

He tried opening his eyes. Then he tried blinking. Then he tried closing his eyes. Okay, he told himself, rewind. Back to the last thing you remember. Which was—

—a blinding flash of pain fading into nothingness. Not much help there. So back a few thousand frames to the guard at the gatehouse waving him through and saying Mr Percowitz would join him up at the house. All very polite. Duncan idling up the drive, taking in the grounds, the lawn, the freshly cropped grass, the ornamental bushes, the dogs behind the high wire fence to the right of the house, then pulling up at the foot of the wide stone steps as the guards lumbered down to greet him. Their manner suggesting that all resistance was futile.

Yes. It was all coming back to him now. Painfully so.

The guards comprised three blocks of flesh forged from the same Sumo mould: they were black-suited, shaven-headed, thick-necked, pebble-eyed, fat-knuckled, single-minded pain-inflictors, sharing the same single eyebrow. One of them reached into the car and dragged Duncan out onto the steps. He did not resist. They frogmarched him up the steps and into the building. Still he did not resist. Two of them held his arms as the third crossed to a small reception desk and picked up a phone. Duncan could feel the tension jerking in their blood as they mangled his arms in their vicelike paws. He really wanted to resist. They wanted him to resist. But then the third guard came off the phone and returned with a well-honed slash of a smile.

“We’re to take him upstairs.”

“Poor guy.”

They marched him through an unmarked door into a narrow service-area. Kitchen sounds clattered up the bare stone stairs. *Ping*. A lift arrived. They manouevred him inside. As the doors clanged shut, Duncan felt his self-control slipping. He was pinioned between their hard fat bellies, shrivelling beneath the weight of their breath as they frowned on him like Easter Island statues. He let his knees buckle. It took them by surprise. He got in one good shot, evinced one satisfying scream, then it was all downhill into the blinding flash of nothingness.