

CHAPTER 3

In England, it was Monday morning. Peter Bolton walked over a carpet of damp pine needles, taking a short cut to Harwood's Service Station. The rain that had deluged all of southern England the previous day had finally stopped, although the grey sky seemed to hold more.

He was worried about the presentation he was to give at a meeting with Travis Developments, his most important client, later that morning. Would they accept it, or was his design too revolutionary for them? Would they turn to one of the larger, more conventional computer consultancies, despite their much higher quotes? The uncertainty was twisting his stomach in knots. He forced his thoughts to a less stressful subject. To his car.

Today it should be ready - must be ready, or he would miss this morning's meeting. He was looking forward to driving it, with the 40% increase in power the turbo-charger would provide. He smiled in anticipation. The car was his release from the stresses of work and the still-sharp pain of losing his wife and children.

Peter lived alone in a large, converted barn designed for a family. He was getting used to it. This last week at home had hardly bothered him - had been useful, in fact. A rest from the stresses of commuting to his client's office had done him

good. Even in the Merc it was an exhausting drive - and without the constant interruptions of the office environment he had made good progress on the project. The project. What if he didn't get the contract? What if he couldn't get to the meeting? Was there a problem at the garage? The worry that had been hovering in the corners of his mind washed over him.

Colin, the mechanic at Harwood's, had not called him to confirm that the job was finished - and there had been no answer from the garage when he had telephoned the previous evening and again first thing this morning. But he shouldn't worry. There would be some simple explanation - a problem with the 'phone lines, most likely.

He hoped that was all. If the car was not ready, he would miss the meeting. If he missed the meeting, he would lose the contract. In these times of recession, he could not afford to lose the contract.

He practiced the presentation of his system design as he walked, trying to stop his over-active imagination from finding unpleasant reasons for the unanswered telephone. The back of the garage came into sight through the trees, and he walked round to the side of the black-painted timber building, past the door to the primitive toilets. There was Stella's old Capri, so she was here. He relaxed. He felt the muscles of his stomach unclench. There must be something wrong with the 'phone, as he had suspected.

Squeezing between the car and the tyre dump, he emerged at the front of the garage. There was a big, strange-looking tracked vehicle in the middle of the forecourt and he stopped for a moment and stared at it. It really was the most unusual thing he had ever seen - a prop for a science-fiction film or some advertising promotion, he supposed, but it was well done. There was a feel of intense alienness about it. He couldn't imagine what it was doing here, in the middle of nowhere - but no doubt there would be some mundane explanation.

Reluctantly, he turned to more urgent things. He pushed the office door open and walked in. The room was empty. The till was open and Stella's handbag hung on the seat behind it, but she was not there.

"Stella!" He called out, quietly at first, embarrassed. There were rumours about the relationship between cashier and mechanic. Silence. He tried again, louder.

"Stella! Colin! Where are you?" Nothing but the wind in the pine trees. He pushed open the door to the tiny store-room behind the office, and jumped at a shape seen from the corner of his eye. It was just the dressmaker's mannequin - why was he so nervous? Stella spent her time between customers designing and making exotic clothing, dreaming of her escape from this squalid place to the world of high fashion. There was a sewing machine on the tiny table above the floor safe, a tea-chest filled with rich fabrics, which must have cost much of

Stella's pay. The other contents of the room - oil cans and motor accessories - had been pushed into a corner, and were barely visible under a plastic sheet. The usual motoring calendars and posters had been replaced by pages cut from fashion magazines. There was nothing else.

He pulled the store-room door closed and left the office, looking thoughtfully at the tracked vehicle again before going into the workshop. His car was there, apparently complete, but still raised up on the workshop lift. Where was Colin? Now he was worried, torn by the conflicting pressures of the urgency of his meeting and concern for the garage staff. Where could they be? The toilets? He hadn't looked there yet! He almost ran round to the back of the building, called, knocked and opened each door. Empty. Back to the office - had they left a note? No. There was absolutely nothing to show where they'd gone.

He stared round, looking for inspiration. The place looked just the same as it had every time he'd been in to pay for fuel. Wait! The till was open. He had noticed it before, without thinking what it implied - Stella would never leave the till open. God, something terrible had happened! They'd both been dragged into the trees and murdered! But why? There was still money in the till and his car had not been taken. It didn't make sense.

It must have something to do with that thing outside. If two unlikely things happen at the same time, there is probably a link. He walked out to the forecourt and walked around the vehicle while he tried to decide what to do. It was so realistic! He saw that there were no doors or windows - no way to get into the thing or look out of it. It must be radio-controlled.

But looking at this thing was getting him nowhere. He had to find out what had happened to Stella and Colin - and he had to get his car! If he didn't leave soon he'd be late! Could he get it down from the jack himself? Maybe. He would look around a bit longer and then try. He spent half an hour searching the woods around the garage and ran along the road - a few hundred paces in each direction - looking in the ditches. Nothing but rubbish: cigarette packets and coke cans. What should he do? He should call the police, but then he'd definitely miss the meeting. And he didn't know for sure that something was wrong. He would look pretty stupid if he raised the alarm and Stella and Colin strolled back from a walk in the woods. Decision. If they were still missing when he got back from the meeting he would do something.

Breathing heavily from his unaccustomed exercise, he went back into the office, locked the till and hung up the "closed" sign, then went to investigate the workings of the workshop lift. There was a switch on the wall that looked as though it should bring his car down to earth, but nothing happened when he pressed it.

He looked more closely at the lift, which had a distinct home-made look about it. Colin had obviously bodged the thing together from scrap parts. There was nothing at this side - he ducked under his car to look at the other side of the lift mechanism. There! That looked like some kind of safety lock. He pulled at a small red handle, looking closely at the intricate mechanical linkages to see what was happening. The lift started to fall on him. There was a shock of realisation that started in his chest and pulsed slowly outwards to his fingertips. Time seemed to slow down. He bent, eyes closed, and held up his arms in a vain attempt to hold up two tons of Mercedes and lift. Something hit him on the side of the head. There were sounds he could not identify - a crackling, electrical noise, then a loud scraping. The ground shook. A blast of hot air washed over him. He cringed and waited for the pain to come.

Three seconds later he was still alive. He cautiously opened his eyes and looked up. The lift was there. It had stopped falling. Apart from what felt like a small cut above his ear, he was unharmed. He breathed a deep sigh and turned to get out from under the miraculously suspended mass, then saw why it had stopped. The vehicle from the forecourt was there. A heavy arm had emerged from its front and was holding up the lift. Before he could blink, another, smaller arm emerged and hovered near his injured head. There was a brief, stinging coldness over the wound and the arm vanished again. He cried out in surprise. The vehicle instantly echoed his cry precisely.

"What the hell..?" Again the thing copied him. Now he noticed the two deep grooves in the asphalt, leading from where the vehicle had originally stood to its present position. He remembered the sounds he had heard, estimated times and distances. The thing must have evaluated his danger more or less instantaneously, then accelerated at about eight gravities to get here and hold the lift up. And it spoke to him. And - he touched the side of his head carefully - it had fixed his cut. Whatever this thing was, it wasn't a film prop. He forgot about his meeting and settled down to make man's first contact with an alien visitor.