

HUNGRY GHOST

The door opened with no sound on well-oiled brass hinges. Two men and a girl came in on tiptoe like students on a Rag Week stunt. The girl was dressed in a nurse's uniform, starched white with a pocket over her right breast, and white shoes. On her head was a white cap and she carried a small, black leather bag. She was barely five feet tall, but perfectly in proportion, so that standing alone and from a distance it was hard to judge her height. But with a man either side of her in the gloom it was obvious that she was petite, far too small to ever be a model but pretty enough to break hearts.

She moved over to the bottom of the bed and beckoned the men to move to either side. They wore dark business suits, but they wore them badly as if unused to the feel of heavy cloth and long sleeves. While the girl had the soft, well-cared-for skin of a city creature, the men looked weather-beaten and worn as if they'd spent their lives in the fields. And while the girl looked as if she'd never had to lift anything heavier than a lipstick, the men were well-muscled and strong.

The girl gently placed her bag on the foot of the bed, close to the sleeping man's feet and silently opened it. She nervously licked her upper lip, a quick showing of her small, pink tongue, and she took a deep breath, the soft mounds of her breasts pushing the uniform up. She nodded, once, and the two men moved at the same time to grab an arm each. The man on the left, the slightly smaller of the two, reached across and clamped a hand firmly across the sleeper's mouth. He woke with a start and began kicking his legs up and down and twisting his shoulders, his eyes wide with fright and shock. He tried to scream, to force air out of his heaving chest, but the bitter-smelling hand muffled all sound except for a pig-like grunt, too quiet to be heard outside the room. He tried to thrash his head from side to side but the hand held him steady. He tried to bare his teeth to bite the flesh but the thumb was under his chin and painfully squeezing his mouth shut. The men, neither of whom he could see, pulled his arms to the side so that he lay crucified, rigidly held to the bed above the waist but still kicking his legs and grunting. They held him until his legs tired and the grunting stopped. The panic eased somewhat as he realized that they hadn't hurt him. Maybe they just wanted to give him a message, didn't want him to disturb the rest of the party. Perhaps if he lay quietly they'd move the hand and allow him to speak, perhaps they'd tell him what they wanted. He relaxed, let himself go loose to show that he wasn't struggling anymore. But they kept his arms outstretched and the hand stayed where it was, forcing him to breathe noisily through his nostrils.

He became aware of the girl then. He could just make out the top of her head, the white cap and below it two oval-shaped eyes. He felt a weight press down on the bottom of the bed and then saw her face clearly as she climbed up and knelt down with her knees either side of his legs. She had high cheekbones and finely arched eyebrows, and she watched him with a look of quiet amusement. She was gorgeous, no doubt about it, and he couldn't take his eyes off her pouting lips. Her tongue came out and she licked them, slowly and sensuously, like a cat, and began to move up his body, moving one knee at a time. It was a hot night and he was naked under the sheet and he could feel the coolness of her thighs through the cotton. She looked like a nurse, he thought, but what was a nurse doing in his room in the middle of the night and who were the men? For a wild moment he thought he might be in hospital, suffering from amnesia or something, or perhaps he'd had a breakdown. But he knew he was still in the Embassy compound, in the bed he'd occupied for the past three nights. He wasn't in hospital and this wasn't a dream.

She reached his thighs and settled back, nestling her firm buttocks on his knees. Her lips drew back in a teasing smile and he saw white even teeth and behind them her small pointed tongue. Her ears had no lobes, he noticed, and her skin was flawless. She wasn't flat-chested like many Chinese girls, he could see the swell of her breasts under the white dress. His gaze wandered down the line of studs on the front of her dress, down between her breasts to her lap. The dress had ridden up her thighs and he could see her knees by squinting his eyes. Then he saw the hypodermic in her hand and he froze. It began to move upwards and he watched it like a rabbit hypnotized by a snake. The girl held it in front of her face, needle

upwards. In her other hand she held a small vial, containing a colourless liquid, which she pushed onto the needle and extracted fluid from.

The man groaned and began to buck up and down and rock from side to side. The girl gripped him tightly with her thighs as if riding a horse, then she slid up his body until she was sitting on his groin. The dress rode higher up her legs and he caught a glimpse of suspenders and white lace panties. She finished filling the syringe and then popped the empty vial into her breast pocket. The man felt himself grow hard under the sheet, and the girl felt it too. She pressed down against him and smiled, enjoying the feel of his maleness, so close to her, just a sheet separating them. She reached down between her thighs and stroked him, just once. To tease him. Then she removed her hand and tapped the glass with a long, red-painted fingernail and watched the bubbles closely as they rose to the top, under the needle. She gently squeezed the plunger at the bottom, creating a miniature fountain that played over her hands.

The man panicked then, he thrust up and down, trying with all his might to throw her off. He shook his head violently from side to side, eyes rolling with fear, but the hand round his mouth tightened and locked him still. Her cap fell off and black hair tumbled down over her face and across her shoulders, a solid curtain of blackness. She flicked it back and it cascaded around her face. He tried rolling his hips but she just gripped him tighter and moved with him. She reached forward with her left hand and ran her fingertips down his cheek.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I promise,” she said in unaccented English that took him by surprise. He began to sob quietly but lay still, and then she leant forward and injected the contents of the hypodermic into his right arm. Tears rolled down his cheeks and trickled along the side of the hand that kept his mouth clamped shut. She put the empty hypodermic on the bed and he felt a coldness travel up his arm, like pins and needles. She moved forward, placed her hands on the pillow, and kissed him softly on the forehead. He caught the fragrance of jasmine and then it hit his heart and his chest exploded in pain and he died, no sound because his jaw was still locked tight.

The girl shuddered, either with pleasure of relief, and then slid off the bed, gathering up the hypodermic and replacing it in the bag. The men arranged the dead man’s arms under the sheet, and then the three left the room as silently as they’d entered just three minutes earlier.

Sunday was a hell of a funny day to be summoned down to Suffolk to see your boss’s boss, but it wasn’t the sort of invitation that Donaldson could turn down. In fact invitation was the wrong word, he’d been ordered down by Grey, even though the order had come in a very obtuse form. Grey was his normal soft-spoken self on the phone, but there had been no doubt in Donaldson’s mind that something was worrying the man.

When Donaldson took the call his first thought had been that he was about to be sacked, that the latest round of positive vetting had uncovered his little secret. He’d been careful to cover his tracks and whenever he met others who shared his tastes he’d used a false name, but these days you could never be sure; it was always a risk. And perhaps it was the possibility of being caught that added to the excitement. But Grey had simply said that he’d needed his help and that it was something that had to be dealt with out of the office.

He’d been given quite a complicated set of instructions to follow to reach the house and once he’d left the main road he’d had to stop a couple of times to read the scribble he’d jotted down on the back of an internal memo. It had rained for a while, which hadn’t helped. It was the height of summer but the weather owed more to November. It was almost chilly, and had been for the best part of a week. A freak north wind, said the forecasters. Bloody typical, thought Donaldson.

He was ten minutes late and Grey was waiting for him at the entrance to the drive. He was holding open a wooden gate which he closed behind Donaldson’s Toyota as it pulled up in front of the thatched farmhouse.

As he climbed out of the car Donaldson instantly felt over-dressed in his light blue suit. Grey had swapped his customary Savile Row pinstripe for baggy cord trousers and a thick white fisherman's sweater. With his greying temples and weather-beaten face he looked more like the head of a farming family than an off-duty civil servant. He shook Donaldson limply by the hand and took him along the hall past a selection of tasteful hunting prints and into a sitting-room packed with plush settees and Victorian furniture. It was very much a woman's room, with pretty lace things on the backs of the chairs and a collection of old perfume bottles on a circular table in one corner. On top of a large television set was a collection of brass-framed photographs of the Grey clan. A fire was burning merrily in a white-painted metal fireplace that looked original and Grey gestured towards the two floral-patterned easy chairs either side of the blaze. In between the chairs was a low coffee table on which stood a fine bone china tea-set and a silver teapot. There was also a plateful of crumpets dripping with butter.

The two men sat down and made small talk while Grey poured. The conversation turned towards the office, and workloads and politics. Donaldson felt uneasy; Grey wouldn't normally even say hello to him if they passed in a corridor. Donaldson was a Grade 2 admin assistant, albeit with a high security classification. His main job was to keep track of expenses of agents in the field, he was always at arm's length from operations. The nearest he got to the sharp end of intelligence work was to read thrillers by Brian Freemantle and John le Carré.

The fire crackled in the grate, the logs moving against each other like uneasy lovers. A gust of wind blew down the chimney and a plume of smoke bellowed under the rim of the fireplace and wafted gently towards the ceiling, filling the air with the fragrant scent of burning pine.

"There's nothing like an open fire," said Donaldson, settling back in the chair and enjoying the warmth but wishing that his host would just get on with it. Men of Donaldson's rank didn't get social invitations for tea and crumpets in deepest Suffolk.

"It's worth the effort," replied Grey.

Sure, thought Donaldson. Grey probably kicked his wife out of bed in the morning to empty the ashes, fill the grate and blow on burning newspapers until the bloody thing was lit. Either that or he'd have a servant to do it. Grey wasn't the sort of man who'd be caught dead with a dustpan and brush in his liver-spotted hands.

"More tea?" asked Grey, proffering the silver teapot.

"Thank you, no, sir," Donaldson replied politely. He already wanted to visit the toilet.

"I suppose you're wondering why I asked you here," said Grey, as he poured himself another cup.

Of course not, you silly old fool, thought Donaldson, but he merely smiled and nodded, once.

"We have a problem in Hong Kong," continued Grey.

"Or to be more precise, we have a problem over the border, in China." He stirred his tea thoughtfully, the spoon clinking gently against the cup. "You are of course aware of the massive loss of confidence in the colony, especially after what happened in Tiananmen Square. There has been a rush to get out, businesses are thinking twice about investing there, the place is a shambles. The British Government is struggling to make the transition in 1997 as smooth and painless as possible."

He replaced the spoon in the saucer and sipped the tea with relish.

"The Government has already made it clear that we cannot offer sanctuary to all the six million Chinese who live in Hong Kong, so it's vital that we keep the lid on things, if you follow me. Once Hong Kong is part of China, of course, it is no longer our problem. Until then our intelligence services are doing everything they can to nip any trouble in the bud. We are actively seeking to dissuade those local politicians and businessmen who are trying to delay the handover, or to impose restrictions which we know the Chinese will find unacceptable."

Grey gave his pale imitation of a smile and leant forward to place his cup and saucer on the table between them.

“That is background, background you are no doubt aware of. Now to the problem in hand. There is a nuclear power station in China, some six miles away from Hong Kong. The authorities in Beijing have received a threat to destroy it, to blow it up.”

“My God!” said Donaldson. “A nuclear explosion six miles from Hong Kong?”

“Strictly speaking, it wouldn’t actually be a nuclear explosion,” said Grey, clasping his hands and resting them in his lap. “As I understand it, a conventional explosive device has been placed in the foundations, close to the reactor. If detonated it will crack open the reactor and lead to the sort of thing we saw at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. Not a nuclear explosion, but the release of a cloud of radioactive material. Hong Kong, I should add, tends to be downwind of the power station.”

Donaldson fell silent as his mind tried to grasp the enormity of Grey’s revelation. There were so many questions to ask that he didn’t know where to start and he was relieved when the old man began speaking again.

“MI6 tells us that the ultimatum was delivered to Beijing by one of the triads in Hong Kong, the Chinese mafia if you like. They are especially fearful of what will happen when the colony comes under full Chinese jurisdiction. They execute criminals in China, you know. In football stadiums. Parents take their children to watch.” He shook his head sadly. “It’s a simple matter for the big hongks like Jardine Matheson to switch their domicile to Bermuda, or for the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank to invest money overseas and transfer its capital around the world, but the triads are firmly rooted in Hong Kong. They cannot afford to give up their illegal activities in the colony. They simply have too much to lose. So with only a few years to go before the British pull out they have decided that their only hope is to delay the handover. They want the *status quo* to continue, for fifty years at least.”

“Why fifty years, sir?” asked Donaldson.

Grey smiled thinly at the man’s lack of knowledge. “In 1997 Hong Kong will be given back to China, but for fifty years after handover it will operate under its own rules and regulations. It will have its own Government, including its own elected representatives, and its own laws, which are currently being drafted. It will be part of China, but at the same time separate from it. Special Administrative Region, I think they’re going to call it. It will stay that way until 2047 when it will become just another part of China. But during those fifty years the policing of Hong Kong will be the responsibility of the Chinese. And it is that which is worrying the triads.”

“I thought they were bailing out along with anyone else who can afford to buy a passport, sir,” said Donaldson, and was rewarded with a nod from the older man.

“Yes, but it’s not as simple as that. Any sort of criminal record will stop them getting into Canada, Australia or the United States. The middle classes and the rich have no problems buying second passports, but it’s standard practice in most Western countries to cross-check with Special Branch in Hong Kong to ensure that applicants don’t have triad connections. I’ve no doubt they could buy a passport from Andorra but most of them have nowhere to go. Some have managed to get out and as a result many of the triads are active overseas. They operate anywhere where there are Chinatowns . . . or Chinese restaurants. But the bulk of their income comes from vice, drugs and extortion in Hong Kong. And they are naturally reluctant to lose that revenue.”

“But surely, sir, contaminating Hong Kong is no answer?”

Grey shrugged and reached for his cup and saucer again. “It seems to be a sort of scorched-earth policy. If they can’t have it, no one else will. But I suppose they assume that their demands will be met.”

“All they want is for the police force to remain British, you say?”

Grey drained his cup and sighed. “You know what happens when you give in to blackmail, particularly where terrorists are involved. You submit once and the stakes are raised next time. The Chinese are not stupid. They know if they give in to this demand then more will follow. And to be frank, there is not one hope in hell of the Chinese – or the British – agreeing. The British Government just wants a clean withdrawal and the Chinese want complete control. No, their demands will not be met. The men behind it must be stopped.”

Donaldson nodded.

"That's why I need your help," said Grey.

"I don't follow, sir," said Donaldson, feeling out of his depth.

"On no account must the Chinese be aware that we know of the blackmail threat. We haven't been approached officially, nor will we be. That is why we cannot deal with this through normal channels, as news would soon filter back to Peking."

"I hardly think we have any Chinese double-agents, sir," said Donaldson smugly.

"If we have I wouldn't expect you to know about them," said Grey, and Donaldson winced at the reprimand. "No, our department cannot be involved officially. Or unofficially for that matter."

"So you want me to arrange a freelance, sir?"

"No," said Grey, carefully putting his cup and saucer back on the table and looking wistfully at the now empty teapot. "No, not a freelance." He looked up at Donaldson, eyes shining like a ferret's. "We want to use Howells."

Donaldson stiffened as if he'd been plugged into the mains.

"Howells is dead," he said.

"Retired," stressed Grey.

"That's what I mean," said Donaldson.

"No," smiled Grey. "I mean he really *was* retired. Pensioned off. He's alive, and available."

Donaldson sank back into the easy chair, his mind whirling as it tried to come to terms with what he'd heard.

"Howells is a psychopath," he spluttered.

"Actually, I think the phrase the psychologists use is sociopath, admittedly with homicidal tendencies. Though you'll have to take it from me that Geoff Howells is a changed man, for the moment at least. Have you seen the garden?"

The change in subject caught Donaldson by surprise. "I'm sorry, sir?" he said.

"The garden, have you seen the garden? Come on, I feel like a walk."

He led the younger man down along the hall to the back door where he pulled off his slippers and donned a pair of green Wellington boots. He gestured towards a matching pair.

"The grass is still wet. Try those for size. They're my son's, he's up at Oxford."

He would be, thought Donaldson. The boots fitted, though.

Grey hauled open the door to be greeted by two heaving Labradors, one black, one golden-brown, tongues lolling out of the corners of their mouths, tails wagging madly, overjoyed to see their master. Donaldson had seen similar reactions from section heads going into Grey's monthly think-tank meetings. Not that Donaldson had ever attended one. The black dog leapt up and tried to lick Grey's face and he pushed it away, though obviously pleased at the show of affection.

"Down, Lady," he said, but there was no harshness in his voice.

The dogs ran in circles around the two men as they walked along the edge of the lawn which sloped gently down towards a small orchard. The grass formed a triangular shape with the base at the house and the clump of apple trees filling the apex. The garden was bordered by a thick privet hedge some ten feet high and between it and the lawn was a wide flower bed packed with plants and bushes. The air was cool and moist and Donaldson breathed in deeply, savouring its freshness.

"Do you live in the country?" asked Grey.

"Ealing, sir," replied Donaldson.

"Ah," said Grey quietly, as if he'd just heard that Donaldson was an orphan.

"I have garden, though," Donaldson added, and then inwardly squirmed as he realized how lame that sounded. They walked in silence for a while until Grey sniffed the air and turned to peer upward at the roof.

"Damn chimney's smoking too much, I'll have to get it swept. Have you any idea how much it costs to have a chimney swept?"

Donaldson didn't; his three-bedroomed semi had radiators in every room.

They wandered into the orchard, a dozen or so trees twice the height of a man, a mixture of apple, pear and plum, and Grey carefully inspected each one.

“Do you think they need spraying?” asked Grey, but Donaldson guessed it was rhetorical.

You never knew with Grey, that was the problem. He was often so subtle, so obtuse, that it was easy to miss what he was trying to say. He’d once called in one of his departmental heads for a half-hour chat and the poor man had walked out of the office without even realizing that he’d been sacked. It wasn’t until Grey passed him in the corridor a week later that he discovered he was still on the payroll. It wasn’t unusual for group meetings with Grey to be followed by a flurry of phone calls along the lines of ‘what exactly did we decide?’ Donaldson was on edge for any hint, any clue as to what it was that Grey wanted. All he knew so far was that it involved Geoff Howells, a man he thought had been dead for more than three years.

That was the last time one of his expense sheets had passed over his desk. Ridiculously high, as usual. Donaldson had enjoyed wielding the red pen, often slashing them by half. Until the day Howells had burst into Donaldson’s office. Jesus, he’d been terrified. Damn near pissed himself.

“Did you ever work with Howell’s?” asked Grey.

Donaldson shook his head. “No, but I followed his career with interest.”

“Short but eventful,” said Grey. “He managed to gain quite a reputation in a relatively short period of time.”

“Captain in the SAS, wasn’t he? Trained to kill.” And the bastard damn near killed me, thought Donaldson. He’d grabbed him by the throat and pinned him to the wall. That’s all Donaldson remembered until he woke up in the empty office with one of Howell’s expense sheets shoved between his teeth. That was the last time he’d used the red pen.

“Special Boat Section, actually. One of the best. Did a superb job during the Falklands War, led one of the advance reconnaissance teams sent in to identify the Argentinian positions. Recorded nine kills during a four-day mission.”

“Impressive,” said Donaldson.

“Problem was,” said Grey, studying a small patch of green mould on the trunk of one of the plum trees, “two of them were SAS troopers. That’s when he came to our attention.”

“What!” exploded Donaldson.

“We hushed it all up of course, we were getting enough bad publicity at the time as it was.”

By ‘we’ Donaldson assumed he meant the British.

“What happened, sir?” he asked.

“He joined one of our more low profile departments.”

“No, sir, I mean what happened to the SAS men?”

“Howells was sitting in a hole a hundred yards or so from an Argentinian artillery unit when two SAS soldiers practically fell on top of him. According to Howells one of them was about to shoot and he reacted instinctively, killed one with a punch to the throat and knocked the other to the ground and broke his neck. It was over in seconds, apparently, and the Argentinians didn’t hear a thing. He left the bodies in the hole. One of life’s little tragedies.”

Donaldson thought for a moment that Grey had made a joke, but realized that he was serious.

“We took him in and trained him. He was good, very good. One of the best, in fact. Ten clean kills in a two-year period. Never any problems, not as far as the technical side was concerned, anyway. I am going to have to speak to Perkins about this.”

“Perkins?” said Donaldson, totally confused.

“My gardener. He’s going to have to do something about this mould. It can kill the tree if it isn’t treated, you know.”

Donaldson didn’t know, and frankly he didn’t give a toss. He had only one tree at the end of his pocket-handkerchief of a garden.

“He started to enjoy the work, that was the trouble.”

Donaldson realized Grey had switched back to Howells, though he was still studying the mould intently.

“The psychologists picked it up during his monthly check-up. He was fretting when he wasn’t working and they discovered that he’d put a little too much, shall we say, effort into his last job. His target was a Libyan student who planted a messy bomb in Manchester some time back, you remember the one? Killed three people. Nothing we could prove in court so Howells’ department was told to arrange a termination. Howells decided to make it look like a car accident. And he did, too. By the time they cut the Libyan out of the wreckage there was barely an unbroken bone in his body.”

“So?” said Donaldson, though he knew what was coming.

“So that’s the way the Libyan went into the car. Howells killed him with his bare hands – slowly and very painfully.

That was one of the crazy things about their line of work, mused Donaldson. You could do the job, and do it professionally, but once you started to enjoy it, you were finished. The psychologists reckoned that only a mad man could enjoy killing, but they never asked if a truly sane man would do the job in the first place. Going by the names and expense sheets that went across Donaldson’s desk, three years was as long as they normally lasted in the job, though some could go on for much longer. The CIA was rumoured to have a grandmother on their books who’d been active for nigh on thirty-five years.

“You know why he wasn’t transferred?” Donaldson didn’t, of course. “We tried to shift him over to a desk job, but Howells wouldn’t have any of it. Said he wanted to carry on doing what he was good at, what we had trained him to do. Said he wouldn’t accept a transfer.”

That happened sometimes, when operatives got so addicted to the adrenalin rush that they couldn’t bear to lose it. And if they were forcibly moved into another job they’d find another outlet for their frustrations and innocent bystanders would get hurt. It happened, but when it did the man, or woman, was swiftly retired. And retirement didn’t mean a pension and a cottage in Devon. Retirement meant permanent. It was never spoken about openly, not at Donaldson’s level, anyway. But every now and again a name would just disappear from the approved-expenses list and the file would be recalled by Personnel and never seen again. Donaldson had breathed a sigh of relief when Howell’s name and file had gone. The man was a nutter, a dangerous nutter.

The two men walked out of the trees and back along the lawn towards the house. Grey picked up a small dead branch and threw it for the dogs. They rushed after it, barking and barging into each other. They reached it at the same time and grabbed an end each, pulling it and grunting with pleasure. Donaldson knew exactly how the stick felt.

“Where is he now, sir?”

“Bali.”

“Bali?”

“Indonesia.”

This was becoming bizarre, thought Donaldson. In the space of a few minutes the conversation had gone from a threat to destroy a Chinese power station to a retired killer lying on a beach in Indonesia. And somewhere in the middle, like the stick caught between the two dogs, was Donaldson himself.

“We want to use Howells to clear up this Daya Bay business,” said Grey.

“Daya Bay?”

“That’s where the nuclear reactor is. We want Howells to defuse the situation.”

He didn’t seem to realize the pun. The black Labrador had won the tussle over the stick and came running over to Grey to present the trophy, and receive a pat on the head for her trouble. The other dog pretended to lose interest and wandered among the trees, sniffing at roots.

“Why Howells, sir?” asked Donaldson, hoping it didn’t sound like criticism.

“We need someone who can’t be traced back to us, someone who isn’t on our books, and that rules out staffers and freelancers. The Chinese mustn’t know that we know, if you see what I mean. So any action we take must be completely covert.”

“But surely that would also rule out Howells, sir?”

Donaldson asked though he knew what was coming and he prayed to God that he was wrong. He didn't want to meet Howells again – ever.

“Because he used to work for us? That isn't a problem. He's never worked in Hong Kong or China, so it's unlikely he would be recognized. His mental problems and his retirement are no secret, and if anything goes wrong it would be assumed that he'd just gone on the rampage. I can't think anybody would believe that the British Government would use such an agent.”

Donaldson agreed with that one. And his own involvement was starting to give him an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. His urge to go to the toilet was increasing by the minute. Maybe it was the tea, maybe it was the cold air, or maybe it was the thought of working with Howells that seemed to be what Grey was suggesting.

“I must repeat that it is crucial that the Chinese do not find out that the British Government is involved. The negotiations between the triads and the Chinese are being conducted at the highest level in Peking and there is only a handful of people involved. If they discover that we know what is going on, there is a good chance it will expose our source. There must be no connection at all seen between Howells and my department.

Which, thought Donaldson, is why I'm here. To provide the distance.

“Howells isn't the man he was,” continued Grey.

“In what way, sir?”

Grey thought for a while, oblivious of the dog shuffling backwards and forwards at his feet waiting for the saliva-smear stick to be thrown.

“Have you ever had a tooth capped?” he asked.

Donaldson shook his head. What the hell did teeth have to do with this? There were times when he wondered if the older man really was starting to go gaga.

“It's worth doing if you've got a tooth that's so badly rotted that it can't be repaired with a normal amalgam filling. You build another tooth out of porcelain and metal and bond it to what's left of the original tooth. It looks real and it functions as normal.”

He threw the stick hard and high and the dog hurtled after it as it curved through the air. The dog in the orchard pretended not to notice, but its tail wasn't wagging.

“Howells had a personality that was rotten to the core. For whatever reason, he'd got to the stage where he enjoyed inflicting pain, enjoyed killing. He spent six months in a private sanatorium while some of the best psychologists in the country tried to undo the damage – but to no avail. Their conclusion was that Geoff Howells could never be returned to society. He was facing a lifetime in a Broadmoor cell weaving baskets.”

The dog was back, stick in mouth, but Grey ignored her. The two men had returned to the back door of the house but Grey made no move to open it. Donaldson's bladder was starting to hurt.

“We decided instead to try a different method, which brings us back to the dental analogy. They produced a new personality and in effect grafted it on to the old one, just like capping a bad tooth. They used deep hypnosis and God knows what drugs to suppress all his killer instincts, dampened his feelings and emotions and overlaid them with a new set. He has the memories of what went before, but it's as if they belong to someone else. To all intents and purposes Howells is now a confirmed pacifist, as docile as a lamb. We've done a few favours for the Indonesian Government over the years so we arranged for him to live there.”

Until he was needed again, thought Donaldson. Until now.

“If he's been neutralized, surely he's no good to us now, sir,” said Donaldson, more in hope than belief.

Grey smiled. “The conversion isn't permanent. In the same way that a cap can be pulled off a tooth, the new personality can be removed to reveal the man he used to be. And it's that man we need.”

“I still don't follow why it has to be Howells, sir. Surely we could use any freelance and just make sure our tracks are well covered.”

God, that sounded like a whine. Would Charlie Muffin have said that? Would Quiller refuse to take an assignment because it meant dealing with a psychopath/sociopath? If he had any bloody sense he would.

Grey shook his head. "No, you know how they work. They all keep safety deposit boxes with envelopes to be opened in the event of their deaths. And they don't take kindly to being used, it can have a nasty habit of backfiring. No, Howells is perfect. He has no living relatives, he will follow instructions to the letter and he is . . ."

"Expendable?" asked Donaldson hopefully.

"Exactly. I am glad we understand each other." He seized the doorknob and pushed open the wooden door, careful not to allow the panting Labrador in. He ushered Donaldson inside where they removed their boots, then led him into the sitting-room and picked up a manila file off a small mahogany side-table. "Sit down and read this. It goes without saying that I don't want you to take notes." If it goes without saying, thought Donaldson, why mention it? "Come and see me when you've finished reading the file. I'll be in the garden."

Grey closed the door gently. A minute or so later Donaldson heard him let himself out of the back door and call for the dogs. He settled down into the chair and began to read, all thoughts of his bladder gone.