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a pleasure to read' *New York Times Book Review*

JG Ballard

The Unlimited Dream Company



P.S.
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& MORE

The Unlimited Dream Company

J.G. Ballard

FOURTH ESTATE • *London*

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CHAPTER 1

The Coming of the Helicopters

In the first place, why did I steal the aircraft?

If I had known that only ten minutes after taking off from London Airport the burning machine was to crash into the Thames, would I still have climbed into its cock-pit? Perhaps even then I had a confused premonition of the strange events that would take place in the hours following my rescue.

As I stand here in the centre of this deserted riverside town I can see my tattered flying suit reflected in the windows of a nearby supermarket, and clearly remember when I entered the unguarded hangar at the airport. Seven days ago my mind was as cool and stressed as the steel rods above my head. While I strapped myself into the pilot's seat I knew that a lifetime's failures and false starts were at last giving way to the simplest and most mysterious of all actions – flight!

Above the film studios helicopters are circling. Soon the police will land on this empty shopping mall, no doubt keen to question me about the disappearance of Shepperton's entire population. I only wish that I could see their surprise when they discover the remarkable way in which I have transformed this peaceful town.

Unsettled by the helicopters, the birds are rising into the air, and I know that it is time for me to leave. Thousands of them surround me, from every corner of the globe, flamingos and frigate-birds, falcons and deep-water albatross, as if sprung from the cages of a well-stocked zoo. They perch on the portico of the filling-station, jostle for a place on the warm roofs of the abandoned cars. When I lean against a pillar-box, trying to straighten my ragged flying suit, the harpy eagle guarding these never-to-be-collected letters snaps at my hands, as if she has forgotten who I am and is curious to inspect this solitary pilot who has casually stepped off the wind into these deserted streets. The barbaric plumage of cockatoos, macaws and scarlet ibis covers the shopping mall, a living train that I would like to fasten around my waist. During the past few minutes, as I made sure that none of my neighbours had been left behind, the centre of Shepperton has become a spectacular aviary, a huge aerial reserve ruled by the condors.

Only the condors will remain with me to the end. Two of these great vultures are watching me now from the concrete roof of the car-park. Fungus stains the tips of their wings, and the putrefying decaying flesh glints between their talons, carrion gold shining in the claws of restless money-changers. Like all the birds, they give the impression that they might attack me at any moment. Excited by the helicopters and the barely healed wound on my chest.

Despite these suburban pleasantries, I wish that I could stay longer here and come to terms with everything that has happened to me, and the consequences for us all that extend far beyond the boundaries of this small town fifteen miles to the west of London. Around me the streets are silent in the afternoon light. Toys lie by the garden gates, dropped in mid-game by the children when they ran away an hour ago, and one of my neighbours has forgotten to turn off his lawn sprinkler. It rotates tirelessly, casting a succession of immaculate rainbows over the ornamental pond at the foot of the garden, as if hoping to lasso a spectral fish from its deeps.

'Mrs St Cloud ...! Father Wingate ...!' I miss them already, the widow who tried to finance my flying school, and the priest who found my bones in the river bed.

'Miriam ...! Dr Miriam ...!' The young doctor who revived me when I had almost drowned.

All have left me now. Beckoning the birds to follow me, I set off across the shopping mall. On the beach by the river is a hiding place where I can wait until the helicopters have gone. For the last time I look up at the vivid tropical vegetation that forms Shepperton's unique skyline. Orchids and horse-tail ferns crowd the roofs of the supermarket and filling-station, saw-leaved palmettos flourish in the windows of the hardware store and the television rental office, mango trees and magnolia overrun the once sober gardens, transforming this quiet suburban town where I crash-landed only a week ago into some corner of a forgotten Amazon city.

The helicopters are nearer now, clattering up and down the deserted streets by the film studios. The crews peer through their binoculars at the empty houses. But although the townspeople have left I can still feel their presence within my body. In the window of the appliance store I see my skin glowing like an archangel's, lit by the dreams of these housewives and secretaries, film actors and bank cashiers as they sleep within me, safe in the dormitories of my bones.

At the entrance to the park are the memorials which they built to me before they embarked on their last flight. With good-humoured irony, they constructed these shrines from miniature pyramids of dishwashers and television sets, kiosks of record players ornamented with sunflowers, gourds and nectarines, the most fitting materials these suburbanites could find to celebrate their affection for me. Each of these arbours contains a fragment of my flying suit or a small section of the aircraft, a memento of our flights together in the skies above Shepperton, and of that man-powered flying machine I dreamed all my life of building and which they helped me to construct.

One of the helicopters is close behind me, making a tentative circuit of the town centre. Already the pilot and navigator have seen my skin glowing through the trees. But for all their concern, they might as well abandon their machine in mid-air. Soon there will be too many deserted towns for them to count. Along the Thames valley, all over Europe and the Americas, spreading outwards across Asia and Africa, ten thousand similar suburbs will empty as people gather to make their first man-powered flights.

I know now that these quiet, tree-lined roads are runways, waiting for us all to take off for the skies I sought seven days ago when I flew my light aircraft into the air-space of this small town by the Thames, into which I plunged and where I escaped both my death and my life.

CHAPTER 2

I Steal the Aircraft

Dreams of flight haunted that past year.

Throughout the summer I had worked as an aircraft cleaner at London Airport. In spite of the incessant noise and the millions of tourists moving in and out of the terminal buildings I was completely alone. Surrounded by parked airliners, I walked down the empty aisles with my vacuum cleaner, sweeping away the debris of journeys, the litter of uneaten meals, of unused tranquillizers and contraceptives, memories of arrivals and departures that reminded me of all my own failures to go anywhere.

Already, at the age of twenty-five, I knew that the past ten years of my life had been an avalanche zone. Whatever new course I set myself, however carefully I tried to follow a fresh compass bearing, flew straight into the nearest brick wall. For some reason I felt that, even in being myself, I was acting a part to which someone else should have been assigned. Only my compulsive role-playing, above all dressing up as a pilot in the white flying suit I found in one of the lockers, touched the corners of some kind of invisible reality.

At seventeen I had been expelled from the last of half a dozen schools. I had always been aggressive and lazy, inclined to regard the adult world as a boring conspiracy of which I wanted no part. As a small child I had been injured in the car crash that killed my mother, and my left shoulder developed a slight upward tilt that I soon exaggerated into a combative swagger. My school-friends liked to mimic me, but I ignored them. I thought of myself as a new species of winged man. I remembered Baudelaire's albatross, hooted at by the crowd, but unable to walk only because of his heavy wings.

Everything touched off my imagination in strange ways. The school science library, thanks to an over-enlightened biology master, was a cornucopia of deviant possibilities. In a dictionary of anthropology I discovered a curious but touching fertility rite, in which the aboriginal tribesmen dug a hole in the desert and took turns to copulate with the earth. Powerfully moved by this image, I wandered around in a daze, and one midnight tried to have an orgasm with the school's most cherished cricket pitch. In a glare of torch-beams I was found drunk on the violated turf, surrounded by beer bottles. Strangely enough, the attempt seemed far less bizarre to me than it did to my appalled headmaster.

Expulsion hardly affected me. Since early adolescence I had been certain that one day I would achieve something extraordinary, astonish even myself. I knew the power of my own dreams. Since my mother's death I had been brought up partly by her sister in Toronto and the rest of the time by my father, a successful eye surgeon preoccupied with his practice who never seemed properly to recognize me. In fact, I had spent so much time on transatlantic jets that my only formal education had come from in-flight movies.

After a year at London University I was thrown out of the medical school – while dissecting a thorax in the anatomy laboratory one afternoon I suddenly became convinced that the cadaver was still alive. I terrorized a weak fellow student into helping me to frogmarch the corpse up and down the laboratory in an attempt to revive it. I am still half-certain that we would have succeeded.

Disowned by my father – I had never been close to him and often fantasized that my real father

was one of the early American astronauts, and that I had been conceived by semen ripened in outer space, a messianic figure born *into* my mother's womb from a pregnant universe – I began an erratic and increasingly steep slalom. Rejected would-be mercenary pilot, failed Jesuit novice, unpublished writer of pornography (I spent many excited weekends dialling deserted offices all over London and dictating extraordinary sexual fantasies into their answering machines, to be typed out for amazed executives by the unsuspecting secretaries) – yet for all these failures I had a tenacious faith in myself, a messiah as yet without a message who would one day assemble a unique identity out of the defective jigsaw.

For six months I worked in the aviary at London Zoo. The birds drove me mad with their incessant cheeping and chittering, but I learned a great deal from them, and my obsession with man-powered flight began at this point. Once I was arrested by the police for being over-boisterous in the children's playground near the zoo where I spent much of my spare time. For five minutes one rainy afternoon I was gripped by a Pied Piper complex, and genuinely believed that I could lead the twenty children and their startled mothers, the few passing dogs and even the dripping flowers away to paradise which was literally, if I could only find it, no more than a few hundred yards from us.

Outside the courthouse, where I had been discharged by a sympathetic magistrate, I was befriended by a retired air hostess who now worked as a barmaid at a London Airport hotel and had just been convicted of soliciting at the West London Air Terminal. She was a spirited and likeable girl with a fund of strange stories about the sexual activities at international airports. Carried away by these visions, I immediately proposed to her and moved into the apartment she rented near Heathrow. At this time I was obsessed with the idea of building a man-powered aircraft. Already I was planning the world's first circumnavigation, and saw myself as the Lindbergh and Saint-Exupéry of man-powered flight. I began to visit the airport each day, watching the airliners and the thousands of passengers taking off into the sky. I envied them, their profoundly ordinary lives crossed by the incredible dream of flight.

Flying dreams haunted me more and more. After a few weeks spent on the observation decks I found a job as an aircraft cleaner. On the southern side of London Airport was a section reserved for light aircraft. I spent all my free time in the parking hangars, sitting at the controls of these winnowing, weary but elegant machines, complex symbols that turned all sorts of keys in my mind. One day, accepting the logic of my dreams, I decided to take off myself.

So began my real life.

Whatever my motives at the time, however, an event that morning had profoundly unsettled me. While watching my fiancée dressing in the bedroom, I felt a sudden need to embrace her. Her uniform was decorated with flying motifs, and I always enjoyed the way she put on this grotesque costume. But as I held her shoulders against my chest I knew that I was not moved by any affection for her but by the need literally to crush her out of existence. I remember the bedside lamp falling to the floor at one foot, knocked down by her flailing arm. As she struck my face with her hard fists I stood by the bed choking her against my chest. Only when she collapsed around my knees did I realize that I had been about to kill her, but without the slightest hate or anger.

Later, as I sat in the cockpit of the Cessna, excited by the engine as it coughed and thundered in my life, I knew that I had meant no harm to her. But at the same time I remembered the dumb fear in her face as she sat on the floor, and I was certain that she would go to the police. Narrowly missing the stationary airliner, I took off on one of the parking runways. I had watched the mechanics start the engines and often badgered them to let me sit beside them as they taxied around the hangars. Several of them were qualified pilots and told me all I needed to know about the flight controls and engine

settings. Strangely, now that I was actually airborne, crossing the car-parks, plastics factories and reservoirs that surrounded the airport, I had no idea what course to set. Even then I realized that I would soon be caught and charged with stealing the Cessna after attempting to murder my fiancée.

Forgetting to raise the flaps, I was unable to climb higher than 500 feet, but the idea of low-flying aircraft had always excited me. About five miles south of the airport the engine began to overheat. Within seconds it caught fire and filled the cabin with burning smoke. Below me was a peaceful riverside town, its tree-lined suburban streets and shopping centre tucked into a wide bend of the river. There were film studios, technicians on a lawn by their cameras. A dozen antique biplanes were drawn up by the canvas mock-up of a camouflaged hangar, and actors in World War I leather flying gear raised their goggles to stare up at me as I soared past, trailing an immense plume of smoke. A man standing on a platform above a metal tower waved his megaphone at me, as if trying to incorporate me into his film.

By now the burning oil that filled the cabin was scorching my face and hands. I decided to put the aircraft down into the river – rather than be burned alive I would drown. Half a mile ahead, beyond tennis courts and a park ringed by dead elms, a large Tudor mansion stood above a sloping lawn that ran down to the water.

As the aircraft crossed the park my shoes were on fire. Vaporizing glycol raced up the funnels of my trousers, scalding my legs and about to boil my testicles. The treetops rushed by on either side. The undercarriage splintered the brittle upper branches of the dead elms, and a cloud of starlings erupted from the trees like shrapnel from a shell. The control column struck itself from my hands. At the last moment I shouted at the river as it rose towards me. Falling apart in the air, its tail impaled by the branches, the aircraft plunged into the water. Spray and steam exploded through the fuselage, the hot pellets striking my face. Hurlled forwards against the harness, I felt my head strike the cabin door but without any sense of pain, as if my body belonged to a passenger.

However, I was certain that I never lost consciousness. Immediately the aircraft began to sink. As I tried to release the harness, struggling with the unfamiliar buckle, a seething black water filled the cabin and swirled in a greedy way around my waist. I knew that within a few seconds I would be drowned.

At this point I saw a vision.

CHAPTER 3

The Vision

Supported by its wings, the aircraft lay passively in the water. A huge cloud of steam rose from the submerged engine and drifted towards the bank. The nose tilted forwards, and the river lapped in an off-hand way at the fractured windshield in front of my face. I slipped the release catch of my harness and was trying to force open the cabin door when my attention was held by the scene in front of me.

I seemed to be looking at an enormous illuminated painting, lit both by the unsettled water and by a deep light transmitted through the body of the canvas. What surprised me, as I pushed the cabin door against the current, was the intense clarity of every detail. In front of me, above its sloping lawn was the half-timbered Tudor mansion. A number of people were watching me, like figures posed by the artist in a formal landscape. None of them moved, as if frozen by the burning aircraft that had burst out of the afternoon sky and fallen into the water at their feet.

Although I had never been to this town before – Shepperton, I assumed, from the presence of the film studios – I was convinced that I recognized their faces, and that they were a party of film actors resting between takes. Nearest to me was a dark-haired young woman wearing a white laboratory coat. She stood on the foam-flecked lawn below the mansion, playing in a distracted way with three small children. Two boys and a girl, they sat side by side on a swing like monkeys huddled together on a perch, smiling hopefully at whatever game the young woman was trying to arrange for them. On the sides of their eyes they watched me in a knowing way, as if they had been waiting all day for me to land my plane in the water for them. The smaller of the boys wore leg-irons, and whistled now and then at his heavy feet, encouraging them to kick the air. The other boy, a stocky, large-skulled mongrel, whispered something to the girl, a pretty child with pale cheeks and secretive eyes.

Above them, in an upstairs window of the mansion, was a handsome, middle-aged woman with a widow's empty face, the mother, I guessed, of the girl in the white coat. She held the brocade curtain in one hand, a forgotten cigarette in the other, unsure whether the violence of my arrival might drag her down with me. She was calling to a bearded man in his late fifties who sat on the narrow beach that separated me from the bank. An archaeologist of some kind, he was surrounded by easel, wicker hamper and specimen trays, his strong but over-weight body squeezed into a small canvas chair. Although his shirt was soaked with water splashed across him by the aircraft, he was staring intently at something on the beach that had caught his attention.

The last of these seven witnesses was a man of about thirty, naked but for his swimming trunks, who stood at the end of a wrought-iron pier jutting into the river from the group of riverside hotels beyond the mansion. He was painting the gondola of a miniature Ferris wheel, part of a children's funfair built on to this crumbling Edwardian pier. He paused paint-brush in hand, and with complete presence of mind glanced casually over his shoulder at me, displaying his blond hair and the showy muscular physique of a film company athlete.

The water rose around my chest, surging through the submerged dials of the instrument panel. I waited for one of the witnesses to come to my help, but they stood like actors waiting for a director's cue, their figures lit by the vibrant light that suffused the air. A deep, premonitory glow lay over the mansion, the amusement pier and the hotels by the marina, as if in the last micro-seconds before an immense disaster. I was almost convinced that a huge airliner had crashed on to this suburban town

that it was about to be overwhelmed by a nuclear catastrophe.

~~The river swirled across the windshield. A murky foam thrashed against the fractured glass. At~~
the last moment I saw the archaeologist rise from his chair, strong arms outstretched across the water, trying to will me from the aircraft as if he had suddenly realized his responsibility for me.

The starboard wing sank below the surface. Dragged by the current, the Cessna rolled on to its starboard side. Breaking free from my harness, I forced back the door and clambered from the flooded cabin onto the port wing strut. I climbed on to the roof and stood there in my ragged flying suit as the aircraft sank below me into the water, taking my dreams and hopes into its deep.

CHAPTER 4

An Attempt to Kill Me

I was lying on the wet grass below the mansion. People jostled around me in what seemed to be a drunken brawl, ordered back by the young woman in the white coat.

‘Dr Miriam—!’

‘I can see he isn’t dead! Now get away!’ She brushed her untidy hair out of her eyes and knelt beside me, a nervous but strong hand on my breast-bone, ready to pump my heart back to life. ‘God ... God ... you seem to be all right.’

For all the authority in this young woman’s voice, she was totally confused by something, still not altogether sure that I was alive. Behind her was the middle-aged woman I had seen in the window of the mansion. She stared at me in an appalled way, as if she, and not I, had escaped from the accident. Engine grease marked her silk blouse and the pearls hanging from her neck. She held the forgotten cigarette in her left hand, about to brand this drenched aviator who had wrestled himself down to the grass.

She reached down and angrily shook my shoulder.

‘Who *are* you!’

‘Mrs St Cloud! You’ll hurt him, madam ...!’

A man in chauffeur’s uniform tried to calm her, but she clung to me in a disorientated way, as if she had stolen something valuable from her.

‘Mother!’ The young doctor struck her hand from my shoulder. ‘He can’t cope with you as well. Bring my case from the house!’

The people around me stepped back reluctantly, revealing a placid sky. The intense light had gone, and the Ferris wheel rotated against the clouds like an amiable mandala. I felt strong but strangely old, as if I had completed an immense voyage. I touched the doctor’s arm in an effort to calm her, wondering how to warn her of the disaster about to overwhelm this small town.

She patted my cheek reassuringly. Obviously she had been deeply impressed by the dramatic style of my arrival. Looking up at this confused young woman, I felt a powerful sense of gratitude for her. I wanted to stroke her skin, place my mouth against her breast. For a moment I almost believed that I was her suitor, and that I had chosen this extravagant method of arrival in order to propose marriage to her.

As if aware of this, she smiled and pressed my hand. ‘Are you all right? I don’t mind saying that you gave me a hell of a scare ... Can you see me? And hear me? How many fingers? Good. Now, were there anyone else in the plane? A passenger?’

‘I ...’ For no clear reason I decided not to speak. The image of the Cessna’s cockpit formed a blank zone in my mind. I could no longer remember myself at the controls. ‘No ... I was alone.’

‘You don’t sound very sure. Who are you, anyway? You look as if you might forget at any moment.’

‘Blake – I’m a stunt pilot. The aircraft caught fire.’

‘It certainly did ...’

Taking her arm, I sat up. The wet grass was stained with oil from my flying suit. My shoes were charred, but luckily neither of my feet had been burned. From the respectful faces of the people

around me – a gardener, the chauffeur, and an elderly couple who appeared to be housekeepers – knew they had all assumed that I had drowned and were stunned by my apparent return from the dead. Along the river people were standing by both banks. Tennis players carrying their rackets moved through the trees, and a group of small boys were throwing clods of earth into the water, imitating the aircraft's splash.

The Cessna had vanished in the current, swept away by the dark water.

The archaeologist strode up from the beach, his beard and parson's collar soaked with water. As he caught his breath, staring impatiently at the oil-stained lawn, he resembled a harassed marine prophet come ashore to search for a renegade member of his flock. He gazed at me in a curious, disappointed way. I guessed that he had waded into the river to pull me to safety, assumed like the others that I had died and was about to read the last rites over me.

'Father Wingate – he's come round.' Dr Miriam steadied me against her shoulder. 'That's one miracle I concede to you.'

'I can see that, Miriam.' The priest made no attempt to come any nearer, as if wary of me rebuffed by my return to the living. 'Well, thank God ... But let him rest.'

The light faded, and then grew suddenly brighter. The priest's face swam, its firm and spartan features leaking across the air into an angry grimace. Exhausted, I leaned against Dr Miriam and laid my head across her warm lap.

I could feel the imprint of a strange mouth against my own. My lips were swollen and cut against my teeth. A pair of powerful hands had bruised themselves into my chest. Whoever had given me artificial respiration to me had used unnecessary strength, forcing his fingers between my ribs, as if determined to kill me. Through the deep glare that illuminated the river, now an almost lunar domain without shadows, I could see the priest watching me with a peculiar intensity, as if he were challenging me in some way. Had he tried to revive me, or kill me?

At the same time, I knew that I had not lost consciousness. I remembered stepping from the roof of the aircraft and swimming strongly for the shore, and then being steered by someone through the shallows. I looked up at the sky, which hovered on the verge of that vivid glow I had seen from the cockpit of the Cessna. As Dr Miriam held my head in her lap, her fingers pressed anxiously to my temples, I was about to warn her of the disaster.

Abruptly, the sky cleared. Dr Miriam was looking at me in a reflective way, as if we were lovers long familiar with each other's bodies. I could smell her strong thighs, and see her surprisingly grimed feet within their sandals. Her untidy hair was tied back in a faded ribbon. Through a missing button on her blouse I stared at a child's scratch-marks on her left breast. I wanted to embrace her, here on the open lawn in front of this aggressive priest. I was sure that the violence of my accident had aroused her, and I was disappointed that it was not her mouth that had cut my lips.

She checked herself, and began wiping the oil from my face with a scented handkerchief. At that moment the local police would arrive, drawn by the crowd watching along the bank. Hundreds of people were staring at me across the calm water.

I stood up and leaned against the swing, while the three children watched me from their perch. They laughed hysterically when I kicked the charred shoes from my feet. The flying suit hung in rags around my waist. The right shoulder and leg were missing, torn from me as I escaped from the Cessna.

Turning my back on the priest, I said: 'I have to leave. I'm an instructor at a flying school. They'll need to know the aircraft came down here.'

'I thought you were a stunt pilot.'

'I am, in a way. I am a stunt pilot.' To avoid her interested gaze, I asked: 'What's the matter with

your mother? She's mad ...'

~~'You startled her, to put it mildly. Now, wait a minute.'~~ She stood in front of me and felt my bruised ribs and abdomen, like a teacher inspecting a child injured in a playground. The blood from my grazed knuckles spotted her hands. Once again I felt a strong sexual attraction to her, part of my nervous relief at being alive. There was a slight swelling under her upper lip, as if she had bruised it kissing her lover.

'Before you leave I want to take an X-ray of that head. Five minutes ago we thought you'd ...'

She left the sentence unfinished, less out of deference to me than to the clergyman. He had moved a few steps closer but had still not joined us. His level stare made me sure that he already suspected I was not a qualified pilot. Dr Miriam squeezed the water from my suit. 'Father Wingate, who's the patron saint of stunt pilots and flying instructors? There must be one.'

'Clearly there must be. Miriam, leave the poor fellow alone.' To me, he added: 'It isn't every day that young men fall from the sky.'

'More's the pity.' She turned from me and silenced the three children, who were running around the swing. The boy with leg-irons was uttering a series of whooping cries that sounded like a parody of my voice. 'Jamie – why are you being cruel?'

I thought of clouting the boy but the priest touched my shoulder. He had at last approached me and was staring into my face as if reading the seams in one of his bone-beds. 'Before you go. You're all right, are you? You must have a powerful will – you literally came to life in our hands.'

For all his pious tone, I knew that he was not about to ask me to join him in a prayer of thanksgiving. My apparent return from the dead had clearly shaken the orders and proprieties of his universe. Perhaps he had tried to revive me on the beach, and after all these years of wearing the cloth wings, I was embarrassed to find that he had apparently performed a miracle.

Seeing his strong physique at close quarters, the shoulders still trembling with some strangely repressed emotion, I could easily imagine him deciding to crush the life out of me and send me back to the other side before everything got out of hand. He was deliberately exposing the suspicions that had crossed his face, trying to provoke me. I was tempted to grapple with him, force my bruised body against his and hurl him on to the oil-stained grass.

I touched my lips, wondering if the priest had revived me by this act of oral rape. Someone with powerful arms had crushed the air from my lungs – a man of my own size, judging from the imprint on his mouth and hands. The priest was old enough to be my father, but despite his dog-collar he had the aggressive physique of a rugby player.

I looked at the circle of faces, at the people lining the opposite bank of the river. If not the priest, then which of the seven witnesses? Perhaps Dr Miriam, or her dotty mother. Mrs St Cloud had emerged from the mansion, the oil-stained pearls hanging in a greasy chain around her neck. She still hesitated to approach me, as if she expected me to ignite spontaneously and destroy her already disfigured lawn.

The last of the witnesses, the blond-haired man painting the Ferris wheel, had stepped down from the rusting pier and was now walking along the beach towards us. He strolled through the shallow water in his bare feet, showing off his almost naked body to me. His casual paddling had a serious purpose, re-establishing his rights over this water I had temporarily made my own.

He waved to Dr Miriam, the small conspiratorial gesture of a past lover, waiting for her to invite him on to the lawn. When she ignored him he pointed in an off-hand but sly way to the dead elm above our heads.

Looking up, I saw a section of the Cessna's tail suspended from the upper branches. Pinned

against the sky, it flicked from side to side, a flag already semaphoring my presence to the searching police.

‘Stark ... he’s always had sharp eyes.’ As if protecting me, Dr Miriam took my arm. ‘Black come on. We ought to leave. I’ll find you something to wear at the clinic’

At that time, as I followed her across the lawn, I was aware only of the silent crowd watching me from both banks of the river, the tennis players sitting with their rackets on the grass. Their faces seemed almost hostile. Seen through this strange light, the placid town into which I had fallen had a distinctly sinister atmosphere, as if all these apparently unhurried suburbanites were in fact actors recruited from the film studios to play their roles in an elaborate conspiracy.

We reached Dr Miriam’s sports car in the drive behind the house. Hovering in the porch, Mrs St Cloud handed the medical bag to her daughter.

‘Miriam—?’

‘Mother, for heaven’s sake. I’ll be quite safe.’ With a tolerant shake of her head, Dr Miriam opened the car door for me.

As I stood there barefoot in the oil-stained rags of my flying suit I was suddenly certain that Mrs St Cloud would not run to the telephone the moment I left. This middle-aged widow had never seen anyone return from the dead. With a hand to her throat, she stared at me as if I were a son whose existence she had absent-mindedly misplaced.

At the same time, I had no intention of overstaying my welcome. For whatever motives, one of these people had tried to kill me.

CHAPTER 5

Back from the Dead

Should I have been more wary of Miriam St Cloud? Even then, as we approached the clinic, it seemed strange that I was so ready to trust this young doctor. Little more than a student, with her white coat and grass-stained feet, she sat seriously over the wheel. She was still unsettled, putting herself to unnecessary trouble to look after me, and I suspected that she might try to drive me to the local police station. We stopped several times under the trees, giving the three children time to catch up with us. They raced across the park, whooping and hooting, as if hoping to shock the solemn beeches out of their silence. I kept a careful watch for the arrival of the police, my arm behind Dr Miriam's seat. If a patrol car appeared I was ready to wrest the controls from her and bundle her out on to the grass.

The sunlight shimmered through the trees. The birds and leaves were restive, as if the elements of the disrupted afternoon were trying to reconstitute themselves.

'Do you want to go back to your mother?' I asked. 'I'd say she needs you more than I do.'

'You upset her – she wasn't expecting you to recover so dramatically. Since father's death two years ago she's spent all her time by the window, almost as if he were out here somewhere. Next time you come back from the dead do it in easy stages.'

'I didn't come *back* from the dead.'

'Blake, I know ...' Annoyed with herself, she pressed my hand. I liked this young doctor, but her light-hearted reference to my death irritated me, a touch of dissecting-room humour I could do without. In fact, apart from my bruised mouth and ribs, I felt remarkably well. I remembered swimming strongly for the shore as the Cessna sank beneath me, and then fainting in the shallow water more from relief than real exhaustion. The clergyman had pulled me on to the grass, and at this point in the confusion some lunatic had tried to revive me, some half-trained suburban first-aid enthusiast. Already I resolved that the sooner I left Shepperton the better, before any other blunder could occur.

However, before I could leave I needed a new set of clothes.

'There's a spare suit at the clinic, though your pupils at the flying school won't recognize you in it.' She added in a droll way: 'I'm deliberately being cryptic – you might decide to jump out of the car.'

'As long as the suit didn't belong to someone who died. Tempting providence twice the same afternoon isn't the kind of thing your priest would approve of.'

'Blake, you didn't tempt providence.' Choosing her words, she went on matter-of-factly. 'Actually, people don't die at the clinic, it's for out-patients only. Believe me, I'm glad you weren't our first recruit. There's a geriatric unit attached to it – the three children are temporarily there on referral, no one else would take them. I'm sorry they were being silly, but before they came here they'd been terribly abused.'

She pointed to a three-storey building beyond the clinic's car-park. On the terrace a line of elderly patients sat in their wheelchairs, nodding at the sun. As soon as they saw my ragged flying suit they immediately revived, began to point at me and argue with each other. I assumed that they had seen the burning Cessna fly over and hit the trees along the river.

We waited in the car-park for the three children to run up to us. Unaware that I was watching her so closely, Dr Miriam leaned against one of the cars and picked at a fleck of dirt under her thumbnail.

For some reason, perhaps the heat reflected from the polished cellulose and my own half-naked body I felt suddenly obsessed with this young woman, with the chipped varnish on her toe-nails, the grass stains on her heels, the heady smell of her thighs and armpits, and even the cryptic residue of some patient's bodily functions on her white coat. She flicked the dirt from her nail on to the grass, as returning to the park part of that bountiful nature welling up ceaselessly through her pores. I felt that her grubby feet and air of untidiness stemmed not from any lack of hygiene but from her complete absorption in all the commonplaces of nature. I knew that she cured her patients with poultices of earth and spit, rolled together in her strong hands and warmed between her thighs. Infatuated with her smell, I wanted to mount her like a stallion taking a meadow-rich mare.

'Blake ...?' She was watching me in a not unfriendly way, as if she knew that I was no ordinary pilot and was deliberately letting herself be attracted to me. When the children reached us she bent down and embraced them warmly in turn, smiling unflinchingly when the little girl's sticky fingers searched her mouth.

The child was blind. I realized now why these three handicapped children stayed so close – in the way they pooled their abilities. The girl was the brightest of the trio, with an alert, pointed face and a lively, questing nose. The larger of the two boys, the stocky mongol with his massive forehead like an air-raid shelter, was her devoted guide-dog, always within hands'-reach and careful to steer her between the parked cars. He kept up a continuous murmured commentary on everything, presenting his blind companion what must have been the picture of a dream-like and affable world.

The third child was a small, sandy-haired boy who squinted at the sky with tremendous excitement as if rediscovering each second the sheer joy of all that went on around him. As he gazed at the sun-filled park every leaf and flower seemed to hold the promise of a special treat. He used the leg-iron shackled to his right foot as a pivot, swinging around on it with some style.

I watched them scuttle around me, in and out of the cars. I liked this self-reliant threesome, and wished that I could help them. I remembered my Pied Piper complex. Somewhere in this park there might well be a miniature paradise, a secret domain where I could give the blind girl her sight, strength to the spastic, intelligence to the mongol.

'What is it, Rachel ...?' Dr Miriam bent down to catch her whisper. 'Rachel's very keen to know what you look like. I haven't quite convinced her that you're not a personal messenger from the archangel Michael.'

The girl's agile hands, with their acute flexion at the wrists, were already tracing out the contours of a face. Like the two boys, she seemed to cross reality at an angle. I lifted her and held her against my chest, partly to confirm that her small hands could not have bruised my ribs. Her thin breath panting into my face as her fingers raced like excited moths over my cheeks and forehead, poked into my mouth and nostrils. I almost enjoyed the sharp pain as she touched my lips. I held her tightly, squeezing her hips against my abdomen.

The mongol was tugging at my wrists, alarmed eyes under his overloaded forehead. The girl cried out, shaking her blind face away from my lips.

'Blake! Put her down!' Dr Miriam pulled the child from my arms. She stared at me in a shocked way, unsure whether this was how I ordinarily behaved. Fifty yards away, Father Wingate was crossing the park. He had stopped under the trees, the canvas chair and wicker hamper in his strong hands, watching me as if I were some kind of escaped criminal. I knew that he had seen me seize the girl.

Dr Miriam lowered the child to the ground. 'David, Jamie – take Rachel with you.'

The girl tottered away from me, safe within the mongol's protective gaze. Clearly he was unable

to decide whether Rachel had really been frightened by me. They ran off into the park together. Rachel's hands were tracing out the profiles of some extraordinary face.

‘What did she see?’

‘By the looks of it, a kind of bizarre bird.’

Dr Miriam stood between me and the children, making sure that I did not take it into my head to run after them. My arms were still shaking from the effort of embracing the child. I knew that Dr Miriam was well aware of the brief sexual frenzy that had gripped me, and half-expected me to wrestle her into the back seat of the nearest car. How fiercely would she have fought me off? She stayed close to me when we entered the clinic, wary that I might assault one of the elderly patients shuffling into the waiting room.

But once we were in her office she deliberately turned her back to me, almost inviting me to hold her waist. She was still confused by the excitement of my crash-landing. For all her modesty, as she listened to my heart and lungs her hands never left me. I watched her in an almost dream-like way while she pressed my shoulders against the X-ray machine. The exquisite mole like a beautiful cancer below her left ear, the handsome black hair swept back out of harm's way, the unsettled eyes ruled by her high forehead, the blue vein in her temple that pulsed with some kind of erratic emotion – I wanted to examine all these at my leisure, savour the scent of her armpits, save for ever in a photograph hung around my neck the tag of loose skin on her lip. Far from being a stranger, I felt that I had known her for years.

She brought me the spare suit she had promised and watched me while I changed, staring frankly at my naked body and half-erect penis. I pulled on the black worsted trousers and jacket, the dark cleaned suit of a priest or funeral mute, fitted with unusual pockets designed to conceal a secret rosary or the bereaved's tips.

When she returned with the developed X-ray plates she handed me a pair of tennis shoes.

‘I'll look like an undertaker out for a quiet run.’ I waited as she examined these photographs of my skull. ‘For a year I was a medical student. Who owns the copyright? They may be valuable.’

‘We do. They probably are. Thank God there's nothing there. Will you come back for the aeroplane?’

I paused at the door, glad that she wanted to see me again. Avoiding my eyes, she was gently rubbing her fingers, stroking the faint traces of my skin. But was all this some kind of unconscious ruse? I knew that I had identified this young doctor with my safe escape from the Cessna. How far was my attraction to her self-serving, the grave's-love of an infatuated patient? All the same, I wanted to warn her of the danger threatening this small town. However grotesque, my vision of the imminent holocaust had gained a powerful conviction in my mind. Perhaps in moments of extreme crisis we stepped outside the planes of everyday time and space and were able to catch a glimpse of all events that had ever occurred in both past and future.

‘Miriam, wait. Before I go ... has there ever been a major disaster in Shepperton? A factory explosion, or a crashing airliner?’

When she shook her head, looking at me with a suddenly professional interest, I pointed through the window at the calm sky, at the park filled with bland summer light where the crippled children played, circling each other like aircraft with outstretched arms. ‘After the crash I had a premonition that there was going to be some kind of disaster – perhaps even a nuclear accident. There was a enormous glow in the sky, an intense light. Come with me ...’ I tried to take her arm. ‘I'll look after you.’

She placed her hands on my chest, her fingers overlaying the bruise-marks. She had not revived

me. 'It's nothing, Blake, nothing unusual. It's common for the dying to see bright lights. At the end the brain tries to rally itself, to free itself from the body. I suppose it's where we get our ideas of the soul.'

'I wasn't dying!' Her fingers stung my ribs. I was tempted to seize her by the neck, force her to take a long look at my still erect penis. 'Miriam, look at me – I swam from the aircraft!'

'Yes, you did, Blake. We saw you.' She touched me again, reminding herself that I was still with her. Confused by her feelings for me, she said: 'Blake, while you were trapped in the cockpit I actually prayed for you. We weren't sure you were alone. Just before you escaped there seemed to be two people there.'

I remembered the deep light that suffused the air above the town, as if some fiercely incandescent vapour had been about to ignite. Had there been someone else in the Cessna's cockpit? Just beyond the margin of my vision there seemed to be the figure of a seated man.

'I swam from the aircraft,' I repeated doggedly. 'Some fool gave me artificial respiration. What was it!'

'No one. I'm certain.' She straightened the clutter of pens on her desk, so many confusing pointers, watching me with the same expression I had seen on her mother's face. I realized that she was attracted to me but at the same time almost disgusted, as if fascinated by something in an open grave.

'Miriam ...' I wanted to reassure her.

But in a sudden access of lucidity she came towards me, buttoning her white coat.

'Blake, haven't you grasped yet what happened?' She stared into my eyes, willing a dull pupil to get the point. 'When you were trapped in the cockpit you were under water for more than eleven minutes. We all thought you'd died.'

'Had I?'

'Yes!' Almost shouting, she angrily struck my hand. 'You *died* ...! And then came alive again!'

CHAPTER 6

Trapped by the Motorway

‘The girl’s mad!’

I slammed the clinic door behind me.

Across the park a white flag signalled an urgent message. The section of the Cessna’s tailplane hung from the upper boughs of the dead elm, whipped to and fro by the wind. Fortunately the police had still failed to find me, and none of the tennis players was showing any interest in the downed aircraft. I drummed my fists on the roofs of the parked cars, annoyed with Miriam St Cloud – the likeable but confused woman doctor showed all the signs of turning into a witch. I decided to lose myself among the afternoon housewives and catch the first bus back to the airport.

At the same time I found that I was laughing out loud at myself – the abortive flight had been a double fiasco. Not only had I crashed and nearly killed myself, but the few witnesses who might have tried to save me had developed a vested interest in believing that I had died. The notion of my death in some deranged way fulfilled a profound need, perhaps linked with their sterile lives in this suffocating town – anyone who came within its clutches was unconsciously assumed to have ‘died’.

Thinking of Dr Miriam – I would have liked to show her just how dead I was, and seed a child between those shy hips – I strode past the war memorial and open-air swimming-pool. The town centre consisted of little more than a supermarket and shopping mall, a multi-storey car-park and a filling station. Shepperton, known to me only for its film studios, seemed to be the everywhere of suburbia, the paradigm of nowhere. Young mothers steered small children in and out of the launderette and supermarket, refuelled their cars at the filling-station. They gazed at their reflections in the appliance-store windows, exposing their handsome bodies to these washing machines and television sets as if setting up clandestine liaisons with them.

As I stared at this array of thighs and breasts I was aware of my nervous sex, set off by the crash by Miriam St Cloud and the blind child. All my senses seemed to be magnified – scents collided in the air, the shop-fronts flashed gaudy signs at me. I was moving among these young women with my loins at more than half cock, ready to mount them among the pyramids of detergent packs and free cosmetic offers.

Over my head the sky brightened, bathing the placid roofs in an auroral light, transforming the suburban high street into an avenue of temples. I felt queasy and leaned against the chestnut tree outside the post office. I waited for this retinal illusion to pass, unsure whether to halt the passing traffic and warn these ruminating women that they and their offspring were about to be annihilated. Already I was attracting attention. A group of teenagers stopped as I blinked and clenched my fists. They laughed at my grotesque costume, the priest’s shiny black suit and the white sneakers.

‘Blake – wait for me!’

As I swayed helplessly, surrounded by these tittering youths, I heard Father Wingate shouting at me. He crossed the street, holding back the cars with a strong hand, his forehead glaring like a helmet in the overbright air. He ordered the teenagers away and then stared at me with the same expression of concern and anger, as if I were some deviant usurper he was bound by a strange tie to assist.

‘Blake, what are you looking at? Blake—!’

Trying to escape the light, and this odd clergyman, I jumped an ornamental rail and ran off down

the side-street of sedate bungalows behind the post office. Father Wingate's voice faded behind me, lost among the car horns and overhead aircraft. Here everything was calmer. The pavements were deserted, the well-tended gardens like miniature memorial parks consecrated to the household gods, the television set and dishwasher.

The light faded as I reached the northern outskirts of the town. Two hundred yards beyond a untilled field ran the broad deck of the motorway. A convoy of trucks was turning off into the nearby exit ramp, each pulling a large trailer that carried a wood and canvas replica of an antique aircraft. As this caravan of aerial fantasies entered the gates of the film studios, dusty dreams of my own flight crossed the perimeter road and set off for the pedestrian bridge that spanned the motorway. Poppies and yellow broom brushed my legs, hopefully leaving their pollen on me. They flowered among the debris of worn tyres and abandoned mattresses. To my right was a furniture hypermarket, its open courtyard packed with three-piece suites, dining-tables and wardrobes, through which a few customers moved in an abstracted way, like spectators in a boring museum. Next to the hypermarket was an automobile repair yard, its forecourt filled with used cars. They sat in the sunlight with numerals on their windshields, the advance guard of a digital universe in which everything would be tagged and numbered, a doomsday catalogue listing each stone and grain of sand under my feet, each eagle a poppy.

Now that I was at last escaping from Shepperton – within moments I would cross the bridge and catch the bus to the airport – I felt confident and light-footed, skipping along in my white sneakers, paused by a concrete post embedded in the soil, a digit marking this waste land. Looking back for the last time at this stifling town where I had nearly lost my life, I thought of returning to it one night and aerosolling a million ascending numbers on every garden gate, supermarket trolley and baby's forehead.

Carried away by this extravaganza, I ran along, shouting numbers at everything around me, at the drivers on the motorway, the modest clouds in the sky, the hangar-like sound stages of the film studios. Already, despite the crash, I was thinking of my new career in aviation – a course of lessons at a flying school, a commission in the air force, I would either bring off the world's first man-powered circumnavigation or become the first European astronaut ...

Out of breath, I unbuttoned the clerical jacket, about to throw it aside. It was then, fifty yards from the motorway, that I made an unsettling discovery. Although I was walking at a steady pace across the uneven soil, I was no longer drawing any closer to the pedestrian bridge. The sandy ground moved past me, the poppies swayed more urgently against my pollen-covered knees, but the motorway remained as far away as ever. If anything, this distance between us seemed to enlarge. At the same time, Shepperton receded behind me, and I found myself standing in an immense field filled with poppies and a few worn tyres.

I watched the cars speed along the motorway, the faces of their drivers clearly visible. In a sudden sprint, trying to confuse and overrun whatever deranged sense of direction had taken root in my mind, I darted forward and then swerved behind a line of rusting fuel drums.

Again the motorway receded further from me.

Gasping at the dusty air, I stared down at my feet. Had Miriam St Cloud deliberately given me this defective pair of running shoes, part of her witch's repertory?

I carefully tested myself against the silent ground. Around me the waste land remained as I had found it, yielding and unyielding, in league with the secret people of Shepperton. Foxglove grew through the rusting doors of a small car. An unvarying light calmed the waiting nettles along the motorway palisade. A few drivers watched me from their cars, a demented priest in my white sneakers.

I picked up a chalky stone and set out a line of numbered stakes with pieces of driftwood, a calibrated pathway that would carry me to the pedestrian bridge. But as I walked forward they encircled me in a spiral arm that curved back upon itself, a whorl of numerals that returned me to the centre of the field.

Half an hour later I gave up and walked back to Shepperton. I had exhausted all the stratagems I could devise – crawling, running backwards, shutting my eyes and hand-holding my way along the asphalt. As I left behind the derelict car and the old tyres the streets of the town approached me, as if glad to see me again.

Calming myself, I stepped on to the perimeter road. Clearly the crash had dislocated my head in more ways than I realized. Outside the hypermarket I picked an overstuffed sofa and lay back in the hot sunlight, resting among the reproduction fakes and discount escritorios until I was moved on my way by the wary salesman.

I walked through the garage forecourt, where the burnished cellulose of the second-hand car glowed in the sun, a line of coloured headaches. Straightening my dusty suit, I set off along the perimeter road. Two women stood with their children by the bus stop. They watched me carefully, as if frightened that I might perform my dervish dance, surround them with hundreds of numbered stakes.

I waited for the bus to appear. I ignored the women's sly glances, but I was tempted to expose myself, let them see my half-erect penis. For someone who was supposed to have died I felt more alive than ever before.

'Don't take your children to Dr Miriam!' I shouted to them. 'She'll tell you they're dead! You see this bright light? It's your minds trying to rally themselves!'

Dizzy with my own sex, I sat down on the kerb by the bus stop, laughing to myself. In the strong afternoon light the deserted road had become a dusty tunnel, a tube of constricting mental pressure. The women watched me, gorgons in summer dresses, their children staring open-mouthed.

Suddenly I was certain that the bus would never come.

The police car crossed the motorway, cruising with its headlamps full on in the bright sunlight. The beams flared against my bruised skin. Unable to face them, I turned and ran away down the perimeter road.

Already I had begun to realize that Shepperton had trapped me.

CHAPTER 7

Stark's Zoo

A cool stream ran between the poplars, waiting to balm and soothe my skin. Beyond the water meadow there were yachts and power cruisers moored along the river banks. For ten minutes I had been following the perimeter road, waiting for the right moment to make a second attempt to escape from Shepperton. Lined with chestnut and plane trees, the quiet streets of bungalows and small houses formed a series of green arbours, the entrances to a friendly labyrinth. Here and there a diving board rose above the hedges. Small swimming pools sat in the gardens, water sparkling flintily as if angry at being confined within these domesticated tanks, confused by these obsessively angled floors in which it had been lovingly decanted. I visualized these pools, plagued by small children and their lazy mothers, secretly planning their revenge.

It was plainly not by chance that I had crash-landed my burning aircraft into this riverside town. On all sides Shepperton was surrounded by water – gravel lakes and reservoirs, the settling beds, canals and conduits of the local water authority, the divided arms of the river fed by a maze of creeks and streams. The high embankments of the reservoirs formed a series of raised horizons, and I realized that I was wandering through a marine world. The dappled light below the trees fell upon an ocean floor. Unknown to themselves, these modest suburbanites were exotic marine creatures with the dream-filled minds of aquatic mammals. Around these placid housewives with their tamed appliances everything was suspended in a profound calm. Perhaps the glimmer of threatening light I had seen over Shepperton was a premonitory reflection of this drowned suburban town?

I had reached the hotels near the marina. High above the St Clouds' Tudor mansion the tailplane of the Cessna hung from the dead elm, signalling intermittently as if already bored with its message.

I crossed the road and approached the untended ticket kiosk of the amusement pier. The freshly painted gondolas of the Ferris wheel, the unicorns and winged horses of the miniature carousel gleamed hopefully in the afternoon light, but I guessed that the only people who came to this dilapidated funfair were a few midnight couples.

Behind the kiosk were the almost empty cages of a modest zoo. Two threadbare vultures sat in their hutch, ignoring a dead rabbit on the floor, dreams of the Andes lost behind their sealed eyes. A marmoset slept on his shelf, and an elderly chimpanzee endlessly groomed himself, sensitively fingernails searching his navel as if trying to pick the combination of this umbilical lock, ever-hopeful of an internal émigré.

As I gazed consolingly at his gentle face a large and flamboyantly decorated vehicle emerged from the gates of the film studios, set off rapidly down the road in a dusty clatter and swerved into the forecourt by the ticket kiosk. A hearse converted to carry surf-board and hang-gliding equipment, it was emblazoned with winged emblems and gilded fish. The blond-haired man who had been painting the gondolas stared at me in a self-conscious way from behind the steering wheel, then pulled off an antique flying helmet. He stepped from the vehicle and busied himself in the ticket kiosk, affecting not to notice me.

However, when I walked out to the end of the pier I heard his feet ringing on the metal slats.

'Blake ... be careful there!' He waved me away from the flimsy rail, fearing that his rusting hull might collapse under us. 'Are you all right? This is where you came down.'

He looked at me with some sympathy, but at the same time he stood well back from me, as if any moment I might do something bizarre. Had he watched my attempt to cross the motorway?

‘That was a spectacular landing ...’ He stared at the strong current flowing below our feet. ‘I know you’re a stunt pilot, but you must have been rehearsing that for years.’

‘You’re a fool!’ I wanted to hit him. ‘I nearly killed myself!’

‘Blake, I know! I’m sorry – but I suppose we rehearse that too ...’ He played with the antique goggles and helmet, suddenly embarrassed by this rival show of flying gear. ‘I’m working on a picture at the studios – the remake of *Men with Wings*. I play one of the test pilots.’ He gestured deprecatingly at the Ferris wheel. ‘All this is a long-term investment, or was meant to be. It needs something to give it a lift. In fact, I’m surprised more people aren’t here this afternoon. It’s rather funny, Blake, that you’re the only one who’s come ...’

He reached up to one of the gondolas and swung himself into the air, showing off his muscular physique not so much to intimidate me – I could have knocked him down without any effort – as to win some kind of physical respect. His manner was aggressive but ingratiating, his mind already hard at work trying to think up some means of putting my crash to his advantage. As he gazed wistfully at the river, at the vanished traces of my accident swept away by the sunlit back of the Thames, I could see that he regretted being unable to exploit the derelict pier’s chance proximity to my crash-landing.

‘Stark, tell me – you saw me swim ashore?’

‘Of course.’ As if to forestall any criticism of his lack of action, he explained hurriedly: ‘I was going to dive in, Blake, but suddenly there you were, somehow you’d climbed out of the plane.’

‘Father Wingate helped me on to the beach. Did you see anyone try to revive me? Mouth-to-mouth respiration ...?’

‘No – why do you ask?’ Stark was peering at me with a surprising look of intelligence in his actor’s face. ‘Don’t you remember, Blake?’

‘I’d like to thank him, whoever it was.’ Casually, I added: ‘How long was I in the aircraft?’

Stark was listening to the restive vultures in their cage. The huge birds were clambering around the bars, trying to seize a piece of the sky. I studied Stark’s unsettled eyes, the fine hairs that stood like needles around his lips. Had he revived me? I visualized his handsome mouth locked against my own, strong teeth cutting my gums. In many ways Stark resembled a muscular, blond-haired woman. I felt attracted to him, not by some deviant homosexual urge the crash had jerked loose from my psyche, but by an almost brotherly intimacy with his body, with his thighs and shoulders, arms and buttocks, as if we had shared a bedroom through our childhoods. I was the younger but stronger brother, the yardstick against which Stark would for ever measure himself. I could embrace him whenever I chose, force his hands against my bruised ribs to see if he had tried to attack me, test the bite of his mouth.

Confused by my stare, Stark turned his back on the river. ‘How long were you under? Three or four minutes. Perhaps more.’

‘Ten minutes?’

‘That’s a long time, Blake. You’d hardly be here.’ His composure returned, he watched me shrewdly, curious to see what I would do next. He played with the antique flying helmet, dangling the film prop in front of me as if toying with the suspicion that we were both actor-pilots. Yet I had flown a real plane against the sky, a powered aircraft, not one of his passive hang-gliders collaborating with the wind.

Along the perimeter road the police car approached, headlamps inflaming the afternoon sunlight. When it stopped by the kiosk I saw that Father Wingate was sitting in the rear seat behind the two

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