a brain. She fucked his brains out all right.

'Something the matter?'

'Oh, I was just thinking about my hypnotist friend I told you about.'

'Do you think it worked then?'

'What?'

She pushed herself away from him and gave a little twirl and a smile.

'I should say so,' he said but then put a finger to his lips and added jokingly, 'But, just to be sure, I think I'd better give you a close, naked examination.'

She thumped him in the chest. 'It worked. What do they say? Men lose weight on holiday; women gain it. Well not me. It must have been because you hypnotized me.'

'Yeh... scary, huh?'

'Have you still given up smoking?'

'It's funny. I'd sort of forgotten about that. Yes, I have.'

'That's brilliant, Gordon. I never liked that you smoked. I mean it says on the packet, doesn't it – smoking kills.'

Ironically, he thought, perhaps he had saved himself from one peril only to land himself with another one more immediate – a vengeful hypnotist with a gun.

'Well they didn't hurt me. Chinese burns – now they *kill*.'

‘What?... Oh har, har. I’ll Chinese-burn you if you don’t get any funnier.’

‘Ooh yeah... kinky. What else are you going to do to me?’

She punched him in the chest. Though he was sure she didn’t realize it, she caught him right in the solar plexus, and it was surprisingly unpleasant. Rubbing at his front, he asked her, ‘Did you get me a present then?’

‘Hmmm,’ she smirked at him. ‘I got you two. Only, one of them I can’t show you properly until we get home.’

‘Oh yes? I like the sound of this.’ He picked up her case with one hand, finding it wasn’t as heavy as he had imagined, and took hold of her hand in his other. ‘Come on. Let’s go and catch our train home.’

§

Helen fell asleep on board even before they crawled past Redhill. Oh, for high speed rail links. Maglevs had been built that could speed the Japanese along silently at over three hundred miles per hour – lucky swines. Helen’s head rolled from side to side as the carriage wallowed over subsiding sleepers. Gordon let her rest, and he was left alone with his thoughts again.

He would confront Julian at their next meeting. He had the option just to fail to turn up, but he wanted the treatment for his debts. Sure, the upturn in his career would help sort out his money problems on its own, but the possible results from hypnosis were just too magical to pass up.

But more than that, he was curious. He wanted to face Julian because he wanted to know what Julian had to say. Would there be any explanation? Didn’t Julian *always* have something to say... but he liked to prepare his audience – and his audience was Gordon. He thought before that necessity had driven him into Julian’s pact, but wasn’t the real truth just that they were playing their old game.

The gun was a worrying factor, but although he tended to fear the worst, he couldn’t really bring himself to believe that it would end up pointed at him.

Helen was zonked out in the seat beside him. She looked beautiful asleep. A middle-aged man in a suit and tie sat in the seat opposite Gordon. He had an evening paper open in his lap and kept casting furtive glances at Helen. Gordon was amused for a while – the man

hadn't seen that he was being watched – but Gordon stopped being amused when he cottoned on that the man was copping an eyeful of Helen's breasts. They were jiggling slightly with the bumps in the tracks. Fleetinglly Gordon was reminded of something Julian had said to him: 'There are other hypnogenic devices.' He cleared his throat and glared. The man hid in his paper until his eyes found another passenger to admire.

If there was one question at the centre of the mystery of Julian's pact, it was this: Why had Julian wanted him to learn how to hypnotize anyone? It didn't seem like the right way to go about getting revenge. It didn't make sense, unless... could you know too much? With such a power, might a person be tempted to manipulate more and more of the people in his life until finally he had corrupted everybody around him, and not least himself? Hmmm, he couldn't make it ring true.

The questions remained irresistible, though. He couldn't just walk away. Of course, he had to give back Julian's book for one thing. He sure-as-hell couldn't keep it, and he didn't dare put it in the post. Though that was perfectly true, he didn't delude himself that that was the real reason he was going to see Julian again.

His curiosity had grown unbearable. Even though he knew things might be about to turn bad, perhaps very bad, he couldn't leave all this up in the air. Curiosity killed the cat. It just popped into his head. Yeh? Well what happened to that cat's other nine lives then – curiosity took all nine, did it? He tried to dismiss these bantering thoughts. Why was he plagued like that? They seemed to run on in his head with a life of their own. I think, therefore I am. 'Balls!' he thought. More like – I absorb, therefore I regurgitate.

The answers were awaiting him somewhere. Julian had something in store for him. He didn't know what exactly, or what it all was going to cost him in the end. One thing was sure – he knew he couldn't let things pass without finding out what it was all about.

CHAPTER 31

‘Don’t ask me to do anything like that again, will you.’ Nerine rested her head on Julian’s chest, her cheek against his bare flesh. ‘I dumped him like you wanted me to.’ She expired heavily through her nose. For days she had dreaded having to broach the subject of Gordon, but the longer she left it, the more she dreaded that Julian would be the first to bring it up. At least now, she had chosen the moment. She twirled her fingers in the hair on his stomach.

‘Tell me about Gordon.’

She huffed. ‘What do you want me to tell you?’

‘Did you sleep with him?’

She hadn’t decided if she should try to lie yet. Her heart quickened.

‘Don’t lie to me, Nerine. Tell me you slept with him, but don’t lie to me.’

‘I slept with him,’ she said choking on the words.

Julian was silent for a moment. There was no discernible reaction from him. His voice was neutral and unloaded. He just said, ‘I know.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said wretchedly.

‘Was it good?’

She half-mumbled, half-whimpered something under her breath, barely annunciating the admission that, yes, it was. Then she added, ‘...but I realized that none of that matters.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s you I want. And he wasn’t you.’

‘Nerine, I don’t –’

‘It was just a bodily function,’ she pleaded with him, desperate for

his forgiveness. She drivelled, 'It was no more meaningful than bursting for a pee and finally being able to relieve myself.' But Julian didn't respond. She lifted her head enough so that she could see his face. Julian lay there motionless and unblinking, as though he were dead.

Her eyebrows had bunched in her distress, and now they fell flat as she released a whining tirade, 'Yes, I did it. But I've felt more emotion from... from playing tennis. And it was exhilarating enough. All right, I enjoyed fucking him! But it was... it was empty.' Her chin fell onto his chest, and her breath sighed from her nose, and she pressed her cheek back against his breast. 'You know what?' she said wistfully. 'What I really wanted was to be doing those things with my favourite partner, not with some last-minute stand-in. Surely you can understand what I'm saying?'

Julian remained silent.

Her hand, which had been toying in the hair of his lower belly, edged lower now. Her stretched fingers edged down into his pubic hair, and she began to massage her hand against his skin, reaching down lower with each stroke. She felt his hot hand rest on top of hers.

'Don't.' He pulled her hand off him and slipped sideways out from under the duvet. Naked, he walked to the end of the bed in the darkness.

Nerine could just make out his faint outline as he paced slowly back and forth up there. She sat up and strained to see him in the dim light.

'I was scared you might leave me.'

'Julian!' she said alarmed. 'I was so sure you took me for granted... and now I don't know how you could think that. Don't you know how hopelessly I'm in love with you? Why do you think I went along with your plan?'

'Why did you sleep with him?'

'I was angry with you. I wanted you to be jealous. Why did you tell me to go out with him? Why weren't you jealous? And... and... it'll sound stupid, but I was grateful to Lissope. I was grateful, and I wanted to give him something... and it was really obvious what he wanted.'

‘He let you in when he treated Edmund Leekston, didn’t he?’

Nerine was shocked. ‘How the hell could you know *that*?’

Julian’s voice was quiet and regretful. ‘You forget, I know Gordon. I know Gordon very well indeed.’ He paused. ‘We used to be best friends. You wouldn’t imagine... well, nothing – all that was long ago.

‘You said you were grateful to him. It doesn’t take much to work it out. I knew what you wanted. Because of my pompous pride, I didn’t give it to you, something I could easily have given to you when there’s so much I can’t. Now I’ve missed my chance, and I regret that.’

‘Oh, Julian, I’m sorry.’ She tried to console him. ‘You don’t have to give me anything. I *love* you,’ she assured him, ‘Just love me back.’

‘I... I want to.’

‘It’s this thing with Gordon.’ She sensed that she was entering taboo ground as soon as she had spoken. She elaborated quickly, ‘It cuts me, this feeling I get that you’re afraid of...’ She struggled with the anguish of it. ‘Of *me*,’ she finished miserably and covered her face in her hands. As she looked up into the darkness again, her hands fell to her neck so that it seemed as though she might be praying. ‘I won’t ever probe,’ she promised him. ‘I know you don’t want me to. I know there’s something... painful.’ She worried terribly that her frankness would drive him out of the room, but it all poured out untempered. ‘Nothing I could find out about you could change how I feel about you. However dreadful you think it is, it could never be dreadful enough to stop me wanting you. You don’t have to tell me. I’m not asking you to tell me. But... it’s just... Don’t think that if you let me too close, somehow I’ll become a risk to you. I’m not a threat, Julian.’

The wandering outline at the end of the bedroom had stopped still. She didn’t hear cries, but she thought that concealed in the darkness, he was weeping, that tears were rolling down his cheeks.

‘When is this business with Gordon going to be over?’

‘Soon,’ he said, and she heard in his cracked voice that she might have been right. ‘Tomorrow, I hope. He’s coming in so I can give him a treatment for financial discipline. I’ll finish it there and then if I can.’

Nerine thought of the gun. Suddenly she felt dreadfully worried. 'You're not going to do anything foolish, are you, Julian? I couldn't bear to have you taken away from me. For my sake, please don't... don't...'

'Don't what, Nerine?' he blurted. He suddenly felt pity for her. He relented and said, 'There's something I should have told you a long time ago. I didn't though. How often it has seemed to me that any answer I might give only suggests another question; and every question gets closer, closer to somewhere I don't want to go.'

'Julian... I understand.'

'If I tell you something, will you promise not to ask me the next question? Can you promise that?'

'...I promise.'

'The gun's not real. You couldn't shoot anybody with it even if it had real bullets in it – which it doesn't; they're just fakes.'

She was dumbfounded.

'Pathetic, isn't it,' he said deriding himself. 'My potent symbol won't even fire blanks.'

'Oh God, Julian.'

'So now you fathom my humourless sport.'

'So that's what... You don't know how many times I worried what you might do with that gun. Oh God, what a relief.'

'You thought I might –'

'Don't say it!' she yelled at him, and more quietly she added. 'I don't even want to think about things like that.'

'I knew that you understood me better than you believed. Something you don't want to think about – take such a feeling and multiply it. But imagine having a perverse desire to constantly revisit it nonetheless. Add in a fear that everybody you care about might despise you if they knew just what was going on in your sick head.'

She knew that it was more than he would confide to anyone else, and her heart strained for him because of it. 'I want you, Julian. I want you so badly. I want to feel you inside.'

'Why can't I do it? You don't know, and I haven't got the balls to tell you. I hate myself. I'm fucked in the head,' he said in anguish. 'Would you be surprised if I told you it was Gordon Lissop who

fucked my head up. I know what you want, and I want so much to be able to give it to you, but I just can't. Can't!

'Just get into bed and hold me. Hold me close, and don't let me go.'



Julian fell back into bed beside Nerine. She rolled on top of him and rested her head under his chin. He wrapped his arms around her.

He lay there until she slept, but he didn't sleep. In his mind, he played out the events as he imagined they would unfold the following day. He hardly gave himself chance to consider the possibility that Gordon might not be ready yet to do what he asked.

But what if Gordon couldn't do it? Then there was no hope left. But somehow he knew that Gordon was the key. Gordon would be the one. He allowed himself to believe it.

He lay still with the weight of Nerine sleeping on top of him. It was strange, but it was when she was asleep that he felt most capable of it, that he felt he might actually be capable of going through with it. But she was asleep. What could he do? What was wrong with him? He was revulsed with suspicions of his perversity.

He didn't move for hours. He didn't want to disturb Nerine. She wanted him to hold her; he could do that, at least. Not that he didn't know what she wanted – himself – but it was the thing he was most afraid to give. Eventually he could bear the discomfort no longer. One of his legs had pins and needles all the way up. He rolled her off him but didn't wake her.

He tried to get out of bed, but the leg that had gone to sleep felt like a heavy lifeless appendage. He realized there was plenty of blood in another part of his anatomy and thought again how much he despised himself.

Blood painfully returned to his leg, and he hobbled around in the darkness to find his clothes. Having collected them up into his arms, he slipped quietly out of the bedroom.

The dark streets were empty. The night was surprisingly chilly. He glanced upwards, and though the sky was clear, he made out not a single star. Starlight that had travelled centuries across vast vacuum was drowned out in the last fraction of a second by the luminous metropolis, light from which diffused in a black sky and left it merely

dark. A whole universe lay out there, but was veiled as though inconsequential. You can't look out; you can only look in, he thought. That's why they're called inner cities. He walked faster. He walked with his head down. He passed a deserted tube station entrance, a dark hole that was grated and barred with a padlock and chain. The day's headline was stuck to a board, 'Shock revelation! Wednesday follows Tuesday.' He pretended to recall the story though he never read the paper. 'Our research has uncovered that every Wednesday we examined was always preceded by a Tuesday. This is the greatest scoop our paper has exposed since our investigative journalists revealed that Tuesday always follows Monday.' He wondered miserably what the world was on about as he marched on. Occasionally he would look around him in the emptiness. He would see the odd light on in a building and then continue, going nowhere.

Everybody else was inside. Everybody else was in their place, but he was out here drifting the streets, somehow locked out. It was exactly how he felt – as though he was stuck on the outside looking in on a world of which he didn't feel a proper part, as though life had cruelly contorted him so that he no longer fit.

He fought the feeling. He fought the bitterness that inspired the hate, and he left himself nakedly exposed to his all-embracing sadness. Like a drowning man clawing at the silvery surface, he grasped for the glimmer of hope that the new day promised. In desperation, he placed his faith in the power of hypnosis.

CHAPTER 32

Gordon stared at Julian Auger, into his deep-set and distant eyes, and wondered. Anxiety flushed through him again. Earlier he had tried to convince himself that his fears were unwarranted and had reassured himself that there would still be time to back out later. Though they had eased his journey, he accepted now that those thoughts had been merely conveniently deluding.

He had spent the afternoon in a restaurant in Islington entertaining Highland Tarns. Conscious of his meeting later with Auger, he hadn't wanted to drink and had managed to avoid doing so by sticking to the clients' own product. That the restaurant carried that water out of the plethora hadn't been an accident, it having been sought after at the time the restaurant had been booked. As the others indulged themselves, he began to worry that proceedings might drag on and that they might even extend themselves to another venue. He wondered how he would get out of it. In the event, everything concluded promptly after the trifle dessert. It turned out everybody was eager to start the weekend early, so he was left with a choice either to head straight back to the office, where he would have to kill some time before heading for Auger's, or to walk off some of the meal. Once he began walking, his thoughts started to dwell on Auger. The thought of tackling any of London's mechanized modes of transport – which might distract him but would make it feel like he arrived more quickly at the appointed time – became less and less appealing the further he walked. In the end, he arrived outside the hypnotist's door, feeling he had accomplished a feat to rival Captain Barclay's and feeling empowered by his liberation from London's transport system.

At the hypnotist's, he had entered the building, had distractedly spoken with Nerine while hardly absorbing anything she said, and had presently found himself in the office before Auger, at which point the sense that retreat would still be possible had abandoned him. He had an irresistible feeling that what was between him and Auger had to be seen through. Too belatedly did he begin to wonder about the source of that emotion.

'So,' began the hypnotist.

'Nerine has dumped me,' Gordon admitted. He waited for Julian to respond but saw nothing of the hoped-for reaction. To this point, he still hadn't abandoned the remote possibility that this would be enough to satisfy Julian's desire for retribution, but now he was more convinced than ever that Julian must have realized that Nerine had slept with him. What he said next, he said to appease Julian, but he trembled as he spoke. 'She said I was bad in bed.'

He watched Julian, bracing himself for whatever would come next. But nothing did. He had half expected that Julian would explode with jealous rage, but his tone was indifferent.

'That's a shame. Did she hurt you?'

He thought that it was best to pretend that she had. He sighed and said as wistfully as he could, 'Nobody likes to get dumped.'

'Or told they're bad in bed.'

Yes rub it in, Julian, he thought. But then he saw that Julian's words didn't fit his manner. He realized with a shock that Julian was only playing along. He was taking no pleasure from his remarks.

So, Julian had abandoned that little game; it had to mean that it had been made obsolete by a bigger one. Gordon could feel a pounding in his chest. He clenched his fists to try to stop his hands from shaking. He felt as if he couldn't catch his breath. He looked into Julian's face; it was inscrutable. Though it felt as though he wouldn't be able to get the words out, he had a strong urge to ask the question that had brought him here.

But Julian spoke first. 'Have you read any of my book?'

He remembered Julian's book in his briefcase, and it was enough to distract him from confronting Julian. A part of him was relieved for the excuse to delay putting the question to Julian and seized upon it.

As soon as he escaped Julian's gaze to busy himself with his case, he relaxed, and some of the feelings subsided. 'That reminds me. I've brought it back for you.' He swung his case up onto the corner of Julian's desk and flipped the latches. He took it out and offered it to him.

Julian looked at it in Gordon's hand without moving. He hesitated to take it back. Then apparently he changed his mind and took it from him. He held it to his chest in both hands and regarded Gordon for a moment. His lips twitched as if about to speak, but instead he spun round and thrust the book onto the shelves behind him, where it became lost from sight between all the tomes.

He turned back to face Gordon, his fingers interlaced in front of him and gently massaging one hand against the other. The hesitance was evident in his voice. 'Did you manage to read any of it?'

Gordon leapt at the opportunity to win Julian's approval if only in this small way. 'Every word, Julian. I even read all your annotations as well.'

'Excellent.'

He knew then that it was what Julian had wanted to hear, but it surprised him how greatly it appeared to please him.

'It wasn't such an imposition on my part then?'

'No,' Gordon said. 'I'll admit I was pleasantly surprised. I might as well admit I don't read a lot of books.' And then he remembered his curiosity – not the question he had come to confront Julian with but something that had been bothering him all the same. Now seemed the moment to ask about it. 'Julian, why did you want me to read Forslagg's book?'

Auger gave him a curious stare, as if he couldn't quite believe Gordon's question. Gordon suddenly felt embarrassed to have asked, as if it should have been obvious to him, and not having realized the answer betrayed a staggering naivety. Wasn't the book reason enough in itself that it should be read?

'Apart from the fact that it's about hypnosis, the thing I've been trying to teach you about?'

Gordon felt his face redden.

But Julian relented. 'OK, Gordon, I admit it. I did have an ulterior motive of sorts. I thought it might cause you to think about some

things. I thought it might open your mind to some things I wouldn't mind having someone to talk to about.'

'It did make me think,' Gordon admitted feebly, but he doubted the worries that had preoccupied him were quite what Julian had in mind.

'Forslagg's ideas made me think about something. Imagine a widow losing her husband.' Auger broke off. After a pause he said, 'Er, perhaps you'll allow me to explore a hypothetical situation?'

Gordon nodded uneasily. Though he didn't relish the moment he would have to put his real question, it was going to be difficult to listen carefully enough to follow Julian while the worry of it still burdened him.

Auger continued, 'The widow mourns the loss of her husband, and she lives the rest of her life with his death. She grows old and eventually dies herself. And only then does it come to light that the husband didn't in fact die but elaborately faked his own death and fled to live the rest of his life in a foreign country.

'Now to the widow, whether he died or not is immaterial. To her, the death of her husband was real. Her experience was no less real just because what she believed apparently contradicted the truth of the matter.'

'And so you're saying that Forslagg's implanted ideas and memories were no less real to his victims just because he made them up.'

'Exactly! But he worried about his grasp on reality because of what hypnosis showed him was possible. But, from the hypothetical widow, you see how it can happen anyway, even without hypnotism.'

'Hmm...'. How often did people fake their own death? Gordon didn't think he was quite in agreement with Julian's point, but he much preferred conciliation to wrath, so he pretended to approve. 'You'd sort of expect reality to have more substance to it.'

'Well, it all led me to another idea. Philosophers worry that "cause and effect" prohibits freewill.'

Julian held his gaze a moment before continuing, and Gordon suddenly hoped that Auger was going to forget the other business. Impulsively he changed his mind about asking his question and thought he wouldn't confront Julian after all. Perhaps the threat only

existed in his own mind. He almost laughed when he suddenly thought, Perhaps I'm a hypothetical widow.

'Because if everything is caused by something else,' Julian was saying, 'everything you do must have been caused by something – so you couldn't have chosen to do anything else, so you can't have had any freewill.'

Gordon remembered he had heard that argument before, and that offenders should be rehabilitated and not punished. From the thought sprang an unexpected hope that Julian might perhaps have the capacity to be merciful.

Julian held a pointed finger in the air. 'But freewill *is* experienced. The experience of loss was no less real just because the husband wasn't actually dead. The experience of freewill is no less real just because it contradicts the truth which is "cause and effect".'

Gordon saw that Julian was building up to a crescendo. On his face, he saw the excitement and suddenly felt an immeasurable sadness, though quite why he felt it evaded him.

'How is this possible? Because they exist in different realms – one in the realm of the objective, the other in the realm of the subjective. Freewill is an experience, and *all* experience is subjective.'

Gordon tried to hide his inexplicable wretchedness and show that he had been listening. 'So freewill is just an illusion.'

'No,' Julian answered looking at him, but Gordon didn't really think Julian saw anything but his own thoughts. 'It's real. It's as real as conscious existence itself.'

'So *life* is some kind of dream?'

'No... I don't think so. In dreams, anything goes and nothing makes sense.'

Gordon was silent. He thought how his life had changed since his first encounter with Julian in this office. He thought that, by Julian's definition, his own life had become rather dreamlike.

'Do you believe in God, Gordon?'

Gordon was momentarily flummoxed, but then he couldn't help smiling. Reality, freewill – the conversation had to come round to God, didn't it. It amused him that Julian had found his way around to just that question. It reminded him of discussions they'd had when they were friends, united in their lack of belief. In sudden

understanding, he wondered if at last this was to be their reconciliation. 'No Julian. I still don't.'

'Well, I do.'

'What?' *It was impossible.*

Julian must have seen Gordon's look of disbelief and added quickly, 'God as an abstract concept, that is.'

'Oh...' Gordon remembered one of their old sneers at religion. It wasn't something he was apt to say now, but he said it anyway for old time's sake. 'You haven't witnessed a miracle and found God then?'

Both men sniggered, partly as they had done once at such scoffs, but more at the memory of having done so. Gordon honestly dared to hope that things were mending between them, that after years apart he might have his best friend back.

'God as the idea of the potential for good in all men,' Julian continued. 'We personify the idea to give us something tangible – God in our own image.'

'Oh... blasphemer!' Gordon protested in mock indignation. 'Go on.'

'We pray to God, but, since God is an idea in our own minds, we actually pray to ourselves. It's like we tell our subconscious minds something. The mind quietly trundles on, looking for a way and an opportunity to give us what we prayed for.'

Gordon wondered what Julian might have prayed for.

'But the experience of God is real to those who sincerely believe – as real as the grief of the widow who sincerely believed her husband was dead.'

Gordon smirked at Julian. 'I think you'll find that orthodoxy insists that the truth of God is a bit less... optional... than that. Judgement day is coming whether you believe it or not.' Realizing what he had said, he suddenly regretted that he couldn't take back his words.

'Well, that's by the way. Just a bit of amusement while I get around to the point I wanted to make right from the beginning.'

Gordon was disheartened to see how Julian's demeanour had turned sombre again, containing a threat like a dark cloud.

'There's something else. Doesn't prayer now strike you as rather similar to something?'

Gordon looked blank, now beginning to fear the worst again.

‘Suggestion?’ the hypnotist prompted.

Gordon let out an aspirated, ‘Ah...’

‘Prayer is autohypnosis,’ the hypnotist said heavily.

‘Well it would have to be, wouldn’t it,’ said Gordon, trying to make light of the situation, ‘with you being a hypnotist.’

Julian smiled back, but a smile that lacked all happiness. It faded from his face. It was as if he had remembered something. The temporary reprieve had been just that – temporary. It was as if the burden of what he had remembered extinguished any fun that had remained in the room. Gordon looked into his grave eyes. Something had appeared in them, flickering behind their glassy surface, something demonic.

Gordon fought with an urge to edge away from Auger.

‘There is a diabolical consequence to this idea. If there is God, then the Devil is equally real, being the abstract concept of man’s potential for evil.’

Gordon saw where Julian was heading and jumped in. ‘And so equally you might pray to the Devil.’

‘It’s worse than that, I realized. What if you pray to God, but instead of asking for an end to suffering, say, you ask to be given revenge on your enemies?’

Gordon didn’t answer. Julian’s mention of the word revenge made his blood run cold.

‘I’ll tell you. Your prayers will be answered, but if you thought your prayers would be answered by God, you were mistaken. Such prayers can only be answered... by the *Devil*!!!’

Gordon saw a menace in Julian’s eyes that left him terror-stricken. He felt the world threatening to swirl up around him. He remembered the question that had brought him here and lunged at it as though it offered the only solid ground in a perilous quagmire.

‘I’ve played along in the dark... Enough!’ he protested. ‘What’s this pact about? I want to know what it’s all about.’ He screamed, ‘What do you want, Julian?’

All thoughts of reconciliation were lain aside and forgotten. The hypnotist Julian Auger was clearly insane.

CHAPTER 33

The deranged hypnotist didn't answer him immediately. He lifted his palms toward Gordon in a calming manner, regaining his human demeanour in the act, and turned to stare absently out of the window. Presently he said, 'I spoke to the wife of Mister Leekston yesterday.'

The whole episode came flooding back. Gordon remembered Leekston's hasty departure from this office, through the same door he wished himself to run through now. How could he ever have been so naive as to imagine Julian wouldn't find out.

His gaze returned to Auger from a longing glance at the door. Auger's apparent calmness disconcerted him all the more. He knew that his behaviour towards Auger's patient was inexcusable. He waited apprehensively for the moment when surely Julian would be able to contain his outrage no longer.

'I don't usually make follow-up calls to my patients,' the hypnotist said apologetically, 'but I had to know how Leekston was progressing. I still consider Edmund Leekston to be my responsibility.' He paused a moment while considering Gordon. 'I did say the patient would remain my responsibility.' Gordon remained silent. 'By chance Mister Leekston wasn't at home, so I spoke to Missis Leekston. She was *effusive* about –'

'Look, Julian,' Gordon interrupted hurriedly. 'I don't know –'

'...the *marvellous* change-for-the-better she's seen in her husband. "He seems so much happier," she said. "He's a new man."'

Gordon absorbed this. He was being praised. Julian appeared to assume that the unease his understudy displayed owed to a misplaced modesty in his new abilities, and he seemed charmed by it.

‘I would’ve liked to talk to Edmund Leekston in person, but obviously that isn’t necessary now.’ The hypnotist held his hands wide. ‘Your progress has exceeded my hopes.’

That meant that one of two things had happened to Edmund Leekston after receiving his treatment. Leekston had made the proposition and the girl had turned him down, ending his delusion; or she had said yes and he had... Gordon thought he could safely guess which had been the case.

He had a new dread that Julian would want to hear the details of what had been said to Leekston under hypnosis. He shivered at the thought of what might be Julian’s reaction should he find out the truth – most probably one of boiling wrath.

‘Which is why I’ve decided that you’re ready,’ Julian continued. ‘We will conclude our pact today!’

‘What is it you want me to do?’

‘You know what it is I want, Gordon.’

‘No, really I don’t,’ Gordon pleaded weakly. ‘I haven’t a clue.’ But the truth was he felt a dark suspicion that he did. Somewhere inside, he had already realized what it was Julian must want. He had felt it there, lurking, but had refused to give it substance by thinking deeper. It waited for him to provide the effort that would call it up, that would give it words. Fear preceded it and dread was attached to it, which was why he had recoiled from it. And throughout he had stayed hardly cognizant of the self-deception.

The hypnotist dropped his gaze and seemed to consider Gordon’s answer. ‘First things first,’ he said. ‘You still have to receive your final treatment.’

Gordon heard the word ‘final’ and shuddered. This was going to be Julian’s last chance to hypnotize him and he knew it. If Auger was going to take revenge by means of some post-hypnotic suggestion, it would have to be now.

Then he thought again of what surely must be a gun in Julian’s drawer. And they were alone! Once Julian had what he needed, might he want to shoot him in final bloody revenge?

He had to think, and think quickly. He wasn’t really going to allow this madman to hypnotize him, was he – not ever again? But was Julian really giving him a choice? He thought he should at least

attempt to refuse politely, though something made him hesitate, and suddenly Julian's voice was already commanding him to take a seat and relax – and his tone was irresistible.

§

The hypnotist stared at Gordon, who lay in a deep hypnotic trance on the couch before him, and he considered what he might do. A momentary wave of doubt cursed him. What if Gordon had become suspicious and was only feigning the torpor?

He got up from the wooden chair, walked around and stood behind it. He leant against the old dining-chair with his hands on top of the backrest. 'Stop fussing and get on with it!' a voice told him; Gordon wanted a solution to his debt problems too much to jeopardize the treatment. Right now he was going to give Gordon that treatment, and a whole lot more he hadn't bargained for.

He looked at Gordon lying before him, vulnerable to his suggestions and unsuspecting. He felt a twinge of guilt, ashamed that he was about to abuse his position, that he should sully himself with this violation. He doubted himself once more.

'It doesn't count,' he told himself, 'I told him this was no professional relationship,' though his words convinced him not at all. The bitterly venomous voice which urged him on spat angrily, 'Give him his treatment then!'

'Gordon?'

'...Yes.'

'You are amounting debts?'

'Yes.'

'Large debts.'

'Yes.'

'Very large debts – you owe so much money that you might consider anything to escape them.'

'Anything.'

A cold compunction told him to stop. He couldn't go on like this, not like this. At least he should give him a damn treatment first. He breathed deeply before continuing. 'You thought financial prudence was boring, a trait for bean counters and tightfists?'

'Mmm.'

'And now you're learning your lesson the hard way. I imagine

you're finding having to rein-in a miserable experience. Two years living beyond your means; ten years paying for it. I don't envy you. The price wasn't the interest you hazily knew it would cost. The true price is what you will have to put yourself through to pay it all back.'

Gordon remained quiet, so the hypnotist said forcefully, 'You will find it impossible to forget how punishing debts can be whenever you are presented with the opportunity to extend your indebtedness.'

'But everybody...'

'You should remember how a man who is up to his neck is sometimes comforted by the thought that everybody is in the same boat. Nevertheless he, and they too, are still as likely to sink.'

Gordon didn't answer.

'You must deny the impulse. You *know* this, don't you, Gordon.'

'I know.'

'But you splurge.'

'Yes.'

'You binge on your cash.'

'I...'

'You've pigged-out on your credit cards.'

'Yes, I have.'

'And you blame others, your girlfriend for instance, but who is to blame, *Gordon*?'

'I am.'

The hypnotist paused. He strode to the window and looked out, hands thrust down into his pockets. He went to the desk and opened the drawer to look at the gun lying there. Slowly he returned to Gordon's side.

'You will reduce your debts, Gordon.'

'Yes.'

'Say it!'

'I will reduce my debts.'

'You *are* self-disciplined. And you *will* be austere.'

'I am self-disciplined.'

'And?'

'I will be austere.'

The patient, of course, had known how to tackle this problem right from the beginning. Julian reflected that, like so many of the

people he treated, Gordon just needed someone to convince him he could do it. That was how he helped them all – not that he expected Gordon would have the opportunity to benefit this time. But that was what he did, he reassured himself. He helped people.

Ironic then that you can't help yourself. The jeer was familiar, vented from his own embittered self. It chided, 'Don't you dare feel guilty. He deserves it.'

'Now, Gordon. It's time to pay.'

He picked up the gun that was lying in his open desk drawer, and approached Gordon with it.

'Gordon, in my hand I have... a gun.'

'You're going to shoot me,' the subject answered almost inaudibly.

Auger threw back his head and roared with laughter. How often he had dreamed of doing just that. Unseen, Gordon flinched at the outburst.

'I'm going to put this gun in your briefcase... where you will keep it hidden.'

'Yes,' replied his subject.

'You're going to visit your bank manager, Gordon. You are going to the bank to have a frank discussion about your finances...' a sneering grin fixed itself across Auger's face '...as all those who're taking control of their finances should do.' He relished the moment as he said, 'Once seated alone with him, you will take the gun from your briefcase.'

He stopped then briefly to ponder the idea. Glancing behind him, he saw that Gordon's case still lay unlatched on the corner of his desk. He hadn't yet seen him without that crutch of his. Lissope lugged his briefcase after him like a child dragged a security blanket.

'You will point the gun at the bank manager and tell him to lead you to the safe.'

'Yes, I will make him take me to the safe.'

Auger half heard Gordon's reply as he became engrossed in his imaginings of the scene of Gordon's profound shock upon finding himself holding the manager at gunpoint. 'Squirm your way out of that one, Gordon,' he thought. Attempted armed robbery – that should be worth a few years in prison... and you'll have plenty of time to reflect on how you got there. Relive that!

A sudden thought spoilt his enjoyment. What – that Gordon might get away with it? No, not that. Ridiculous! Gordon on the run with a bankvault-full of money: the thought of Gordon, dashing furtively from street to street with a bag of swag, pulled the lips off Auger's tall teeth into an ugly grin – half mirth, half snarl. No, the real problem was that he might still need Gordon, because Gordon might not succeed straight away. Wasn't it possible that he would require a course of hypnosis from Lissope.

He wasn't getting cold feet, he assured himself – and parried his rancour's most virulent protests. Now that he was faced with the real prospect of his revenge on Gordon, shying away from it would show him for the gutless coward that he had feared he was. Yes, Gordon would succeed, but it was too important to leave to chance. He would implant a deactivating phrase before he brought him out of hypnosis. He could use it later if he had to.

And having done it, he woke Gordon and turned briskly away from him. Lissope asked if his treatment was over and done with.

'Yes,' he said simply. But that seemed an inadequate answer, so he expanded saying, 'But, Gordon, you do realize that I haven't just made your debts disappear. You've already made your bed, unfortunately.'

'Yes, I know,' Gordon responded grudgingly. 'There aren't any magic bullets.'

The hypnotist suddenly thought of the gun. He felt a third and final moment of doubt. Could Gordon know something? But no, Gordon's reply seemed innocently enough made, though he glanced at Gordon and wondered what was it now that his face betrayed? Nothing! Nothing because he knows nothing! He chided himself for the pathetic ease with which he had spooked yet again. Gordon couldn't realize the significance of his subconscious's perverse choice of words.

He felt his face drop in irritation, and he snapped testily at Gordon, letting his impatience show, 'Enough of the platitudes! Are you ready to hypnotize *me* now?'

CHAPTER 34

He was faced finally with Julian's demand, and with it came an unexpected relief. He guessed fully, in that instant, what Julian wanted, but his answer to Julian's revelation came automatically. 'Why would you want me to do *that*?'

Julian sighed. He looked at Gordon sadly before taking a breath. 'Why? Why?...?' he said exasperatedly. His eyes were wide. 'Because...' he began, and his tone was strained. 'Because I want you to kill the thing that haunts me. That taunts me in my dreams. That taints me when I wake. That spoils my palate for all that is beautiful in the world with its bitterness. I want to forget what I can't forgive. I don't want to think again of the time –'

Horried that Auger might recall the thing in all its humiliating detail – and worst of all to hear it from Julian, the one who had suffered at his hands – he interrupted with the hurriedly blurted words, 'The Unspeakable Thing.'

Julian stopped speaking, mouth still half open.

Gordon elaborated quietly, 'You want me to purge you of the Unspeakable Thing.'

'Yes, Gordon. That.'

The thing had been taboo for so long that he couldn't help being repulsed. He spoke in reflex, 'But can't you do that yourself? Self-hypnosis or something.'

The hypnotist's face twisted with contempt. 'Don't you think I've tried that?'

Gordon knew that his shock must seem pathetic, but his mind still reeled, and his words were thoughtless. 'Another hypnotist then?' He knew his questions must sound ungrateful, but now was the only

time to ask if ever at all. ‘Why have you waited for *me*?’

The hypnotist’s lip pulled up, and around his nose his skin curled in sneering scorn. ‘And whom do you suppose I was willing to tell that lurid tale to? Whom have you told your part in it to?’

‘Nobody. Of course, nobody.’ And it was true.

‘It has to be you, Gordon... Even if I could confide in someone, what could I tell them compared to everything that you know already? You were there. You felt it. How could I possibly make someone understand it?’ The thought seemed to enrage him, and he yelled, ‘I don’t want some patronizing cunt to tell me they understand. *Nobody* fucking understands me!’

For a moment, the hate dropped from Julian’s face, and Gordon could see only the uncorrupted hurt.

Julian calmed and lowered his voice. ‘But you must know things, things that I still don’t. So that’s why.’ His eyes were downcast, and he paused as if considering whether he had said everything. Then he looked Gordon in the eye. ‘I don’t believe anyone else can help me. It has to be you.’ Perhaps he thought he had admitted a weakness in his position because he immediately took a commanding tone and insisted, ‘And you owe me, Gordon. You owe me.’

No thought of reneging had occurred to Gordon, but he was worried. ‘But how do I –’

‘I can’t tell you that,’ the hypnotist snapped in annoyance, but he caught hold of himself and patted down the air with both hands. Then he explained, ‘I have this suspicion of why I couldn’t make the self-hypnosis work. To forewarn is to forearm. One’s own mind can be a powerful adversary, perhaps the *most* powerful.’

Their eyes met fixedly at this point, and it seemed that some understanding passed between them – a desperate admission mixed with a plea for help maybe. Auger released him before continuing. ‘You will think of a way,’ he assured Gordon. ‘I can’t tell you what it should be, and you can’t tell me what you propose. You’ll just have to do it.’

Auger must have read the doubt in Gordon’s eyes, but he contained his anger. ‘It’ll work, have no fear. It’ll work just because I don’t know how you’ll attack. You must hypnotize me.’

Did Julian consider hypnotism to be a kind of assault? The idea

troubled Gordon. 'Now?' he asked absently, still pondering the hypnotist's odd choice of words.

'I won't wait,' Julian said as he walked to the leather patient's couch. He sat down, then lay back on it. 'I'm ready *now*.'

Gordon approached Julian and noticed his heart was beating hard in his chest, part through excitement and part through nerves. He didn't think what Julian was asking would be so easy. The very idea of it bothered him. Surely hypnotists should be somehow resistant to hypnosis – the price of knowing the secret.

'I think I'll use the er... the spiral-graphic mesmerizer. Where is it?'

'Don't be a cretin,' Auger snapped impatiently. 'Who do you want to impress?'

'But –'

'You didn't have it when you hypnotized your girlfriend, did you?'

Gordon was startled. 'How do you know I hypnotized Helen?'

'I didn't, but you had to have practised on someone. I was going to have you give Leekston another session, until I realized that he didn't need it – and neither did you.' Julian watched Gordon for a moment. 'So either you've practised,' he said wryly, 'or we've discovered a hidden *talent*.'

'I told her to go on holiday without me.'

Julian began to laugh then stopped abruptly, and his expression turned sour. He said quickly, 'With what method did you induce the trance?'

Gordon guessed the thought that had curtailed Auger's brief levity, but then Julian's question reawakened an earlier apprehension he had about having dabbled with something of which he only had partial knowledge. He answered insecurely, 'I told her to imagine she was floating in the sea, in the sunshine.'

'Excellent,' Julian said without feeling. Then he looked at Gordon again and said, 'I knew I wasn't wrong about –' He stopped short and said instead, 'Use the same technique on me. I'll even give you the image to use. I've always had a fantasy about being awarded a Nobel Prize – for a new physical theory that lambastes the old... something dynamite.'

'Er... all right.' Julian was smirking to himself in a way that told

Gordon he was enjoying some private joke; he didn't bother to wonder what. Unfortunately Julian's apparent confidence in him hadn't managed to assuage his doubts.

He began hesitantly. He outlined uncertainly the picture that he presumed Julian wanted – a grand hall, a crammed, esteemed audience – but as he went on, it seemed his fears were being realized. Julian was lying back in the chair before Gordon, eyes closed, but his features were alive with twitches. He looked agitated. Gordon was beginning to despair. He felt the pressure to perform, and the fear of failure hindered him. But something nibbled in his mind. *I'm the hypnotist now*. But that meant... He could hypnotize, and yet he had *been* hypnotized – so shouldn't it be the same for Julian? He *should* be able to hypnotize Julian. So why wasn't it working?

The answer came to him suddenly: Doubt is a saboteur – what you won't believe, you don't allow yourself to achieve. From where did that spring? Though it tied up with something he remembered from school: 'Our doubts are traitors'. Funny he had always thought he had never understood a word Shakespeare said. Finally a *Measure* of reward for all that unintelligible drudgery – though he wouldn't retract his rebuke of back then: Bah! Thou shalt not foist literature upon us lambs. Julian had told him, 'Lissope, you're always flocking bleating,' and then laughed his head off.

He saw now that his negative frame of mind might easily cause barely noticeable changes in body language and intonation, which could have been picked up unconsciously by the patient. Auger would be receiving the message, I can't hypnotize you.

With this realization, he overcame his self-defeating lack of conviction and forced out in an authoritative tone, 'Nothing exists but my *voice*...'

Auger began to respond immediately. Gordon continued the induction until the patient became detached and remote. He added finally, 'Your mind is empty of all thoughts,' and Auger lay entranced before him. He breathed heavily and slowly now. His face was calm, his jowls flaccid. Gordon reflected that, for the first time, he had the hypnotist at his mercy, and found himself wondering how he might escape this vengeful snare. He wondered, as well, how he could possibly help Julian when he himself had admitted his own attempts

had failed. But it occurred to him that he had an advantage that Julian hadn't. Julian believed that only Gordon could help him. That had to be of help. But how to do it?

He left Julian's side and paced around the room, hoping for inspiration, trying to collect his thoughts now that Julian's overbearing presence no longer pressurized him. And in his absent gaze, he realized that his eyes had alighted on prints hanging on Julian's wall. So he looked at them now. Was it some kind of joke? What disturbed mind would choose such a collection of images?

He didn't have to look far for the answer. The glass over the prints reflected the room. Behind him he could see Julian's tranquil face as he rested as if in sleep. Who else but Julian? Light from the window streamed in, landing on Auger's face, making it look angelic and innocent against the dark reflection – a complete absence of malice – but everything was backwards.

Backwards!

He whirled around and strode urgently forward, where he loomed over Auger. He thought of his own guilt, and then he knew he had it. It abhorred him, but he played back the events in his mind, the events of that unspeakable thing, replaying, adjusting, making things fit.

Yes. That would work. It would have been futile to try to seek a way to erase the memory from Auger. It was too deeply ingrained. That surely was the reason why Auger had failed in his own attempts – he had wanted total annihilation.

But he could still change it. He could make it benign. He knew he could make it work. And he thought resentfully that when it was done, *then* he would see who had revenge for whom.

CHAPTER 35

When the hypnotist came out of his hypnotic trance, he remembered nothing of what had been said to him under hypnosis – that much was good – and he remembered only that he had asked Gordon to do something that he couldn't do for himself, and that his *friend* had obliged.

He knew better than to ask or even to wonder about what had actually been said to him. Such curiosity could only be counterproductive.

He felt good. All his conceits were of the day, and he felt on curiously unfamiliar ground – light ground. He thought, Life can be whimsical, and it was as if the thought had never occurred to him before. Perhaps he would take Nerine out tonight – a pleasing thought. Then suddenly he knew the beautifully simple truth that had eluded him: Happiness comes from happy thoughts. *Happiness comes from happy thoughts!* He felt like adopting it as his new mantra. What had been his old one – fuck the world? No, but perhaps that was closer to the truth than he wanted to think. He looked at Gordon with gratitude.

He was ambushed by guilt.

An old guilt – one that had been long forgotten but never quite lost, that returned to make him feel ashamed just when he thought its hold over him was gone. He began to remember what his friend had suffered at his own culpable hands. He blanked it out – the Unthinkable Thing. He remembered that Gordon worked for advert makers. Such a sin could almost assuage his feelings, but the iniquity evaporated just as quickly as he had thought of it. Where had been his sense of proportion? How had his views grown so unbalanced?

Nothing was black and white; everything was endless, ambiguous shades of grey. People didn't need advertising to make them feel dissatisfied and unhappy; they had 'keeping up with the Joneses' to give them that. All that bitterness, he was glad he hadn't acted on any of it.

Then he remembered the gun. And the bank!

Christ! What had he been thinking? What had motivated him to do such a thing? He could hardly blame Gordon for the guilt he made him feel. Could he? Perversely, he supposed he must do. That was no excuse. Gordon didn't deserve this. He could go to prison!

He was close to panic now. The pact was over, and Gordon would want to go. He couldn't allow him to leave like this. He had to get the gun out of Gordon's briefcase.

§

Gordon had watched the dazed awakening of Julian Auger. He knew at once that he had succeeded. The effect was dramatic. Lines had been removed from his face. His deep-set eyes no longer had their usual look – half inwards, half upon the world.

Julian sat up, regaining some of the normality in his expression, and turned towards Gordon. Gordon saw the gratitude and was sickened. He couldn't help thinking of what Julian had just tried to do to him. That last trick of Julian's had particularly caught his imagination, and so he had made use of it himself. He wondered if he should try to use it now to teach Auger a lesson.

He walked around behind the leather couch, in which Julian was seated, so that he didn't have to meet his eye. His indignation seemed less intense. He felt queasy and didn't want to understand why. Instead he wondered about the extent of Julian's reform, and found himself curious to see what Julian would do next.

Julian stood up and resumed a place by his desk.

Gordon smiled tightly and turned away, ostensibly to look at the framed prints hanging on the wall.

'Nerine said I needed to brighten that corner up a bit,' Julian pronounced.

'They're very colourful... very vivid,' Gordon admitted. In several of the pictures, the hypnotist's faded image was caught standing, as though immersed behind the surface of the glass. The thought

occurred to Gordon again that it was now his own turn for revenge. His carefully chosen trigger-words tempted at the tips of his lips. It would be so easy just to utter them and then see what occurred to him next. He could feel Julian's eyes boring into his back. Would he say nothing to redeem himself? And then he realized something about Auger: His attention having narrowed by staring so fervidly, Julian hadn't noticed that he was being watched by the reflection in the prints.

CHAPTER 36

The hypnotist saw with partial relief that Gordon didn't appear in an immediate hurry to leave. He hadn't a clue what pretext he could have used to delay his departure. The sense of panic had turned his mind blank. He had noticed that Gordon was avoiding his eye, but it barely seemed worthy of consideration compared to the worry on his mind. And then – thank God if He ever answered a prayer – Gordon turned to look at his paintings. 'Nerine, you beauty!' he thought. Thank goodness she had succeeded in persuading him to brighten up his office. He vowed to himself that he would give her a special reward tonight. He knew he wouldn't be given another chance like this. The briefcase was still on the end of the desk, and Auger almost had it beside him now as he silently edged towards it.

'They're all by impressionists,' he told Gordon just to keep him distracted. His eyes were fixed on Gordon, willing him not to turn around, while his hands fumbled blindly with Gordon's case. Don't turn around, he prayed, don't turn around.

Gordon turned round.

Julian stood before him, his hands behind his back. 'Except that one,' he said nodding to his left and directing with a flick of his eyes. 'That's a Picasso.'

He watched as Gordon walked across to look at it more closely.

'It's my favourite actually,' Auger continued.

His eyes never leaving Gordon, Auger manoeuvred back around behind his desk to the open drawer. He glanced down at the drawer below him and then looked straight back at Gordon. He was musing over the print. Auger eased the gun around from behind his back

and, without taking his eyes off Gordon for a moment, made to place the gun down into the drawer.

‘Yes, it’s suitably deranged,’ Gordon said.

Deranged! The word resonated in Auger’s head. For an instant, he had forgotten what he was doing. He glanced down to see that the gun was safely home, only the gun wasn’t there. His hands too were empty. He was momentarily confused. Suddenly conscious that he had taken his eyes off Gordon and not able to remember just how long it had been that way, his eyes shot back across at Lissope. Gordon’s body was turning towards him, and his gaze, which lingered a moment longer on the picture, was about to follow. Auger shoved with his thigh, and the drawer shut.

Julian forced a smile and dropped his hands to his sides. He stood there woodenly for a moment with a teathy grin plastered on his face. Gordon looked ready to leave. The hypnotist relaxed, feeling that he had safely retrieved the gun and that he had avoided having to ask for it – and therefore avoided the embarrassment of having to make up an explanation of how it had come to be in Gordon’s briefcase. It was somewhere in the drawer now, surely. It must just have slipped in further than he thought.

There was something else to do before he could let Gordon leave. He remembered that he had loaded a phrase. He silently congratulated himself for his foresight, and subsequently chastised himself for not having considered how he would get the gun back as well.

He noticed then that Gordon appeared reticent. He preferred them to part on a friendlier note. He might be imagining it, but he still thought Gordon was avoiding his eyes. ‘Have you ever wondered what the purpose of life is?’

Gordon looked at him sharply, paused, and then replied, ‘Survival of our selfish genes, isn’t it? We’re just along for the ride.’

‘Yes, but we’re intelligent beings. Just having enough to eat and plenty of offspring hasn’t been enough for us ever since civilization began.’

‘I suppose you’ve got a better idea.’

‘I thought maybe it’s a trick question.’ Auger thought he saw Gordon soften towards him and continued, ‘The answer I’ve got

begs the question a bit. But even so, it has to be the answer... I think.'

'There's no changing you, is there Julian.'

It was inexplicable to Julian what Gordon was lamenting about. He pressed on anyway, hoping he could lighten his mood. 'The purpose of life is to pursue our desire to have answers.'

'Answers to what?'

'Anything and everything. Everything we're curious about. Why else does the question seem so important.' He shrugged his arms wide. 'If the question isn't important, who cares what the answer is!'

'Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise. Where truth is so odious, 'tis better to cherish lies.'

'Gordon, you surprise me. You don't really believe that, do you? It's so... defeatist.'

'I don't know. I don't even know why I said it. It just sort of popped into my head. I think I must have heard it on TV.'

'...Oh.'

'I don't think life has a purpose. It's an end in itself.'

'And it comes to a bad end at that.'

Gordon laughed and gave the barest nod and then added. 'And we've still got to eat.'

'Of course you're absolutely right. We can't forget the practicalities of life, at least not for long. But curiosity's a powerful thing, even if all you want to know is what your neighbour's up to.'

Gordon laughed again, but this time Auger thought it sounded forced. Auger said quickly, 'What if life isn't an end in itself? What if it isn't an inevitable accident?' He noticed now that Gordon looked uncomfortable, and for the life of him he couldn't fathom why, so he pushed on. 'Isn't it incredible that the moon just exactly eclipses the sun, creating the diamond ring, as they call it? I mean, any smaller or any further away and it wouldn't work. You could almost imagine that Earth would be a tourist destination for aliens – "Oh, that planet whose only moon so perfectly eclipses the sun."'

'It does seem unusual – just the right size – but you've lost me.'

'The moon might be significant. It waxes and wanes with a period of 28 days – the menstrual period of a woman, but not all mammals, and only a few bleed – us, apes, and a few monkeys. And doesn't that

have to be significant – procreation, on which our existence depends. Blood makes it all the more “in your face”. Think about it. If someone wanted to give us a message, they could hardly leave us a larger, more indelible one. They say, “Your moon is significant. How many planets could happen to have just such an eclipse? And there is a relationship between the moon and the continuation of your species.” A message, astronomical in scale and written in blood – surely the message can only be that they had a hand in our creation.’

‘Where do you get all this, Julian? Have you got a friend who’s a druid or something?’

‘Where do I get it? Where do I *get* it?! Not from druids. Though I grant you, I did think of something along that line – well actually, something that predates druids. I thought how many millions of people throughout the ages of mankind must have been struck by exactly the same thought as I’d had. And then I realized – Stonehenge, a place of observation of the heavenly bodies. What was the purpose of Stonehenge, I thought, and then I suddenly had it. They were trying to discover the rest of the message.’

‘What rest of it?’

‘Look, how can you discover a message if you don’t know you’re supposed to be looking for it. The eclipse and the menstrual period are just a marker, an attention grabber – “There’s a message here!” The rest of the message could well be beyond the means of a prehistoric civilization to uncover, but it’ll be obvious, so obvious that we’ll slap ourselves on the forehead and say how could we have missed that for so long.’

‘So what is the rest of the message?’

Now it was his turn to laugh. ‘Well, I don’t know. I’ve hardly begun to look... but I’m willing to bet, if it’s there at all, it’s staring somebody in the face even now.’

‘Or it could be just a coincidence. Somebody thinks about a friend they haven’t heard from for a long time. Then the phone rings, and it’s the friend. They think it’s ESP. Coincidences happen all the time. It’s a trap to believe they must be significant.’

‘Absolutely. Absolutely,’ he said and blushed, ‘I realize that,’ but he saw that Gordon had noticed him redden, and now looked almost

fearful. Could it be that Gordon mistook his colour for anger? So he said quickly, 'Perhaps that's why the Stonehenge civilization vanished. Perhaps they died out of monumental embarrassment.'

Gordon picked up his briefcase and was clearly more than ready to say goodbye.

Auger remembered the deactivating phrase. 'You know, Gordon – about your debts,' he said thinking he could pass it off as a quip. '*There's no need to go robbing any banks.*' But Gordon's reaction left the hypnotist slightly puzzled: He smiled and said, 'Oh, I don't know if I would say that exactly.'

And then he was gone.

CHAPTER 37

Gordon didn't hang around. It didn't seem likely that he was in any danger, but he would feel happier when he had put a safe distance between himself and Auger. He was unscathed, but he couldn't avoid the feeling that he had escaped by the skin of his teeth.

As he left Julian's office, he wondered what he would say to Nerine. It was probably the last time he would see her, and he thought he should say something, but he had no idea what. In the event, Nerine's post behind the reception desk was deserted, and she was nowhere in sight.

Outside it was another warm summer's evening. The arteries were choked with idling cars whose occupants wanted to be elsewhere for the weekend. Gordon walked down the pavement, deep in his thoughts.

He had done his part. The pact was concluded. He didn't expect he would see Julian again. Some part of him regretted it was all over. He felt a mild resentment for Julian and tried to put his finger on exactly why that was.

Julian had wanted revenge – he could hardly doubt it anymore – which was reason enough for any hard feelings he might have towards him, but he knew that wasn't it. He thought back, and he remembered the feeling had arisen just at the point when he saw that what he had done to Julian was going to work. Julian had looked at him, and Gordon had seen in his face a mixture of guilt and pity, and he knew then beyond any doubt that it had worked. He had managed to switch their roles in the incident, at least in Julian's mind.

There had been only two people to whom this thing had really mattered. He was one, Julian was the other. Who else had been so

emotionally involved? Michelle, he expected, would have forgotten about it pretty quickly after moving schools, an unsuspecting casualty of their unconscious rivalry. Her removal from Watson's by her parents had owed more to her parents' pique at the embarrassment, he was sure, than any other factor. But for Julian and himself, the moment was defined by them, and part of their lives in turn had been defined by it.

Their separate memories of the event now contradicted, and were destined to remain irreconcilable. Gordon had been relieved of his guilt, but left alone with the truth. He was left to guard the solitary memory of it. What they shared had tied them together, but now that bond was severed. He had left Julian behind in a fool's paradise.

It was crazy that he should mourn the passing of such an onerous legacy, but his release left a feeling of emptiness. A memory that had been such a deep part of who he was had become nebulous, uncertain, possibly something that only existed in his own imagination. A feeling of futility overran him.

He realized Forslagg's worries about identity hadn't bothered him much. Neither had Julian's loony ideas troubled him especially. One particular time, he had looked at some holiday snaps from his childhood and had the spooky sensation that they had happened to somebody else. He always thought he'd had a bad memory – and that like every other thought in his head hardly seemed to single him out. If there was anything unique about him, it didn't appear to be what went on in his head. Nor did the prospect of abstract deities worry him – he had never believed he had a soul anyway. He believed he had a body, and he was certain it belonged to nobody else. He supposed that what he couldn't deny was that he identified himself by the people that surrounded him.

But he had changed the people around him. He had changed Julian, and what had he done to Helen, the person closest to him? If he twisted them, did he twist himself? What permanence could be sought in such an idea anyway – one day he would die and everything about him, all his life, would die with him because, eventually, everyone who ever knew him and who felt anything about him would be dead too. He saw his mortality.

He thought of Helen, the *new* Helen, waiting for him at home, and

he couldn't maintain his gloomy thoughts. The Unspeakable Thing might one day become utterable. Perhaps when he had lived long enough and close enough to someone, he would have the one intimate confidant to whom he could bear to tell the story. Was she Helen?

London had its hot smell on – a smell Gordon had always associated with good times and beers swigged outside. He pondered the upturned tale he had given Julian. That farcical distortion, he wouldn't do credit to by repeating. He had supplanted the unspeakable with the untenable. He chuckled to himself as he strode down the street.

He felt inside the breast pocket of his jacket and took out the gun to look at it. He was glad to have separated it from Julian. It was heavy in his palm, dark and hard and cold against the skin. Now that he looked at it, he felt strangely that there was something familiar about it.

Ahead of him, he noticed a pedestrian look anxiously in his direction then hurriedly cross to the other side of the street. It struck him how unwise it was to carry this weapon so brazenly and openly in the street. He looked down at it and was about to stuff it back into his jacket when suddenly he recognized it. He knew this gun.

And once he recognized it, he recognized it beyond any doubt. He vaguely recalled the announcement in assembly after the school play. He had assumed – if he had thought about it at all – that the gun had just turned up. It had never occurred to him that Julian had taken it. Now it all seemed to make a kind of perverse sense.

He felt a momentary guilt at having separated Julian from his keepsake. Then he remembered his paranoid fear that Julian might be going to shoot him, and laughed at himself.

Julian didn't need his commiseration prize any longer. That episode of his life was finally closed. He supposed Auger might wonder where on earth the thing had got to, but he didn't think now that Julian would really miss it.

Gordon shook his head slowly. He had sacrificed the treatment for his money troubles – for what? For fear that Julian might want to shoot him... with a stage prop. So Julian's post-hypnotic ploy, his little bank job, had been outed and foiled. Gordon still thought

perhaps he should extract his own revenge, but he knew he didn't have the stomach for it.

He thought again of the headmaster's address from the proscenium of the previous night's performance, curtains drawn closed behind him, and he was struck for the first time by the symbolism of the position from which the speech had been delivered, and some of what the headmaster had said took on a crass new slant. Suddenly he was incredulous. How could that man have silenced them all? It was as if only now was he prepared to consider such doubts, and as soon as he did, he saw right through himself. Of course people had talked! Just not to him or Julian.

But was he sure? He should have overheard something. Had he been left with the sole duty of talking to Julian? If so, he had hidden behind the headmaster's ruling. The idea that he could ever now be certain seemed to him naive, and the uncertainty just made his own history appear more ghost-like. The past now would never be better than a consensus of one, and everything seemed less concrete because of it. The perverse possibility remained that everybody might have talked except the one person who most needed to. Haughton's ruling could have turned out, for Julian, to be unintentionally cruel. Gordon was relieved now that he hadn't sunk low enough to retaliate against Julian. He remembered everything Auger had done for him.

He thought how unexpectedly his mind had been drawn into a world of hypnosis, how resolutely his circumstances had been turned around in hypnotic manner. He regretted that he had had to pass up the final part. He had heard Julian's financial advice. He hadn't known what Julian was going to say to convince him, but he had believed it would be something more than that. It was stupid he knew, but he couldn't bring himself to believe that the last treatment would have worked as well as the others.

He was almost home as he turned north off Marylebone and headed up Gloucester Place. He crossed the road in a side street, and a black cab bore down on him with unexpected speed. He broke into a jog for the last couple of yards to the curb. A heavy weight in his jacket swung and slapped against his chest, reminding him of the gun in his pocket. He would show it to Helen when he got home. No way

would she be able to tell it wasn't real. He wondered what story he would feed her about how he had come to have it.

An idea occurred to him. The solution to all his financial woes, he thought amusedly. He would show Helen the gun, and then he would tell her, by way of explanation, if she didn't stop spending money he was going to hold up a bank.

That ought to get the message across. He thought of the irony that he might end up threatening to do just what Julian had tried to implant. He smirked at a vision of Helen's shocked expression and her supplicating promises never, ever again, to spend even a single penny.

But then he had another idea. It had an attraction all of its own. There was another way he could cull Helen's spending, one that quite appealed. He realized, now that this ability had been given to him, he would never see things in exactly the same way again. The power would always tempt with corrupting influence. Helen had been the first, but after her, who would be next – Jameson? Hammel? He could see that every situation would be imbued with this new possibility, the possibility to craft the world to his liking. He could already sense it happening. In everything, he could see the lure of hypnosis. It was as if the life he had believed in had all been false advertising – and everybody had been infected – because a new germ of truth had occurred to him which undermined his very core. Yet it made anything possible, and everything farcical. Everything he had gone through converged upon him – dreams, lusts, delusions, and faith. A hot catabolism was going on in his brain that was simplifying and energetic; and at its centre was a rarefying thought from which he wanted no escape...

Life is a kind of hypnosis.

