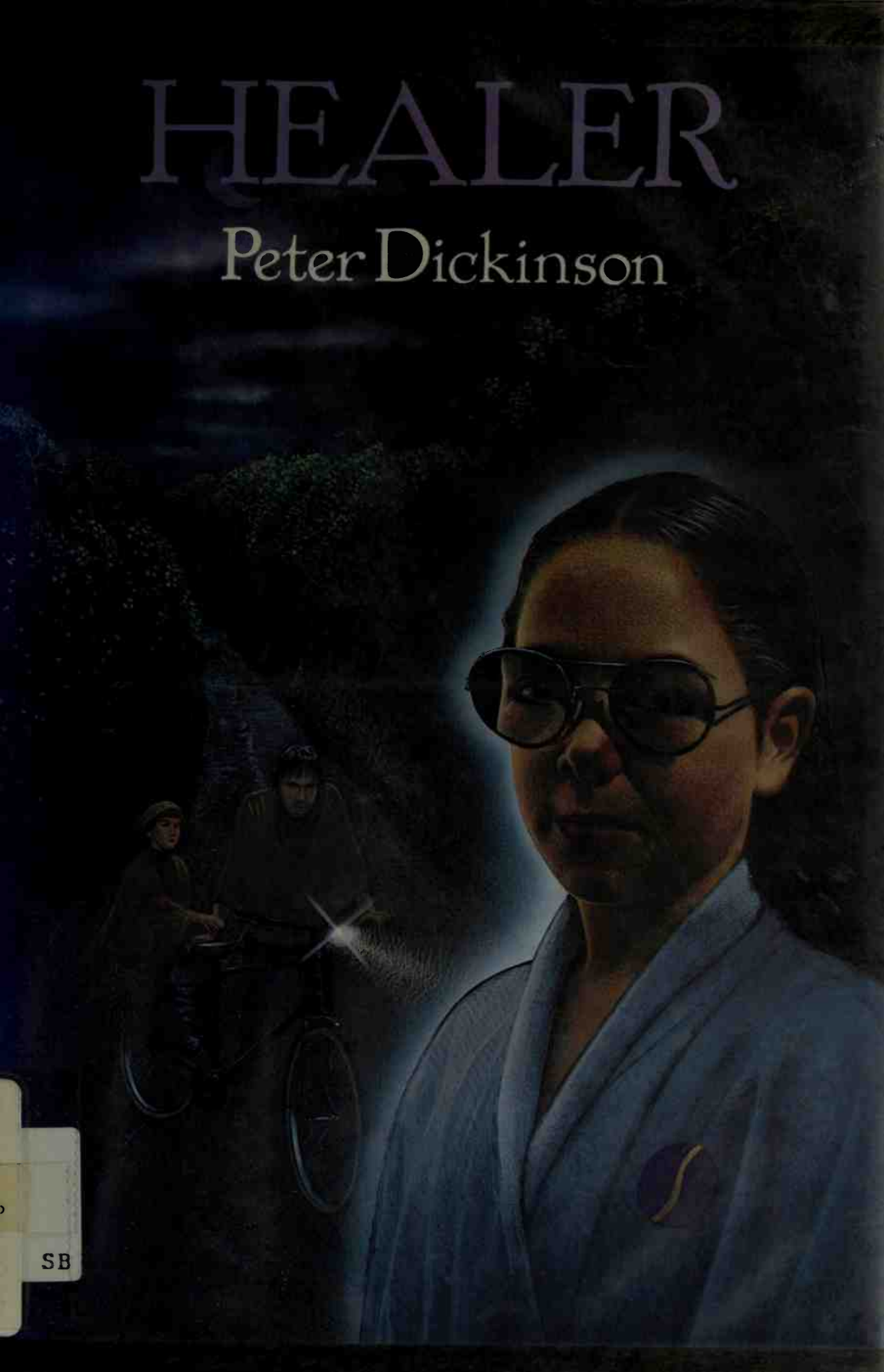
HEALER

Peter Dickinson



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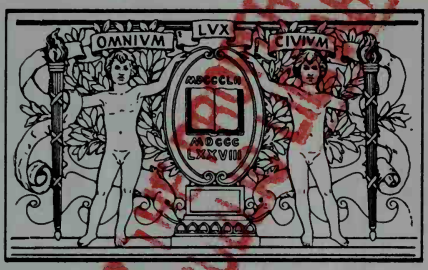
The touch of her hands can heal. Or can it? Pinkie Proudfoot is only a child, but to some people she seems to have this extraordinary gift, so they set up the Foundation of Harmony to help her make use of it. But to Barry Evans, a sixteen-year-old who had struck up an odd friendship with Pinkie when they were both still at school, it seems that the Foundation really exists to exploit Pinkie and her gift—and the sick people who pay large fees to come there.

When Barry learns what the Foundation is doing to Pinkie, he decides that he must get her out. But is that his only reason? Or does he want to exploit Pinkie for his own selfish ends?

A strange and powerful adventure by a master storyteller about whom the *Times Literary Supplement* (London) has said, "As with his books for adults, *Healer* works because its characters are real people."

DELACORTE PRESS/NEW YORK



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Summary: Although grudgingly aware that ten-year-old Pinkie has extraordinary powers to heal, sixteen-year-old Barry becomes increasingly convinced that she is an unwilling participant at the healing sessions run by her enterprising stepfather.

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HEALER

Part One

Part One

1

In a corner of the Hall of Harmony a woman was playing the harp. She sat on a raised platform so that everybody could see her as well as hear her.

The watchers were all sick, all waiting, all hoping. In the next hour something marvelous might happen and they would be sick no longer. They listened in silence to the gentle notes of the harp.

One of them was different from the others. All the rest had come to the Foundation because they were sick and were hoping to be healed. But one young man had made himself sick in order to come here. He too was waiting and hoping, but for something else.

He was sixteen years old, and his name was Barry Evans. In the secrecy of his own mind he often thought of himself not as Barry but as Bear. Indeed, sometimes he felt as though there were two personalities inhabiting his body, with those two different names, though usually the idea of Bear was little more than a comforting private fantasy, left over from childhood. At the moment he was very aware of Bear, because the migraine seemed to have stirred him up. It was worse than he'd intended, a dry sickness in his throat and stomach and a beam of pain in his head, running from temple to temple. He felt hardly able to stand, hardly able to go through with what he'd come for.

He watched the harpist through the haze of pain. From time to time his hand strayed to his hip pocket and touched a folded piece of paper he kept there. It was the receipt for the fee he'd paid to be here this morning, four hundred pounds, a really classy piece of paper, thick, white,

crackling like frosted snowfall. Though the four hundred pounds hadn't been Barry's own money, touching the receipt helped keep him going by reminding him why he was here.

Watching the harpist helped, too. She played that way, as though being seen was just as important as being heard. All harpists make a bit of a show of themselves, long, bare arms and beaky profiles, and leaning to listen to the twangle of the wires as if it was something holy. But this woman, well, it wouldn't have mattered if half the audience had been deaf. When she began to play, Barry had heard a slight ripple of paper around the room, like the noise of theater programs suddenly being looked at when a new actor comes on. There were whispers, too, between neighbor and neighbor as people showed each other the photograph in the Foundation brochure, a pair of hands as crooked as the claws of a parrot on its perch. And now those same hands were supple, their long fingers reaching to and fro across the harp frame to pluck at the chosen wires. They had been rigid claws, and then the Healer had touched them, and they had become hands again.

Says the brochure, grumbled Bear. *And why can't she walk then?*

Because you mustn't expect miracles, the brochure said. The Foundation wasn't a church; it was a scientific establishment; the purpose was to investigate the phenomenon of Nonmedical Healing by means of Harmonic Energy.

Oh, sure, snarled Bear. *So why are all these suckers saying their prayers?*

It was true. There were white arum lilies on stands by the doors, and the woman might have been playing in a cathedral, and the whispers were hushed with awe. But more than that. The people were not just longing and hoping. They were praying. *O God, if you're there, make my*

pain be taken away, my eyes see the way they used to, my son walk again, my daughter not die. It was a church like churches must have been in the days when people really believed in that sort of thing—except that all the people in *this* church had paid four hundred pounds, minimum, as their entrance fee. The ones who were doing the three-day residence had been stung for two thousand. And all of them were sick or bringing a sick child. Some were dying.

Barry had forgotten how vile a bad migraine could be. He hadn't had one since the new doctor had found out about his chocolate allergy. Three Chic-a-choc bars washed down with a glass of Moroccan brandy yesterday morning had done the trick, and a bit over. The Chic-a-choc he'd had this morning to top up had been a mistake. Now he could barely walk the wincing tightrope over the pain, was just able to move and talk and think through the violent shudders and sweats. He'd seen his face in a mirror, the color of roadside snow. He looked a good bit sicker than most of the sick people in the room, and probably felt it, too. The difference was that he knew his own pain would go tomorrow or perhaps the day after. Some of theirs would never go.

Despite the pain and sickness, Barry felt content as he watched the harpist lean from her chair to make her hands waver across the wires, like tropical fish in a tank. He was right to be here. It was worth the migraine, worth Mr. Stott's money. Why, even old Bear agreed. Bear had always loathed migraines, had seemed most real, most like a separate person, while they were on, snarling and sulking, furious with the pain. He was angry now, but for a different reason. It was this place, these people, that stirred him up.

The harpist ended with the usual rising twangle and laid her hands across the wires to stop their humming. Everybody seemed to take the same deep breath. The twin doors

at the side of the room swung slowly open. A procession came in.

The audience, or congregation, or whatever you called it, was arranged in a horseshoe, four ranks deep. There was a row of wheelchairs in front, then two rows of metal chairs with canvas seats and backs, and then a waist-high rail, and then a row of people standing behind the rail. Barry was in this back row, slantwise across from the doors, about a third of the way around the curve. It was a good place to watch the procession.

At first he could only see heads moving behind the back rank opposite, but then they began to emerge at the open end of the horseshoe. They all wore white uniforms, dazzlingly clean. The only mark on the whiteness was the badge of the Foundation, a purple circle with a gold line like a stretched *S* running down it, worn on the left breast. The uniform made the women look more like nurses than nuns, but for some reason it was the other way around with the men. They were priests, not doctors.

First came two men pushing a gleaming cart with huge rubber wheels; then, two women carrying a couple of leather cases about the size of shoeboxes. Next came four men and two women, empty-handed. One of the men was Dr. Geare, who had interviewed Barry briefly an hour ago. Then there was a gap, and two more people appeared side by side, a man with a gold beard and a child.

The man was enormous, at least six inches taller than anyone else in the room, broad but not fat. The child was a plain, dark-haired girl, just over ten years old. She was small for her age and so looked younger, but Barry knew exactly. The last time he'd seen her he'd been the only guest at her eighth birthday party.

He stared at her. For a while he couldn't see anything else in the room. It didn't matter. Nobody would notice

him staring like that because all the others were doing the same. They were eating her with their eyes. She was the center of their hopes, the channel of their prayers, the reason why they had paid their fees and made their journey. They were staring at the Healer.

Barry, though, was staring at Pinkie Proudfoot.

Why'd they taken away her glasses? She couldn't see eighteen inches without them. Didn't look especially happy or sad, but she wouldn't. Grown a bit. Got a bit thinner? No. She was the same. Still walked the same dreamy, drifting way, still held herself somehow more together than other kids. She hadn't changed at all.

Stupid, crazy kid, mumbled Bear, pleased for once.

The cart stopped dead center in the opening of the horseshoe. The white-robed crew came and unpacked gear from it, working with silent efficiency. One woman went around the front of the horseshoe, carrying a bundle of short white cables with a crocodile clip at either end and using them to link each wheelchair to its neighbor. Another came around behind and whispered to the people standing there to grip the rail in front of them with both hands. Barry noticed that the chairs in the middle two rows were already connected by a metal bar at floor level, and he could feel that the carpet beneath his feet was rubber-backed. The women with the purple boxes had placed them on the shiny black pedestals which stood at the opposite points of the horseshoe; now they opened the lids and took out cable ends, which they plugged in at the back of the pedestals. More cables linked the pedestals to the three rows of chairs and the rail. Finally Dr. Geare and a short, bald man took a couple of gadgets like hand-held directional aerials from the cart and socketed their coiled extending cables into the back of the purple boxes. Everything went smoothly, went right, without a word spoken.

The harpist plinked quietly on her platform, not showing off at all now.

The big man took Pinkie to a chair at the end of the room and settled her there, then strolled around, checking the work of the crew. You'd have known he was boss even without that. His beard made him look like Moses. It was very gold, too gold, bright as real metal, and he had strange gold eyes like a leopard's. Barry watched him as he stood and worked at the cart, moving knobs on a control panel in a way which made it obvious that he was now balancing the circuits which had been set up. He hadn't finished this by the time everyone else seemed ready, but he went on for some minutes, unconcerned. At last he looked up and nodded affably to the audience. It was a signal for the harpist to stop playing.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," said the Moses-man. "All groups of our clients differ because all people differ, and we have to make fresh allowances each time. I'm sure you understand that."

He had a soft, deep, soothing voice. *Could've made a packet doing the voice-over for TV ads,* Barry thought. But he grabbed your attention all right. No one was looking at Pinkie now.

"Before we begin," he went on, "I will give you a small demonstration to help you understand what we hope is going to happen during the Harmony Session. It will be a very simple demonstration because the work we are doing here is, I suspect, very simple when you get to the heart of it. Nobody understands it yet, and some people dismiss it as hocus-pocus. But remember, nobody understood electricity a hundred years ago, and when great scientists produced their ideas about it, other scientists dismissed them as hocus-pocus. I am going to show you a commonplace experiment in electromagnetism. All I ask you, in fact, I beg you,

is to remember that the force we are dealing with is not electromagnetism. It may be like it in some ways, but not others. There was a great Healer once who talked to his patients in what he called parables—stories to help them grasp ideas which they could not yet understand. The film you will now see is just such a parable. Lights, please."

Barry heard no switches click, but blinds slid down the windows, and the hall darkened. A square of fierce white burst into being on the far wall. The film began. The camera showed a desk top, a square of paper, a glass jar, and a big horseshoe magnet. A hand reached into the picture, picked up the magnet, showed it, took it out of sight. Two hands came and opened the jar. There was a ring on one finger, a round purple stone with a stretched *S* across it. The right hand shook dark powder from the jar onto the paper, sprinkling it around at random, put the jar down, tapped the paper to spread the powder, vanished. The camera closed in and roamed over the mottled surface, lingering on an odd blob or empty patch. It retreated, showing the whole surface. After half a minute of nothing happening the hand came back with the magnet and laid it on the desk, then lifted the paper and placed it over the magnet.

Barry knew perfectly well what was going to happen, but still his interest twitched with the shock of movement as the iron filings on the paper shot into dark, strong curves that mapped the invisible magnetic field. He felt, too, how the other watchers in the room experienced the selfsame twitch, as if they were all responding to forces like those around the magnet. Obviously that was the idea. It was how they were supposed to react, to twitch at the impulse, to feel themselves doing so, like a lot of intelligent little filings. Not that intelligent—they were supposed to be feeling, not thinking. . . .

Watch it, Bear, remember you're one of them, feeling

foul, feeling hopeful, feeling excited, hardly thinking at all. . . .

Barry deliberately allowed his migraine to wash over him like a wave, probing into all his crevices. When the wave withdrew, he saw that the hand with the ring was now holding a pointer and tracing out the curving lines of the force field between the poles of the magnet. The film ended. The blinds slid up. His brain gave a yelp of pain as the sunlight came streaming in. This time he treated it the way he had learned to when he was still quite small, pushing it back and to one side by an effort of will and cramming it into a sort of compartment he kept there. It didn't go away. It was still there, still a foul sick ache, but provided you kept one foot against the door, you got on with other things, a bit—such as watching what was going on now.

Two men fetched a chair from under the harpist's platform. It was made entirely of stainless steel. Even the seat and back were shining steel springs. The Moses-man fetched Pinkie and sat her in this chair, while the two other men connected thick cables from it to the two pedestals. Everyone was looking at Pinkie again now, sitting in front of the cart between the two ends of the horseshoe. She sat bolt upright and gazed calmly out in front of her, though from the way the Moses-man led her about, Barry could tell that the room must be little more than a bright blur to her. He'd thought they might have given her contact lenses, but they hadn't.

"Now," said the Moses-man, "we are all in the presence of the great forces of nature. At this very moment they are streaming through this room, apparently at random. Through our very bodies. Electromagnetism, gravity, time flow, and other forces we are only just beginning to guess

at, flooding through us now. We are in the presence of mighty powers.

"For our purposes, at this moment, the most important of these forces is the one I have named Harmonic Energy. This is a force whose existence has only recently begun to be suspected, so I will say a few words about it. Many of my fellow scientists have long been aware that there is a contradiction at the heart of orthodox physics. The second law of thermodynamics tells us, in effect, that the matter of the universe is gradually but inevitably working toward a state of greater and greater disorder and will end in billions of years in a vast, cold, random stillness. But at the same time we can see that the part of the universe with which we are best acquainted is working toward a state of greater and greater order and complexity. Molecules of ordinary salt join to make the perfect cubes of the salt crystal. Single-cell organisms join to compose organisms of immense cooperative complexity, from the jellyfish to you and me. Many scientists are beginning to believe that some force outside the knowledge of orthodox physics is at work, at work against the second law of thermodynamics, moving matter from chaos to order, from random simplicity to patterned complexity, from discord to harmony.

"Harmony. Our researches at the Foundation are centered on this force. We call it Harmonic Energy. We believe that when matter takes one of its apparently erratic leaps toward greater order, what has happened is that the solar system has been passing through areas of space in which the force lines of Harmonic Energy are close together. If this is true, it is a very important discovery.

"What is more, we believe that we are at this moment in the middle of just such a phase. You have only to look around you to see the changes that have taken place in the world in the last hundred years. My friends, this is a very

good time to be alive. Of course, there is a lot of trouble and sorrow and disorder still in the world. This is only natural. Wherever you find great forward movements you are bound to get turbulences, places where the stream seems to run against the current. But the current is there, believe me. It is there for you to make use of. That is what we will do this morning.

"For sickness and disease, what are they but cases where the harmony of the body has broken down? What is cancer —and we have several brave sufferers from cancer with us today—what is cancer but a case where certain cells have got out of harmony with the bodily process and begun to subdivide more rapidly than they were designed to? What is a bacterial or a viral infection but the presence of alien and therefore unharmonized elements in the body? What is mental disorder? The very words tell you. So we are here to use the Harmonic Energy of the universe to restore the little local harmonies of our own bodies.

"You will see a certain amount of apparatus in the room. This is helpful, but it is not the most important equipment we have. It is there for tuning purposes. The Healer of whom I spoke earlier did much of his work without the aid of science and achieved astonishing results. His name, of course, was Jesus Christ. I myself began this work after my discovery of my own small healing abilities.

"The Healer who will take the session today, though only a child—perhaps *because* only a child, a child of the new age—has the abilities to a far greater degree. Think of her as a lens. Think of the Harmonic Energy as sunlight, scattering through the universe. Think of the lens gathering that light back, focusing it to a burning spot. Think of yourselves, seated or standing here in this curve, as a reflector, concentrating the energy still further, passing it through you, sending it back, all together, each for all the

others, all the others for each of you, cells in a cooperative organism, a creature of the new age.

"What will happen is this. First we will simply be silent and concentrate on the harmony of our own bodies. It is not as difficult as it sounds. However ill you may be, there is far, far more harmony in your body than there is discord. Your breath comes and goes; your heart keeps time; your blood flows; the innumerable checks and balances of your body chemistry function. Only a few of them are a little out of phase. So grip the arms of your chairs or the rail in front of you. You must make a good contact. Grip firmly with both hands. Then concentrate on the immense reservoirs of health you still have in you. Soon you will feel—almost all of you, though occasional people are insensitive to the effect—you will feel the Harmonic Energy gathering strength. This in itself is strongly beneficial, whether you are one of those who feel it or not.

"Next, using the apparatus, I and my assistants will choose your representatives, the ten or twelve of you who are most nearly in phase with the Harmonic Energy we have concentrated in the room. The representatives will come out in turn and make individual contact with the Healer. Please, please do not think that these few are the only ones who will benefit from the process. They will be working for you and you for them.

"We have seen remarkable things happen in this room. I have watched a blind girl turn her head and discover for the first time what her mother's face looked like. I have seen a man crippled in the prime of his life with rheumatoid arthritis stand up from his wheelchair and walk, and leap for joy. Both these events took place where you are standing or sitting, while the Healer was in contact with a representative. The contact with the representatives is the final stage in the process of concentrating the Harmonic

Energy. So you must not waste your own precious powers in worrying whether you are going to be one of those chosen. In fact, if you do so, you will not be chosen because your reading on our meters will be low. More important, if you do that, your presence here will be of little benefit to you.

"Now I have finished. If you are selected for physical contact with the Healer, wait for an assistant to come and help you out. Answer any questions in a low voice, so as not to disturb the concentration of the others. Be as brief as you can. What you say will be recorded for use in our research but will otherwise be kept totally confidential.

"Above all, I beg you to concentrate on Harmony. The harmony you know best. The harmony of your own bodies. You are that magnet you saw in the film, gathering the lines of force. The Healer is the lens, concentrating them yet further. Between you you can achieve marvelous things."

He nodded and moved behind the control panel on the cart.

Crank, snarled Bear. *And crap.*

Barry agreed. Despite the beam of pain that pierced his head, he'd listened to every word. If he'd been well, he'd probably have thought it was amusing rubbish at first and then become impatient with the lack of actual facts and the vagueness: about whether the horseshoe curve which he was a part of worked like a reflector or a magnet—you couldn't have it both ways. As it was, he was most aware that he was being sold something, something he didn't want, by a supersalesman. . . . TV ads . . . Harmony wouldn't be a bad name for a shampoo . . . more money in this, though? How many in the room? Bit under a hundred? Say eighty. Times four hundred. Thirty-two thousand pounds a session. Times three a week times fifty a

year. Almost five million. Jesus! Place like this cost a packet to run, of course . . .

The harpist was making a quiet, rainy plink-plunk. The man on Barry's left was breathing deeply, with closed eyes, as if he'd dropped off. His way of concentrating? His face was a muddle of yellow-gray folds, as if it had been round and rosy until illness had wrinkled it like a leaky balloon. A woman sitting in the row in front couldn't stop shivering. In front of her was a healthy-looking young woman with a pale, drowsy baby in her lap. Better not keep staring around like this. *You concentrating, Bear? Yearrgh.*

Head bowed, hands on the rail, Barry watched what was happening out of the corner of his eye. Dr. Geare and the little bald man who'd come in beside him were in action now. Apart from the Moses-man, they were the only two of the white-coated staff who looked much more than thirty. The rest of them might have come pretty well straight from the Job Center, been given a haircut and a white uniform, and told what to do, but Geare and Baldie could have been real doctors. They stood at opposite ends of the horseshoe, holding the aerial gadgets as if they were ray guns and pointing them at each patient in turn. A woman assistant stood just behind them. Nothing happened until Dr. Geare was aiming his gadget at a grossly fat young woman in a wheelchair, two along from the end. The assistant who was watching the box on the pedestal on that side called out in a clear voice, "Response. Medium response."

She made an adjustment. Dr. Geare turned a knob at the side of his aerial.

"Four-point-eight," called the woman at the pedestal. "Five-one. Five-two. Five-two-five. Five-one-five. Five-two-plus. Steady."

Dr. Geare nodded, and the assistant behind him stepped forward and pressed a purple blob, a Foundation badge,

onto the fat girl's shoulder. The same kind of thing was happening with a yellow-faced man sitting in the second row on the far side.

Something about the process infuriated Bear. He was working up into one of his rages, those sudden inward tornadoes, terrifying but thrilling, which had been part of Barry's experience ever since he could remember. He gripped the rail and tried to master the rising pressure. Last thing he wanted now. *Cool it,* he whispered. *Sure, it's only a con, a slick trick with a lot of shiny apparatus to fool us. Only we're not fools, Bear. Nobody thinks you're a fool, Bear.* . . .

He gripped the rail tighter yet. The pain in his head was appalling. He had to scream, and if he began to scream, old Bear would get out. . . .

The man on his left stirred, as if he'd noticed something happening next door to him. Barry jerked his head away, fighting the Bear rage. He saw Pinkie sitting in her chair, drawn into herself, still, waiting, a pallid, plain little girl nobody would ever notice. He stared at her, and as he did so, the pressure inside him collapsed. The pain in his head dulled to an ache.

Sorry, grumbled Bear.

The room became real again, something he had to see and study. Dr. Geare seemed to have found another high scorer and was adjusting the knob on his aerial while the assistant at the pedestal called out numbers. Geare would know it was all a con, of course, and the Moses-man and Baldie. But the others? The women calling out the numbers? Suppose Geare could press something on his aerial to produce a reading at the pedestal and then, when he turned the knob, make the readings change. . . . Yeah, that's how it would look if he was picking up genuine signals and tuning them in. . . .

Barry breathed out a slow sigh and managed to relax a little. As he did so, he became aware that what was happening in the room wasn't only Geare and Baldie messing around with their gadgets—not even mainly that. As the two men moved steadily toward the center of the curve and the women at the pedestals called out the numbers in calm, chanting voices, a kind of group tension had begun to build, stronger and stronger, a slow tautening, like a guitar wire being tuned. Touch it, and it would hum with the harmony natural to its length. Even outside it, distrustful of it, fighting not to be part of it, Barry was aware of the group excitement rising and rising. Each time a fresh representative was chosen, it notched itself up a further pitch. The "readings" varied from 3.4 to 7. There was only one 7. The cutoff point was 5. If you didn't register 5 or more, steady, then you didn't get a badge. Barry lost count of how many had been chosen. Four or five on his side, at least. Probably about the same from Baldie. Say nine. Not many to go.

It was a slow process, five seconds a patient when there wasn't a reading and more than a minute when there was. Almost there now. The aerial pointed at the baby on the woman's lap. "Response. High response. Six-point-two. Point-three-five. Point-four. Steady." The woman sagged as though she was going to faint from relief. The assistant whispered in her ear as she pressed the badge onto the baby's frock, and she managed to pull herself straight. The aerial moved up the rows. Nothing from the shivering woman. Nothing from the balloon man. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. It pointed at Barry.

The process was hypnotic. He'd no time to get ready. He'd spent the whole time doing just what he'd been ordered not to, watching what was going on, working out the odds on getting chosen. . . . Now, at this last instant, he

realized it was no use just looking like a sick lad who's hoping for a miracle. You have genuinely to long for the miracle, be that person, believe like the others believed, forget that it's all a flash fraud.

Harmony! Once . . .

Like one of the iron filings leaping to the pull of the magnet, Barry's memory leaped to a morning three and a half years ago, the corridor outside the secretary's office at Marsden Ash Junior School.

2

Why did he have to have one today? Why *today?* Barry was used to his headaches. Mom called them migraines. She had them, too. You realized you were going to have one while you were still asleep—in your last dream it was there—and then you woke up with a dry, sick mouth and a pulsing, stodgy ache filling your skull, and the moment you moved, it rose to a whine of pain. On a good day it would ease off around teatime, but sometimes it would carry on into next day. If you still had it when you went to bed, you knew you'd wake up with it the next morning. Aspirin just made it a bit duller.

Mom's answer was to draw the curtains and lie on the sofa and moan, but if you did that, it was worse because you had only your headache to think about, so Barry had invented a sort of cupboard in his mind and learned how to stuff most of the pain into it and get the door almost shut, which left the rest of his mind free to try and think about other things. Trouble was the cupboard door didn't lock, so you had to keep your foot against it all the time, which messed you up when it came to doing your best at anything important. . . .

Such as the first football game. Today. This afternoon. Why did he have to have one today? He'd felt fine yesterday, barging around, letting the other kids know he'd been in the first team two years at his old school and got a record number of goals last year. But now . . .

Wouldn't have mattered back in Thurley. He could just have said he'd got one of his headaches, and they'd still have kept him a place. But here, in filthy, rotten Marsden

Ash, they'd reckon he was scared after his boasting. Why did it . . .

Around and around and around in his skull. Bear in his pit, around and around and around.

The bench was a shiny old varnished thing, the corridor outside the secretary's office was green tiles below and dirty whitewashed brick above. It was typical of everything in this grotty old school, with its beat-up old books and its soap smells and cabbage smells and echoes. And the school was typical of dirty, drab Marsden Ash, which wasn't much more than a lot of run-down mills and factories crammed into a valley because a canal had once been there. At Thurley there'd been farms, and a new house with a lawn big enough to kick a ball around on, and he hadn't had to share a bedroom with Don; and at school there'd been Jeff and Paul and Gavin and the others, whereas here there were just a lot of roughs who picked on you because of the way you talked and put in a swear every third word to prove how tough they were. No wonder he'd shot his mouth off a bit over the football.

If the secretary would give him a couple of aspirin. He hadn't had any so far because if he'd told Mom about the headache, she'd have kept him at home . . . Oh, come on! She'd got another kid with her, a Paki girl (far more of them here than at Thurley) who'd fallen and graveled her knee and was sniveling while the secretary dabbed it with cream. He'd seen that when he'd put his head around the door and the secretary had snapped at him to wait. Most of the staff snapped at you here. *Come on! Doesn't take hours to put cream on a knee!*

Barry stirred with impatience and, doing so, knocked the back of his head against a sort of brick ledge that jutted out above the bench. His brain yelped with the flood of pain.

The world went red-black. He leaned his face forward into the palms of his hands, drowned in pain, struggling not to vomit. Whew! That had done it! He'd have to go home now after all. . . .

"You've got a nasty head."

A cold, small, soft voice, close by in the red dark. He looked up and saw a fat little girl with glasses. Couldn't have been much more than six.

"I'm all right," he muttered.

"No, you're not. But you will be soon."

"Fat chance. Goes on all day like this. Nothing's any good."

Barry could hear the whine in his voice. He loathed that voice.

"Shove off, will you?" he snarled. "Nothing anyone can do."

"There's something I can do."

She reached out and took his hand. He jerked it, but even that twitch of effort turned itself into pain, and she'd gripped him quite hard. When she took the other hand, he let her. Stupid kid.

"Shove off, I tell you," he said. "I don't believe in fairies."

"Tell it to go away," she said. "It will go away if you tell it. I'll help you. I helped my granddad make his bad leg go away. Your nasty head is going away. You tell it. It's going if you tell it."

Nothing really happened, nothing which made any sense. The swear was in Barry's mouth to get rid of her but didn't quite come; even feeling foul, he wasn't going to line up with the Marsden Ash toughs. Perhaps that was it, or perhaps . . .

Her hands were chilly, but heat was coming from some-

where: a strong warmth on the back of his neck and his shoulder blades, as though there'd been an electric fire close behind him; only the heat began inside him, growing there. . . .

"Tell it to go away," she whispered. "Help me."

The heat made him drowsy. It was like dropping off to sleep after a bad day, dropping into darkness, pain dwindling down a long corridor, a corridor that led right away, farther and farther. He gave it a feeble, sleepy shove, and it vanished completely.

"Better now?" she whispered.

His eyes were shut. When he opened them, he really felt as though he'd been asleep all night after one of the bad days and was now waking with the ache gone and the sense of a well day before him. He eased his head from side to side, trying it out. The muscles of his neck, stiff with the remains of tension, creaked a little but didn't hurt. The warmth was still vaguely there, but with a shiver to it now, like the feeling that comes when you are lying face down on the beach and a small cloud crosses the sun. He stretched.

"Whew!" he said.

"Better?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

For the moment he had no doubt at all that she had actually done what she said: made the migraine go. She looked pleased, though she didn't really smile. She had a round, flat, pale face which seemed too large for her body —or perhaps it was that her mouth and nose were so small. But the extra thick lenses of her glasses made her eyes look soft and huge. They were brown. Her hair was almost black, done in a pigtail. Her clothes were very neat but

looked as if they'd been bought for somebody much prettier than she was.

The secretary's door slapped open, and the Paki girl came out, still sniveling, with a plaster on her knee. The secretary looked at Barry.

"Well, what's up with you?" she said.

"I had a headache, but it's gone."

"Good," she said, not interested. She turned to the kid with the glasses. "And *you're* in the wrong school," she snapped.

The door shut.

The girl gave a puzzled sigh.

"How old are you?" said Barry.

"Going to be seven."

"You're supposed to be at the Infants' still, she means," said Barry. "Other side of the playground. You new here, too?"

She didn't say anything but took his hand.

"Okay," he said, "I'll show you. One good turn deserves another."

On his way back along the edge of the asphalt playground Barry passed the wall of the Assembly Hall. It was built a bit like a chapel and had brick buttresses. He fitted himself into the corner of one of these, leaning his back against the sooty brick. It was a mild September morning, with misty sunlight. A corner of brickwork touched the light bruise at the back of his head, seeming to fit the invisible wound without hurting it. He let it rest there, making it part of him, himself part of it. Like that he could feel the whole world reaching out around him, not dreamy, not blurred at the edges, but sharp and clear and all in its necessary place, each worn old brick where it belonged, and the cabbage smells and the echoes of feet and voices all

true to themselves and all full of one life, a slow, huge, quiet thereness spreading on and on beyond the sun.

He stayed in his nook, part of this life, this quiet, until the bell rang.

3

"Medium response," called a voice. "Four-point-eight. Point-nine. Five-oh-five. Five-oh. Five-oh-five. Steady."

The aerial pointed at Barry for another few seconds and then moved on. The assistant had to come right around behind the rows to give him his badge. Dazed with the violence of memory, he barely noticed.

Of course, if he'd been asked about his first meeting with Pinkie at any time since, he would have remembered it, though probably not told whoever had asked him. And he had often thought about it in a more theoretical way, trying to make up his mind what, if anything, Pinkie did when she "helped" someone get well. His main conclusion was that she'd got it right. She helped. You were due to get well anyway, your body had geared itself up to that point, and there was something about her that triggered the process of recovery off. That was all.

But thinking about it, Barry had only used as much of his memory of that morning as he needed to make his theory work. What it had actually been like—the knowledge of peace, the sense of the world's life flowing through him—had been left out. It hadn't been forgotten. It was like a once-favorite book he'd stopped reading, there on the shelf still, available but never opened. But as the aerial aimed at him and the word "Harmony" hummed in his mind, it was that part of the memory which he had snatched up from the jumble of past days.

It was more than memory. It was the same thing happening again. Everything belonged, and he belonged with

everything, a speck of the universe, a speck called Barry Evans, but the speck was also the universe, and one of the billion billion names of the universe was Barry Evans. Only one moment more, and he would dissolve and become the universe, exist along its infinite network, knowing all its past, all its future. . . .

But first . . .

Yes, there was something to do. A reason. Why he was here, standing, gripping this rail . . .

He made an effort, like deliberately waking from deep sleep, from a marvelous dream. He couldn't have dozed off (if you could call it that) for more than half a minute, but he felt like a time traveler who has spent perhaps years of his own life going back and forth through the ages and has only now returned almost to the instant when he set out.

He continued the effort by pushing the experience away, so that he could think about it, make sense of it. (That was Barry, the impatient, disbelieving mind. Old Bear had been with him on the trip but was surly about waking up, still trying to snuggle back into the dream.) Of course, it was the same old either/or problem you always got with Pinkie, magnified by the setup in this place. *Either* the Moses-man was on to something, and all this kit and the circle of patients and Pinkie herself were actually producing an effect, even if they weren't sure what, but call it focusing this Harmonic Energy stuff, *or* it had all happened in Barry's mind, was going to happen soon anyway but had come with an extra rush now, with the chocolate and brandy wearing off, and the mild delirium of not having eaten a proper meal since Monday, and seeing Pinkie again, and the tension of whether he was going to get picked to talk to her close up, all working together.

His hand slid to his hip pocket and touched the receipt for Mr. Stott's four hundred pounds. Hell, his hand knew

what it thought. The Moses-man was a fraud, getting money out of sick suckers. So it was all in the mind, according to his hand. Good while it lasted, though—a high without dope.

The sense that this was his morning, the gambler's certainty of luck running the right way, came back strongly. He was feeling pretty good.

Wrong, growled Bear.

It was true. He was supposed to be feeling lousy, but the implacable, pulsing pain of the migraine was dying to a dull ache, and the nausea was almost gone. He felt feeble and shivery still, but that was mostly hunger now. Going to have to playact a bit when his turn came . . .

Dr. Geare and Baldie met near the center of the horseshoe. They murmured briefly to each other, then took the aerials back to the cart and spoke to the Moses-man. He straightened from the control panel and gazed around the room.

"Excellent," he said. "This looks like being one of our really good sessions. The levels of Harmonic Energy are almost as high as I have seen them. Fifteen of you, an unusually large number, have shown yourselves to be truly in tune with the Energy. If I believed in luck, I would say this was our lucky day. But I do not believe in luck; I believe in you. It is your effort, your concentration, that has brought this effect about. Almost all of us will benefit from that effort. So don't stop now. Especially while your representatives are in contact with the Healer, concentrate on your own personal Harmonies. My assistants will fetch the representatives from their places. I want them to sit facing the Healer, let her take their hands, and then reply to what she says as naturally as possible. There is nothing to be frightened of. We are in the presence of a great power, but

it is wholly beneficent. It is the power that makes all things new. The power of healing."

He had dropped his voice to a throbbing whisper, but it still filled the big room. As soon as he finished, somebody brought an ordinary wooden chair and placed it opposite the steel one in which Pinkie sat, and two of the women started to fetch the "representatives" out from opposite ends of the horseshoe. Soon the first "representative" was sitting talking to Pinkie. The next was waiting in a wheelchair a few feet away. Pinkie took the patient's hands and said something in a low voice. They talked for about a minute, and then Pinkie let go, and the patient stood up and walked slowly back to his place. An assistant took the wooden chair to one side to make room for the wheelchair. Another patient was brought to wait her turn. So it went on.

There were no miraculous cures, no cripples slinging their crutches away and starting to waltz, but most of the patients came back to their places with dazed, smiling, holy looks. One old man who had needed to be helped into the chair pushed himself firmly to his feet when his turn was over and nodded briskly as he came back to his place, telling himself, "Yes, I feel better already." On the other hand, a woman with a red face and bulging legs started to sob noisily before Pinkie had finished with her. It was an ugly sound, not at all like crying with happiness or relief.

When it was the baby's turn, Pinkie took it onto her lap to hold and almost dropped it as she handed it back—fairly typical Pinkie, if she'd done so. Next was a boy from the far side, about seven or eight, with huge eyes and a face like a starvation poster. Barry couldn't watch whether Pinkie did anything different with him because it was his turn now to come out, following the assistant right around the back. He got a glimpse of the box on the pedestal as he passed it. It

was more complicated than he'd expected, like a miniature video game with a display screen and controls. Two curves, one green and one pink, oscillated across the screen, and the woman who was working it seemed to be trying to keep them in phase with each other. She looked totally absorbed.

While he stood and waited for Pinkie to finish talking to the boy, Barry did his best to think himself back to how he'd been feeling half an hour ago. A fit of the shivers came, and he let it happen. He hung his head, drooped his shoulders, and when the assistant touched his elbow to tell him to move forward, he shuffled like an old man and lowered himself into the chair as though the slightest jolt would be agony. Pinkie leaned forward and took his hands.

"You've got a bad head," she whispered.

There was something wrong with her voice. It had always been slow and quiet, but it had been careful, too, with every word clear. Now it was somehow blurred and uncertain.

"That's right," he muttered. "Same old thing."

"But it's going. Going. If I help you, you can make it go."

She sounded a bit less listless now. Perhaps she was just tired. Doing whatever she did for all these people must take something out of her.

"It gives up sometimes," he said. "But it only comes back, bad as ever."

"You can stop it from ever coming back. You can tune yourself to the Energy. We'll show you how, after. Now tell it to go away. Now."

Still, she gave no sign of having recognized him, of having even seen him. It was difficult to tell with Pinkie. Her flat, pale face with its wrong-size features (though the eyes looked normal now without the magnifying glasses) was like

the unchanging mask of some animal that signals its feelings in different ways from humans. The second time Barry had met her—when he'd mended her glasses on the school bus—he hadn't understood how much breaking them mattered until he'd talked to Mrs. Proudfoot about it. It was the same now. He was the one who must have looked startled when she spoke his name.

"Barry? You're Barry."

"Uh. Yeah. Hi."

"Have you seen Granddad?"

"He's fine. Sends his love."

"Thanks."

She produced one of her tiny smiles. He didn't expect any more. That was a long conversation for Pinkie to have in public like this. She was still holding his hands. He couldn't do what he wanted till she let go.

"Your head is getting better," she said, her voice quite clear now.

"Right."

"It's getting well. Help me make it well. Help me."

No need. The pain, the nausea had vanished, rinsed away, like stale and smoky air rinsed pure by a sudden shower. He felt weak and chilly, but whole. It had happened during the few moments while Pinkie was recognizing him and asking about Mr. Stott.

Watch it, snuffled Bear.

He pulled himself out of the trance just in time, as she let go of his hands. He leaned forward, turning his head slightly away and putting up his right hand to tease the lobe of his ear. Surely she could see at this distance! His heart sank as she sat impassive. Perhaps she hadn't seen. Perhaps she was refusing to answer. Then her nose wrinkled itself up, just as though she was suppressing a sneeze. She closed her eyes.

Done it! Got it right? Wheeeee!

As Barry rose from the chair, he stretched his arms to release the feeling of exultation, of triumph. It all was worth it, worth his time and the sickness and Mr. Stott's money. They'd been right in their guess. Okay, that meant the game had only just started, and there were impossible problems still to solve, but they'd got their pieces on the board against all the odds. They were in.

Barry didn't notice how he got back to his place in the horseshoe. He was vaguely aware of the next two or three patients having their interviews with Pinkie. She carried on just as before, gave no sign. She wouldn't. Teachers and people like that sometimes decided that Pinkie was a complete liar because of the toneless way she answered their questions. When they got to know her better, they changed their minds and thought she was too dreamy to know how to lie, but they were wrong about that, too. She could keep a secret as well as anyone. At this very moment she was sitting in that crazy chair, telling the woman in front of her that she could help her blood run clean or her joints move without pain or whatever, when all the while she knew quite well that Barry had asked her whether she wanted to get away from this place and she'd told him yes.

4

Barry just happened to glance down as he walked back along the aisle of the bus. It was the same kid, sitting perfectly still, unlike all the other little wrigglers from the Infants' School.

"Tape hold out?" he asked.

She nodded and put her hand to touch the corner of her glasses, where he'd mended the broken hinge on the way to school that morning. He never knew what told him that there was something still badly wrong.

"In your seats!" yelled the driver.

He dropped into the place beside her, though Ted and Paul were keeping one for him on the back bench.

"What's up then?" he said.

She didn't answer.

"Trouble at school?"

She shook her head.

"At home?"

She nodded.

It was like one of those stupid guessing games, and just like that, he had one of those flashes when you know before you've even asked the question.

"They're going to get at you about the glasses?"

She nodded.

"Right. I'll come home with you and say I busted them. I'll think of a way it wasn't my fault. There's nothing they can do to either of us."

He grinned, rose, and nipped back to his friends.

"Siddown!" yelled the driver.

Viola Street was a cul-de-sac, about a quarter of a mile from the roaring main road where Barry lived. And it was in any case only half a street, nine little houses down one side and the blank wall of a mill filling the other. The houses had tiny front gardens. One was filled with vast chrysanthemums all lashed to individual canes, another was mainly a sandpit littered with battered toys, but the house in the farthest corner, Number 9, had only a checkerboard of black and white tiles. The center tile had been removed, and two yellow pansies grew in the hole. The kid—she'd told him her name was Pinkie, but he couldn't think of her like that, couldn't really believe anyone had a name like that—reached up to the gleaming brass knocker and tapped it so softly that you wouldn't have thought anyone would hear. The door opened almost at once.

"And who might this be?" said the woman.

She had the same soft, clear voice as the kid, and the same flat, pale face, though her mouth and nose were normal size. She wore a blue striped apron. Her hair was as shiny yellow as the door knocker.

"Barry Evans, ma'am. I've come to say I'm sorry I busted, uh, Pinkie's glasses getting off the bus this morning."

Her pale brown eyes flicked to the glasses, checked the mended earpiece, stared hard at Barry, and then glanced down the street as if to make sure there weren't any witnesses around.

"You'd best come in," she said.

The front room had a never-used feeling. Barry had noticed the same thing in the two sets of lodgings where his family had stayed between Thurley and Marsden Ash. (Later he found that all of Number 9 felt like that. Even the bathroom was like a exhibition room in a store, where nobody has ever cleaned their teeth at the basin or sat on

the toilet.) The carpet was sharp blue, the chairs green, the walls cream. The pictures were large photographs of snowy mountains.

The woman took the glasses off the kid's face as if she'd been lifting them off a shelf and studied the mend. Though Barry had made a neat job of it, she smoothed the tape with her fingertips before putting them back.

"And just how did this come about?" she said.

"Bit of bad luck," said Barry easily. He had in fact no idea how the kid had broken the glasses. She'd been at the stop that morning with them broken, and he'd had a roll of tape in his satchel, that was all. But he could see it wouldn't do now.

"No such thing," said the woman, softer than ever. It was worse than if she'd snapped. Now Barry understood why the kid had been worried.

"I mean, we were getting off the bus," he said. "The little kids get off first, see. Pinkie was last of them, and I was first of the juniors. I'd left her a bit of a gap, but somebody gave me a shove behind, and I had to jump, save myself from falling. That's how my satchel swung out and bashed into her glasses. Couple of inches more, and it'd have caught the side of her head."

From the back of the house a timer sounded. The woman left without a word. Barry winked at the kid, who replied with the smallest possible smile—you almost needed a magnifying glass to see it. The timer stopped, and the woman came back, bringing with her a waft of sweet fresh baking.

"Hey, that smells like a million pounds!" said Barry.

Who said there was no such thing as luck? They were the first words that came, a simple reaction to the glorious odor, but he couldn't have got them righter, both in what

he said and in the way he said it. The kid, surprisingly, did her bit.

"Mom's a super cook," she said.

"It comes of standing around instead of getting on into school," said the woman. "Standing around dreaming."

"It wasn't like that," said Barry. "There were other kids in the way. It's always a crush. I caught up with her, having to jump."

"And you didn't see who pushed you, of course."

"No, ma'am. Wouldn't have been his fault either probably. Someone could have given him a shove from behind."

"I don't like her going on that bus. Never wanted her to go to school in the first place, but it seems I've got no choice."

"I could keep an eye on her if you're bothered," said Barry. "See she's all right."

Mrs. Proudfoot stared coldly at him, and then at the glasses, and then back at him.

"Since you've shown yourself honest . . . so far," she said. "Not many I'd say that of. Wait here."

She was back almost at once, carrying a rack of rock buns. The fusty little room was filled with the freshness of them. She handed Barry a paper napkin.

"They're for the meeting," she said. "But there's one here broken you can have. Put it on the napkin—I don't want crumbs on the carpet."

The bun was still too hot to bite into, so Barry started on an outer fragment.

"Tastes like a million pounds, too," he said.

This time he used the words on purpose. There was something about Mrs. Proudfoot, about this house. . . . She'd wanted to make him pay for the glasses, probably. And then she'd seen she was getting a child-minder for the

price of a broken bun. But the kid's clothes didn't look like cheapies. . . .

She nodded and stood aside, leaving him a clear path to the door.

"You can finish it on your way home," she said.

"Right. See you at the bus stop Monday, Pinkie. Thanks for the cake, Mrs. . . . er . . ."

"Proudfoot."

"Bye, Pinkie."

The kid wrinkled her nose at him. *Bit like a hamster,* he thought.

It became a routine. If there was nothing bothering her, she left him alone, but if she wanted to talk, she'd give him some kind of signal—brush against the back of his hand as he chatted with friends at the bus stop or do her nose-wrinkling trick as he passed her on his way down the aisle. He would sit with her for a bit and try and sort out her problem or else arrange to walk back with her to Viola Street, which gave them a little more time to talk before they actually reached Number 9. It could be anything. For a start she was incredibly clumsy and was always breaking things or losing them. Then she didn't understand about school. Even the simple arrangements at the Infants' seemed beyond her. This wasn't entirely her fault because Mrs. Proudfoot had kept her at home till this term, so she was thrown in with a lot of kids who'd been there a couple of years. You'd have thought they'd have shown her the ropes, the way kids do, but she took weeks to learn. She wasn't stupid. For instance, she could read, more than most of the little kids could do, because Mrs. Proudfoot had started to teach her when she was only four. But even so, Barry gradually came to realize, she was funny about words. She usually understood what people said, but it was as

though it was somehow not real to her. She seemed to live the important part of her life in a different lot of dimensions from everyone else, a sort of Pinkie universe in which language only made half sense. That was why she preferred signals, like the touch on the back of the hand or the wrinkled nose.

Usually the solutions to her problems were straightforward—mending something or suggesting where to look for it or inventing a story to explain its breakage or loss or else simply getting her to see how some part of the system worked. But sometimes they were more mysterious. Later that term, without a word of explanation, she pushed something into the pocket of his jacket. It turned out to be a small teddy bear, black, missing one eye and very grubby. It was surprising that Mrs. Proudfoot allowed such an object in the house. In fact, Barry guessed, that might be the explanation: Pinkie had somehow got it filthy, and Mrs. Proudfoot wanted to put it in the garbage. He shampooed it and put it to dry, and his mom must have found it like that because when he got home, it had two eyes and its torn ear was stitched up and it was wearing a yellow bow tie. When he gave it back to Pinkie a couple of days later, she took it without a word; in fact, nothing was ever said about the whole business. It was curiously satisfying, getting it right like that. Old Bear approved, but then old Bear didn't trust words much ever. Old Bear was scared stiff of Mrs. Proudfoot, too.

On Fridays Barry walked with Pinkie to Viola Street and, as it were, handed her over to Mrs. Proudfoot for the weekend. She paid him off with a bit of whatever she was baking. She always baked on Fridays for the "meeting," whatever that might be. Barry seldom came into the house, and Mrs. Proudfoot gave the impression that she was glad to have him off her doorstep, but the arrangement was fair

because she cooked the best cakes Barry had ever tasted. This gave him something to tell Ted and Paul and the others—a reason why he bothered with a kid from the Infants'; he told himself it was just something he'd somehow got stuck with, like the stray dog the Evanses had got stuck with back at Thurley when Don had brought it home.

It wasn't because of the migraines. He didn't have another one to bother with for more than a month, and when it came, he deliberately kept clear of Pinkie. He wasn't going to have her holding his hands on the school bus in front of everyone.

Toward the end of the term, one Friday afternoon—so near to Christmas that the sky was already halfway dark and the streetlamps had come on—they had reached the corner before Viola Street when Barry said, "Hope your mom's baked something special. It's going to have to last me through till Jan."

Pinkie stopped dead. He glanced at her. Her face seemed extra pale under the dusk and neon.

"You'll be okay," he said. "No school equals no problems."

Her eyes glistened, enlarged by her glasses. He crouched down, as if he was talking to a toddler.

"Look, it's only four weeks . . . less. You'll be all right. Nobody's going to hurt you. We'll start up again next term, uh? Look, I suppose I can drop around Fridays, like I was hoping to get a cake out of your mom anyway, and then . . . If I said can I take you for a walk, d'you think she'd . . . but it's no use if she's going to be there, Pinkie. Isn't there anywhere you go without her, supposing there's someone to take you?"

"Granddad's."

"Where's that?"

"Dallington."

Barry teased at his earlobe, thinking. Dallington was another grimy town like Marsden Ash, a few miles along the valley. There was a bus.

"I suppose I could tell your mom I've got to go over to Dallington," he said, "and shall I take you because of your granddad living there. Think she'd wear that? Right, but listen, I can't afford the bus fare that often, and in any case I don't fancy plugging all the way out to Dallington just because you want a pencil sharpened or something. It's got to be worth it—something important. So before I say anything to your mom about Dallington, you've got to tell me whether . . . okay, that'll do. You wrinkle your nose like that. No, wait a minute. Supposing I've got something on . . ."

That was how it began. The code didn't evolve in one go, and over the months, as Barry was more and more allowed to come right into the house in Viola Street, other signals were added. Some were definite, agreed in words for specific purposes. Others were vaguer, tiny gestures Pinkie might make whose meaning Barry learned to read. But the core of the code remained. If Barry put up his hand to tease his right lobe, it meant "Do you want me to suggest going over to Dallington?" And if Pinkie then wrinkled her nose, it meant "Yes." And it meant that she had something important she needed his help with.

5

The patients crowded to the door, not quite jostling. The wheelchairs slowed them down. Mutters of commonplace chat were exchanged as the tension of the last ninety minutes eased away. A man was nudged against Barry's side by the pressure of people beyond him.

"Sorry," they both said.

Then the man gave him a glance of recognition and smiled.

"Feeling better?" he whispered.

"Yeah, suppose I am," said Barry.

He hadn't thought about it. The exhilaration of achieving his purpose, of winning out against these frauds, had masked the fact that both headache and nausea were clean gone. There wasn't even much of the watery feebleness he used to have to put up with after a bad go of migraine. Suppose he'd not been chosen to make contact with Pinkie, suppose he'd had no chance to exchange the old signals with her, maybe he'd now be feeling sick and stupid still. Or maybe not—you couldn't tell with Pinkie. But the man at his side, a total stranger to Barry, had no doubts.

"Not surprised," he said. "You know, the roses came back into your cheeks the moment she touched you. It was marvelous to see. Wasn't that so? Roses back in his cheeks?"

"It was really lovely," said the woman beyond. "Lovely for all of us. It's been a simply beautiful occasion, quite the best session I've been to. I could feel the Energy working."

Barry heard murmurs from others within earshot, little noises of trust and hope and happiness. *Poor sods,* he

thought. Well, not poor. The woman talked as though she could afford to fork out four hundred pounds whenever she felt like a session. She had a fluty, upper-crust voice which wasn't quite the real thing. The man sounded like an old army officer. Other voices and faces were different—you might have found them in the supermarket at Marsden Ash. Some seemed to be foreign. But they'd all paid. Paid to be conned. Barry felt the muscles around his mouth hardening into contempt and disgust but managed to convert the grimace into what must have looked like a pretty stupid grin.

On the far side of the door a woman in a tweed suit was watching with an anxious frown as the patients emerged. Her face cleared as she spotted Barry. He braced himself for more gush, then noticed the purple badge on her jacket.

"Oh, Mr. Evans," she cooed. "Would you be kind enough to come with me for a moment? Mr. Freeman is anxious to talk to you."

She led him with the crowd for a few yards but then took him through a door marked "Private" into a long corridor that stretched toward the back of the building. Several doors down she knocked and waited. At length a man's voice answered from inside. She held the door for Barry and closed it behind him.

Mr. Freeman turned out to be the Moses-man.

He had been sitting at a large desk, studying the contents of one of the purple files Barry had seen in Dr. Geare's office, but rose as Barry came in. Close to he seemed even larger than he had in the Hall of Harmony, more than a foot taller than Barry, a great slab of a man in his white coat. The whiteness made a shock of contrast with the gold of his hair and beard and the gold of his eyes and the brown, even tan of his face.

"Mr. Evans," he said, and gestured to Barry to sit in a swiveling black leather chair.

"That's right," said Barry.

"Feeling better?"

Having had some practice, Barry got his response right this time.

"Terrific," he said. "A bit dazed, I suppose."

"Dazed?"

"Well . . . it's natural. You're feeling rotten and then —pow!"

"But Pinkie tells me you are used to it. She says she has taken your headaches away before."

"Not like this. Anyway, it was only a couple of times. Three, maybe."

"In what way was it different?"

"Oh . . . course I felt better those times, but . . . well, just sort of empty and peaceful. Not like this. I feel terrific."

Pushing it? Apparently not. It was true anyway. He was still on a self-induced high. He leaned back in the big, comfortable chair and relaxed. Mr. Freeman picked up the purple folder and sat looking at something in it, still and silent. The room seemed to hum with his presence. He was just as impressive sitting here quietly reading as he'd been when he was putting over his stuff in the Hall of Harmony. He might be a crook, in charge of a crooked outfit, but still Barry felt a strong urge to make a good impression on the man—not merely to string along with him and con him into believing that Barry Evans was just another sucker to take a fee off, but actually to make him remember Barry Evans as a person, somebody different.

While he waited, he glanced around the room. It was small but reeked of money. The big desk was made of glossy red wood with brass fittings, and beside it stood a

computer terminal. There were several other high-tech gadgets on show, the furniture looked new and luxuriously comfortable, and there were two large abstract paintings—bright curves in primary colors—on the walls.

Mr. Freeman looked up.

"Dr. Geare does not mention that you had known the Healer before you came to us," he said.

Barry had been ready for this question for days.

"I didn't tell him, sir."

"Oh?"

"You see, I've had these headaches since I was a kid, until I met up with Pinkie and she made them better. I must have been about thirteen then. And I was okay for a couple of years after Mrs. Proudfoot took her away, but then they started coming back worse than ever, and all the doctor could think of was to try a different painkiller. She was useless. I was getting desperate when I heard about this place. . . ."

"We deliberately do not advertise, Mr. Evans."

"No, but my mom was talking to a friend of hers, and this friend's cousin had been here."

"Do you know the cousin's name?"

"Suppose I could find out."

"Go on."

"My mom wasn't especially interested. In fact, she was saying how stupid it was to think a kid could do anything a trained doctor couldn't when I guessed it might be Pinkie or someone like her. My mom had got the name wrong, but she'd remembered 'Harmony' and she knew it was in Hampshire, so I went to the big library where they have all the telephone books and looked under *H* and got your address. That's all."

"I see. You will forgive my saying so, Mr. Evans, but you do not look or sound the type of young man who has

money to burn. What were your reactions on finding how much it would cost you to come here for a session?"

"Shook me rigid. So happened I'd got the money. Had a job last summer, see, working the pumps at a big garage, and I'd been keeping it for a bike I wanted. . . ."

"Pinkie used to live in a town called Marsden Ash. You wrote from, um, Thurley, which I believe is some eighty miles from Marsden Ash."

"That's right. I'm sorry, but I was desperate to come, and I thought if I put Marsden Ash, somebody might mention it to Mrs. Proudfoot and she'd say no."

Mr. Freeman raised his gold eyebrows. He looked amused.

"You see," said Barry, "I used to keep an eye on Pinkie at school for Mrs. Proudfoot, spite of our being different ages, and I used to go and have tea with them most weeks. Then all of a sudden Mrs. Proudfoot took against me. It was at Pinkie's birthday party when she was eight, and I happened to mention it was more than a year since I'd had one of my headaches, and then it came out about Pinkie taking them away. Mrs. Proudfoot threw me out and told me not to come back, and what's more, Pinkie didn't come to school again that term and I went on to a different school next term, so I never saw her again. I'm sorry about the address, but like I say, I was desperate to come, and I thought if I put Marsden Ash, somebody might mention it to Mrs. Proudfoot and then she'd say, 'We're not having *him!*' See? I got a friend I used to have in Thurley to let me use his address."

Mr. Freeman's amusement had become more obvious while Barry was talking. He was clearly enjoying some private joke, though everything Barry had said was true, except for his having started getting his migraines again.

"I think I should have done much the same in your place," said Mr. Freeman.

"Oh . . . well, I mean . . ."

"And you worked at a garage to earn your fee?"

"It wasn't—"

"But it turned out to be the case. You wouldn't have asked your family for the money?"

"Dad couldn't afford it. He was out of work eighteen months, and now he's on a lower salary than he used to get. And my mom would be furious if she knew. She'd think it was a complete waste of money."

"I see. Suppose your father had been able to afford the fee and suppose your mother had felt differently . . ."

"No. I'd still have wanted it to be my thing."

"I find your attitude impressive, Mr. Evans. It is sad that in this money-obsessed age we find we get our best results by asking our clients to produce a substantial fee, often near the limit of what they can afford, to demonstrate their commitment to our work. And of course, we need the money for the work. But we do run a scheme to provide free treatment in case of genuine hardship, where the commitment has been expressed by other means. In view of what you have told me, I am prepared to refund your fee."

Barry felt his eyes widen and his jaw hang open. It wasn't just that the offer was unexpected. It was as if the whole basis of his certainty that the Foundation was a fraud had been suddenly taken away. He could feel against his right buttock a rectangle of stiffness where the receipt for his fee was pressed against the upholstery of the chair. All morning that bit of paper had been a sort of talisman, magically helping him see through the benign-looking masks of people like Dr. Geare and Mr. Freeman, see them for the greedy crooks they were. Now the magic was taken away.

He had nothing to go on. Nothing to tell him he was doing the right thing. Except that Pinkie had wrinkled her nose.

"No?" said Mr. Freeman, more amused than ever.

"Er, it doesn't seem right . . . I mean . . . can I think about it?"

"I have an alternative suggestion which you might think about at the same time. I see that you are sixteen and a half but have already left school. Would you mind telling me why? You are clearly an intelligent young man."

Barry shrugged. It wasn't only a question of how to make the best impression; it just wasn't easy to explain. He could remember the exact moment when he had been climbing the echoing concrete stairs on his way to the physics lab at Marsden Ash Senior and had suddenly known, with total certainty, that no power on earth was going to force him to come back here for another term. It had been a Bear decision, really. Mr. Freeman was looking at him. He would have to say something.

"I did all right," he said. "They wanted me to stay on. My parents were furious. I don't know. I had a row with a teacher, but . . ."

He was beginning to mumble, conscious of becoming just another inarticulate jerk under that golden gaze, when the mention of the row with Mr. Elias suggested a possibility, which then seemed to explode in his mind into a whole chain of connections.

"I suppose it was that mostly. I was just sick of the way we got taught. All dead, you know? All worked out, printed in the textbooks, and you learn it, and that's what you're there for. If it's not in the textbooks, it's rubbish. I'd been reading in a magazine about evolution, about how when a new species starts to evolve somewhere, the same sort of thing happens other places in the world, no connection—"

"I know the work. There were some very significant fig-

ures about the learning behavior of rats in laboratories remote from each other."

"Yeah, but it was evolution I had the row about. I just mentioned the idea, and Mr. Elias blew up. It was like I'd spat in his face or something."

"New ideas are always seen as threats, especially by those whose profession it is to teach old ideas. You are threatening both their self-esteem and their livelihood. I take it that this episode was not your sole reason for deciding to leave school but that it helped you crystallize that decision?"

"That's about it."

Mr. Freeman nodded, looked again at the paper in the file, and then sat still, apparently thinking. Barry watched him and tried to make up his mind. Crooked or only cracked? Or onto something? Fake or genius? Or, somehow, both? Funny how you wanted him to like you, even supposing he was a crook and fake. And if he was a genius after all . . .

The gold eyes turned to him.

"What are your immediate plans, Mr. Evans?"

"Me? I hadn't thought. It depends if my headaches start coming back. If they don't, I suppose I'll try and get a job, though there's not much chance around us, with eighty people going for one vacancy."

"Unless you are committed to living with your family, I could offer you temporary employment at the Foundation."

Barry grunted with surprise.

"This is what I meant by coming to an alternative arrangement over your fee," said Mr. Freeman. "I could refund the money to you now, as a loan, which you could then repay out of your wages. Our work here is partly seasonal. Our American clients in particular prefer to visit us in the summer, so we normally take on extra staff at this time of year. Our difficulty is to find people who are ade-

quately committed to the Foundation. One sulky kitchen hand can disrupt the Harmonies. In fact, this year I have chosen to be short of staff for lack of suitable applicants. But your reactions in the Harmony Session and also what you have told me persuade me that you would fill the bill very well. Indeed, we both might regard the arrangement as probationary, and should it work out, you might decide to join us on a more permanent basis."

"Uh . . . well, it sounds great . . . but I mean, what about Pinkie's mom—Mrs. Proudfoot?"

"She is in America. I will telephone her this afternoon and get her consent. You will be glad to know that she has altered her views on Pinkie's healing abilities since you knew her. She is, by the way, now Mrs. Freeman."

He'd done it on purpose. This time the shock was sharp enough to stimulate old Bear into a snarl of warning. Barry continued to stare at Mr. Freeman in astonishment because that was what the man wanted. He was the puppet master. You twitched at his bidding, and what amused him was watching you do so. It didn't prove anything, didn't in any way solve the crook-or-genius riddle, not at a rational level. But at Bear level it did. You couldn't pull that on old Bear; he wasn't anyone's puppet. Crook!

"She is doing excellent work," said Mr. Freeman, "both in putting suitable clients in touch with us and in exploring the possibilities of extending our work to America. I don't think we need anticipate any objections to your joining us, apart from one small matter."

"Uh?"

"My father-in-law. Mr. Stott. I have not yet met him, by the way. I understand from Pinkie that you know him, and to judge by what you said to her this morning, you have recently seen him."

"Yes, sir."

"Will you tell me about that?"

"You see, I used to take Pinkie over there sometimes. Her mom didn't like going. I hadn't been since she left Marsden Ash, but when I heard about this kid who was healing people, I biked out to ask him if it was her. He said yes."

"You didn't tell me this earlier?"

"Because of Mrs. Proudfoot—Mrs. Freeman, I mean. She and Mr. Stott don't get on."

"But when you applied to come here, you in fact knew you would be seeing Pinkie?"

"He wasn't dead certain. He said he'd written, but no one had answered."

"That is the case. Tell me, Mr. Evans, would you describe Pinkie's grandfather as a harmonious character?"

"Jesus, no!"

"You will have to get out of the habit of blasphemy if you are to come here. For one thing, it deeply offends certain of our clients."

"Sorry, sir."

"I simply tell you. But about my wife's father. You are right. There are, alas, certain personalities which are profoundly disruptive of the Harmonies. It is not a question of their being good or bad people, it is almost a physical trait, but it can present me with agonizing dilemmas. Only this morning I and my colleagues had to consider the case of a young woman who in her interview with Dr. Hamm revealed personal disharmonies strong enough to disrupt the energy flow we struggle to focus during our sessions. I had the distressing task of telling her we could not accept her. This sort of thing is a commonplace of medical practice, but that does not make the individual instances any less painful. You follow me?"

He looked at Barry, waiting. But Barry, after his earlier

uncertainty, knew where he was again. He kept his inward anger under control. Better not make it too easy, though. Let him do a bit of persuading . . .

"They used to be pretty fond of each other," he muttered.

"So it must have seemed. But remember Pinkie had very few people to be fond of. Would you say she used to be fond of you?"

"Uh, she just needed me, I suppose."

"Exactly. When I spoke to her twenty minutes ago, she was tired after the session. She did not mention your having been there. I had to question her. She'd been pleased to see you but was quite unexcited."

"Oh."

(Mild disappointment, that's right. She's fooling you, mister. She's told me she wants out—you think she's going to let on she's even interested? You don't know Pinkie the way old Bear does.)

"She has changed," said Mr. Freeman. "Her world has widened and now contains many friends. She can make comparisons. She has found she neither wants nor needs her grandfather as she used to. Now I must ask you to look at the matter from my point of view. You heard me this morning describe Pinkie as a lens. Of course, that is only a metaphor, but one could extend it by saying that Pinkie is a lens of great accuracy, and this means of great delicacy. Partly this is her natural talent, but partly it is her training since she has been with us. And her treatment. I have taken trouble to see that she is not subjected to emotional stress of any kind. . . ."

He paused and raised an eyebrow. There had been a slight emphasis on the word "any." And Pinkie's mom had somehow been persuaded to leave her and go to America. . . . Barry nodded.

"Have I the right," said Mr. Freeman, speaking so slowly and quietly that he might have been asking himself the question, "have I the right, for the sake of one man's brief happiness, to risk the violent emotion of a meeting that would certainly distort and might even shatter our precious lens? So many people's lifelong happiness depends on Pinkie."

"Um . . ."

"I think not. Mr. Stott, as he told you, wrote to us, but with my wife's strong support as well as that of our senior staff I decided not to respond. It was a painful decision. I did not tell Pinkie that I had made it. Were you proposing to visit Mr. Stott on your return North?"

"Nip out, I thought—just tell him she's okay."

"Good. I would be truly grateful if you could do just that. I have no wish to cause the old gentleman any distress, so it would be an excellent thing if you could set his mind at rest."

"Right."

"But do not encourage him to think that he will be able to see her."

"I get you."

"Excellent," said Mr. Freeman, rising. "I'm afraid I have kept you from your lunch."

"That's all right. Can I talk to Pinkie? I mean, if I'm going to tell her granddad she's happy . . ."

Mr. Freeman shook his head.

"The sessions are very exhausting for her. She has to rest after lunch and will still be asleep when the bus leaves. In any case I am not sure it would be wise. I would prefer to see how she reacts tomorrow to having met you again."

"I could—"

"If all goes well, you will be returning here, won't you? Perhaps then. But speaking of that, will you call at the

office before the bus leaves? Mrs. Elliott will have a letter for you, setting out the terms of employment I am suggesting. Think it over for a couple of days, talk to your parents, and let me know. And since you seem interested in the scientific background to our work, you might care to read this. You will find it less simplistic than much of our literature."

He handed Barry a pamphlet bound in gray paper, smiling as he did so to welcome him into the great game of blinding suckers with science. Barry smiled back and left.

As he walked toward the smell of cooking, he realized that he was trembling. Partly this was weakness after the violent migraine, partly it was the relaxation of tension from the interview, but partly it was anger. Bear was awake again, growling. Nobody used old Bear as a puppet. Nobody bought him with smiles and flattery and a three-month job. Thought he was the kind to stab his friends in the back, did he? Sweet-talk an old cripple who was only asking to see a kid he was fond of? *Neither wants nor needs her grandfather* . . . Grrrrr.

6

It was less than eight miles to Dallington, but the journey took almost fifty minutes. The bus dithered this way and that off the main road, visiting steep and soot-smeared villages where half the houses were boarded up and practically no one got on or off. Barry stared out the window. Pinkie did her trick of folding herself inward as if she was watching private landscapes which no one else would ever visit. *Why bother with her?* grumbled Bear. *Crazy kid.* Barry pulled out of his lethargy to try to think why.

At first it had been just because he'd got himself stuck with her, but now . . . There was something about her. She didn't seem to know how to play. You couldn't imagine Mrs. Proudfoot counting pink toes in the bath: "This little pig went to market." He'd noticed her tagging along with other little kids; they liked having her around, but she wasn't best friends with anyone, as far as he could make out.

Sometimes she seemed even younger than she was, but other times Barry felt that she was really more like an adult, armored and unknowable—even, in an extraordinary way, dangerous. Though she needed looking after in her dealings with the outside world, inside she could look after herself. Nobody had power over her there, not even her mother. She was a funny kid, all right, but she was somehow special. Being with her, Barry decided, made him feel in charge—not just in charge of her, but of himself, too, and what was going to happen.

The valley narrowed, squeezed between the steepening

fells. Road and railway and the rotted canal ran side by side. Wherever there was space, somebody had built an old factory, though a few of these had been pulled down and replaced by modern warehouses. There'd been no room, down here on the precious levels, for people, so lanes led up on either side to ranks of little brick houses perched on slopes so steep that the upstairs windows looked clear over the roofs of those below. In places acres of these old cottages had been cleared, leaving a sort of pink brick and mortar scree spilling down the hill. Just before Dallington the bus turned up one of the lanes, churning in bottom gear between the poky cottages and then on up through an estate of bright new houses, just as poky, and then, steeper and steeper, between stone-walled fields where the thin turf was dotted with ragwort and patches of bracken, as though the moor above, long held back by farmers, had started a slow invasion down the hill.

The bus stopped in front of a brick chapel with boarded windows. The rest of the village consisted of a few old brick cottages, just like the ones below, crumbs of town spilled here by accident when the others had been crammed into the valley. Pinkie got out of her seat without a word and went to the door. Barry followed.

"This it?" he shouted above the racket of the bus reversing to turn back down the hill. "I thought your granddad lived in Dallington."

Pinkie shook her head. The lane led on, toward the true moors. She started up it.

"Funny place to live if you've got a bad leg," said Barry.

"Not got any legs."

"You said you used to make his leg better."

"When it hurts."

"I don't . . . Anyway, it's still a funny place."

They climbed on. About a quarter of a mile above the

last house in the village Barry could see a new-looking bungalow, built of stone, standing on a buttressed terrace. It seemed the only place they could be going, but as they approached, Pinkie moved around to Barry's other side and fell back a little, keeping him between herself and the house. The lane led close by the jut of the terrace, and the moment they reached it she left his side and scuttered up by the wall, crouching until she was bent almost double by the time she came to the garden gate. She pushed it open and made signs to Barry to stop in the gateway.

The terrace supported a garden, but nothing like Barry had ever seen. The soil was piled high as the outer walls and crisscrossed with yard-wide concrete trenches. All over the level surface stood white labels, sometimes with winter-blasted plants in front of them but often marking only a patch of bare earth. The labels made the garden look like a cemetery for toy soldiers. From a trench halfway across the garden projected the head and shoulders of a man; close-shorn white hair showed beneath a knitted blue hat with a bobble on top. Hearing the click of the gate latch, the man had half craned around, then moved a few feet to the right and swiveled completely to see who it was. Two ferocious blue eyes glared from a scarlet face. A white mustache bristled like the antennas of a weapons system.

"Get the bloody hell out of my garden," bellowed an enormous voice.

Barry hesitated. Pinkie was creeping along the trench in front of him. He fell back, just outside the gate. The man gestured vigorously with the trowel he held, commanding Barry to move on and not stand there insulting his privacy by looking at his garden. Pinkie slipped out of sight. The man gestured again and was drawing breath for another good yell when Pinkie leaped at him.

She had ambushed him from close by. His furious face

had no time to change before she was in his lap and kissing him, almost like a dog that had jumped up to lick his face. He pushed her off, still as if she'd been a dog. She scampered to the gate and took Barry by the hand. He'd never seen her like this. She'd let go; she was laughing, her eyes sparkling behind the glasses, her hair all over the place.

The man had come gliding after her. When he rounded the corner, Barry saw that he was sitting in a wheelchair. A pair of empty trouser legs drooped in front of him, with shoes somehow fastened to the ends. The shoes made little shuffling dance movements as the chair joggled them.

"Here's Barry," said Pinkie. "He brought me. It's Granddad, Barry."

"Mr. Stott to you, young man."

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

"We'll see about that. Don't count your chickens. Where's that mother of yours, young woman?"

"At home."

"Can't stand the sight of her," explained Mr. Stott. "Feeling's mutual. Met her, I daresay."

"Yes, sir."

"Then you'll know what I mean, eh?"

"Well, er, she's a good cook."

"Please, Granddad," said Pinkie.

"Say what you think and think what you say. Bottle it up and regret it one day."

"Is your leg hurting?"

Mr. Stott gave a great snort, as if he was determined to unbottle all his loathing of his daughter in one satisfying explosion before moving on to this new subject.

"Been behaving itself," he said. "Got what's called a phantom limb, young man. Went and stood on a land mine at Alamein. Came to in the hospital and found the surgeons had been having a go at my legs, sawn off anything

the mine had left. Left leg never got the message, though. Thinks it's still there. Bloody rum thing, the human mind. You're looking at a man that's haunted by his own left leg, supposed to be buried out in the sands of Egypt forty years back. Shut my eyes, and there it is. I can move it around, wiggle the toes—doing that now. Reach out and scratch my shin, only the bloody thing's not there and my hand goes clean through the itch."

"But we've stopped it hurting," said Pinkie, smug and decisive.

"Used to give me hell," said Mr. Stott, "and that made me hell to live with. My fool of a wife got the worst of it. Ought to have left me years before she did, and no doubt there's some will say that's why my daughter's turned out how she has. Be that as may be, four years back I took a fancy to inspect my granddaughter I'd never seen. Had to pay my daughter a hundred pounds for the privilege, mind you. Cut a long story short, along they came when I was having one of my bad days, yelling and cursing fit to make the moon blush. Ugly little thing she was, but no escaping the family likeness.

"Pulled myself together best I could—been a hundred down the drain otherwise, eh? She came close up. I reckoned my daughter had ordered her to kiss me, and I was starting to push her away when she grabbed hold of my hand and started babbling on about my leg. I felt like chucking her across the room that moment, but somehow I didn't, and then—bloody rum thing, the mind, I tell you—the pain that had had me squealing a couple of minutes before went clean away. What do you make of that? My daughter didn't like it at all, I can tell you for a start. Mind over matter, eh? If you can call it matter when the leg's not there in the first place."

Mr. Stott's face was so red, his eyes so fierce a blue, his

mustache so spiky, his voice so loud, that he looked and sounded furious still. Barry could see what he meant about the family likeness. It wasn't only the flat oval of their big faces; there was something about the look in their eyes, his and Mrs. Proudfoot's and Pinkie's, too. They were loners. No, that wasn't quite right because most loners are really only sulkers. But these three were truly separate. They were like stars that are not part of any galaxy. Only Pinkie had found her extraordinary bridge.

"I get migraines," said Barry, using the posh word to impress. "Pinkie thinks she got rid of one for me."

"And what do you think?"

"Well, it went. It might have been going to anyway."

"Told anyone else?"

"No."

"Don't. Playing with fire. I suppose you've come for a game, young woman?"

Pinkie jumped up and down in eagerness.

"What about your friend?" said Mr. Stott.

"He can just watch."

Mr. Stott glanced at Barry and nodded.

"Up on the porch, young man," he said.

Barry felt snubbed for a moment. You couldn't expect Pinkie to understand, but the old buffer ought to have realized that it had been a nuisance to use up half a fine Saturday plugging out here and then get left out of things. But as soon as the game started, he saw why. It was a kind of hide-and-seek. Mr. Stott chased Pinkie up and down the trenches, yelling at her in his huge sergeant-major voice that she was a bloody Hun and he was coming to get her with his bayonet. He could rush his wheelchair down the straights at fantastic speed but had to slow drastically for the corners.

In a straight chase he would have caught Pinkie quite

easily, but she was able to hide, and move about still hidden, by crouching below trench level. She had to poke her head up to see where he was, and that might give her own position away. There were only certain points where the wheelchair could turn; sometimes Mr. Stott would rush bellowing to one of these, spin around, and glide back in silence, hoping to catch Pinkie sneaking around the other way. Barry thought he was trying as hard as he could. There was just enough of a maze to make it an even contest; in fact, you might have thought the garden had been actually built for the purpose, though obviously the trenches were really there to allow Mr. Stott to garden comfortably from his chair.

Almost accidentally Barry glanced at the view, and all of a sudden his whole focus changed. Mr. Stott and his garden and the game had been odd enough to occupy his conscious attention, and he had been only vaguely aware of height and of the whistling spaces around the bungalow. It was a soft midwinter morning, moist but clear. The valley and its buildings were out of sight, and beyond it stone-walled fields rose to moorland and the ancient shapes of hills pocked and molded by mine workings. None of the tips and tracks and conduits had been used for more than fifty years, and now most of them had begun to look like natural outcrops of underlying rock. Even where they were still obviously man-made they seemed to have moved outside ordinary time and become as immeasurably old as the great stone circle up at Ferriby. Above them all hung the gray sky full of this wide, soft wind. It was easy to feel, up here, that you were as much a creature of the air as of the earth. Barry had said it was a funny place for someone with a bad leg to live. Now he realized it was a funny place for anyone to live. It was very different from 9 Viola Street,

but the two houses had one thing in common: They were ways of being alone.

Barry was trying to see whether he could actually spot Ferriby—not the circle but the parking lot—when the bellows of the game were joined by screams. Mr. Stott's maneuver had worked. He had surprised Pinkie by a sudden reverse and met her head-on in the central trench. She fled, screaming, making no attempt to dodge around a corner. Mr. Stott was racing up behind her, yelling that he was going to get her now, when she shot up the ramp to the porch and clung to Barry, burying her head in his chest and making a noise which could have been real screams. Mr. Stott braked with the step of his chair only a couple of inches from her calves.

"Bloody cheating," he roared. "Hand her over."

"No! No! No!" screamed Pinkie.

"Bayonet the both of you!"

"That's a star game, sir."

Mr. Stott snorted so violently that he might have been trying to blast his mustache off. Barry smiled. Pinkie's screams were clearly laughter now.

"You've got a terrific view, sir. I was trying to see Ferriby."

"Can't—just around the corner. Beat you that time, young woman. Let's have some cocoa."

On the way back in the bus Barry said, "What's the problem then?"

Pinkie looked at him and shook her head. She was almost right back into her usual self. All the time at Mr. Stott's she had been more like other kids, fidgety, overexcited, a bit of a nuisance. Barry had walked up on the moor after cocoa, telling himself he was giving them a bit of time to themselves, but really more to get away from Pinkie. That

wasn't the Pinkie he wanted, a kid sister, a spoiled one, too. Mr. Stott would obviously do anything for her. . . . Or was it that Barry minded about her not needing him while she had Mr. Stott? Yes, probably. Anyway, he let some of that come out now.

"Look, kid, didn't I tell you? I was supposed to be going for a bike ride with Ted this morning, but I cried off because you gave me the signal you had a problem. I'm not going to do this again unless you can stick to the rules. We agreed it had to be something important. I've got better things to do with my time. And money."

(That rankled, too. He'd only worked out too late that if he told Mrs. Proudfoot that he was going over to Dallington anyway, he couldn't then ask her to pay for his bus fare. It had had to come out of his jam jar.)

"Was important," said Pinkie.

"You just said there wasn't anything."

"Granddad seeing you."

"Okay. Well, he's seen me now. But next time . . ."

7

There were, apparently, seven energies—or, rather, Seven Energies.

After lunch Barry lay on the lawn beneath the cedar tree and read the pamphlet Mr. Freeman had given him. It was rubbish, he thought, but much more amusing, much less hateful than the glossy brochures and other literature left lying around in the Foundation for patients to pick up and glance at the pretty pictures, the vague, warm sentences. This was a close-printed scientific pamphlet. The only breaks in the long gray paragraphs were for equations and graphs.

It wasn't easy reading, and from time to time Barry would roll on his side and look around. A little above him, across the lawn, the main building—a glittering white frontage, three stories high, and topped with a wide-eaved roof of purplish slates—blocked the view. Apparently it was about a hundred years old. It had been built as a country house for a rich merchant, but then, as families could no longer afford to live in houses like that, the paint had begun to flake, the roof to leak, the rafters to rot. Soon it would have fallen down if the Foundation hadn't bought it. Now it looked smart and rich again, but it would never look beautiful.

Still, the landscape it faced would never stop looking beautiful, Barry thought. It was Thurley all over again—Thurley squared, the Englishman's dream of England. The house was built near the top of a gentle hill, facing out over a view of pasture and trees. Just below, a church spire, sheathed in green-blue copper, rose above the treetops,

with the ridge of a big tiled barn beyond it, and a few chimneys and corners of roofs. There was a village down there. In his mind's eye Barry could see the thatched pub and the white ducks on the pond and the cricketers on the green. Twelve miles farther off the view ended with the long blue line of the South Downs, and the whole landscape was bathed in that soft, easy Hampshire air and sunlight which never seem to have been touched by the grit and grime of the North. It was beautiful all right, beautiful because it was a landscape that had lived easily over the centuries, protected by its lovers' money. Money made in the grit and grime. Money from the North. Barry's North, Bear's North.

Bear was grumbly still after the migraine and the interview with Mr. Freeman. Or was it more than that? For the first time, lying there on the sunlit lawn in front of the Foundation, Barry began to feel as though a change had taken place that morning in his relationship with his other, imaginary self. When somebody raises a big wild animal, such as a lion cub, in captivity, they can treat it almost as though it was tame for the first year or so, though there may be a few tricky moments. But one day, practically without warning, it somehow discovers its own wildness, and from then on it is a pet no longer. It becomes too dangerous and unpredictable to play with.

All his life Barry had treated Bear as an imaginary pet, part game, part companion. But now he felt a strangeness in himself. It was as though the stress of the migraine and the healing had woken Bear from a long hibernation, and the animal that had gone to sleep as a manageable and often cuddly cub had woken as an adult, wild.

Barry shivered in the sunlight. *I'm not standing for that,* he thought. *Watch it, Bear. You become a nuisance, and I'll get rid of you.*

Bear vanished. He was only a trick of the mind, of course. The moment you applied rational thought you were in control. Barry rolled onto his stomach and returned to the Seven Energies.

The first four came from the textbooks: electromagnetism, gravity, weak interaction, strong interaction. The fifth was something called time flow, which wasn't exactly time; the sixth was so far undiscovered; and the seventh was Harmonic Energy. Barry had got an A on his math exams, but the formulas were beyond him. All he could say was that they didn't feel stupid. It was neat, he thought, having a missing energy. It gave the theory a sort of mysterious excitement which still smelled scientific, like the Periodic Table before all the elements had been discovered. And then Harmonic Energy, with its hint of Rings of Power—*One Energy to rule them all, one Energy to find them*—and all that.

The pamphlet was written by Dr. John Q. Freeman, D.Sc. Barry wondered whether it was the same man. It didn't have one whiff of the rich, poetical stuff he'd put out during the session. And it was funny him not calling himself Dr. Freeman. You'd have thought . . .

Tires scrunched on the gravel between the house and the lawn. The bus to take the one-day patients back to Winchester Station pulled up in front of the white-pillared portico. Barry rose, went inside, and found the office. Mrs. Elliott turned out to be the woman who had taken him to Mr. Freeman just after the Harmony Session. She smiled as he came in and handed him a white envelope with just his name on it.

"So you may be joining us?" she said.

"Uh . . . well . . ."

"I hope you do. Sphere One—Mr. Freeman—often offers jobs to young people who show strong positive reac-

tions during the Harmony Sessions. That's how most of our best staff have come to us."

"Oh? I suppose I'd been wondering—"

"They're much more committed, you see. They *know* it's real."

"Right," said Barry.

She smiled again. She thought he meant he agreed. In fact, she'd made up his mind for him. It was another Bear decision. He was coming.

On the bus a woman a bit like his mom sat next to him and talked and talked about what a wonderful experience it had been. She particularly wanted him to know, she said, because he was the one who had obviously got the most out of it. Bear tried to make him snarl at her, but he kept control. It would be unfair on the poor cow, he thought. And it was good practice for the job, too, smiling and saying yes. Being what Mrs. Elliott called committed. The woman babbled on. He didn't have to listen much. Thinking of Mrs. Elliott made him wonder whether Freeman had told her to say what she had. Were there other reasons for the job offer? Get him away from Mr. Stott? Get him on the side of the Foundation? As far as Barry knew, there'd been only three people who'd mattered much to Pinkie before she went south: her mother, Mr. Stott, and Barry. Did Freeman see them all as threats to his power over Pinkie? Mr. Stott he couldn't do much about, so he kept him at arm's length. Mrs. Proudfoot he'd married and sent to America. But Barry he was going to take on, suck in, own, too.

Yeah? sneered Bear.

8

It was June, so most of the plants were aboveground now, and many in flower, but Mr. Stott's plot still didn't look like anyone else's idea of a garden. You noticed the rows of white labels first. The plants were arranged not for looks but in botanical order, and the effect was that of a stamp collection. In the main area there was only one specimen of anything, though in a patch around the back Mr. Stott raised batches of seedlings or cuttings, either for replacements or to swap with some other alpine nut for something he hadn't got, or to sell to a big garden center over at Brant which had what it called a plantsman's corner. Any spares he couldn't use one of these ways he slung out, no matter how rare or beautiful. Rare was much more important than beautiful, of course.

At the sound of the gate Mr. Stott swiveled round, ready to yell, saw who it was, and bent back to what he was doing. Barry locked the Galaxy to the gate. It was inconceivable that a bike thief was going to chance by, but all of Barry's savings from last summer (the money he'd pretended to Mr. Freeman that he'd spent on the fee for the Foundation) had gone into the Galaxy, and he'd become almost neurotically careful. He'd even got a lock and chain so heavy that the weight was a nuisance on long rides.

He watched while Mr. Stott snipped the petals off a small mauve flower, fertilized it with pollen he had ready on an artist's brush, and tied the maimed and distorted flower head into a paper bag. Mr. Stott had immensely strong arms and hands, and his huge fingers moved with brutal deftness. He said nothing until he had slotted a pane

of glass into clips which held it above the plant to keep the rain off.

"Fool's errand?" He snorted. "Money down the drain, eh?"

"No, I made it."

"Saw her?"

"I talked to her. She wants out."

Barry was half ashamed to hear himself talking in the tight-lipped rhythms of some TV hero. He couldn't help it. That was how he felt: mission accomplished. Mission hardly started really.

Mr. Stott gathered his equipment into the tray clipped to his chair and propelled himself another few feet along the trench. With a curious thin homemade scoop he began to dig a hole beside a patch of hairy gray leaves from which rose a fistful of what might have been dandelions, except that they were pink.

"Get yourself good and sick then?" he said.

"Worse than I meant. But it turned out okay."

"She cured you?"

"It looked like that. And the boss of the place was so pleased with my reaction that he's offered me a job."

"Has he now?"

"Somebody told me he often does that. But . . ."

"Get on with it."

"Only I wondered. He might want to get me away from you. I said I'd have to come and tell you Pinkie was okay. That's what I'm doing now if anyone's looking."

"Think they might be?"

"Not really."

"Tell you something. Yesterday morning—remember I got a detective to trace where Pinkie'd got to, chap named Brasher?—yesterday morning he dropped in, looking for a couple in a yellow van, he said, thought I might have no-

ticed it come by. Told him no. Then he asked, just out of interest, he said, if I'd done anything more about Pinkie. Told him no to that, too."

"You think . . . Bit of a coincidence, picking the same detective, isn't it?"

"Only three of 'em in the Yellow Pages. Brasher's the smallest."

"Still . . ."

"Nothing in it, most likely," said Mr. Stott, and returned to his careful rooting.

"I'm going to take this job," said Barry, speaking louder than he meant.

Mr. Stott craned from his chair to peer into the hole he had made.

"Then I can find out more," said Barry. "I can find out if Pinkie really wants to get away. If she does, I shall have to try."

Mr. Stott, working by feel, with his eyes shut, was now slicing in under the plant with a pocketknife.

"They're just using her," said Barry. "And they're not going to let her go. They make me sick."

Still no response as Mr. Stott pulled from the hole two pale lengths of fleshy root, which he put into a plastic bag. He started to ease the earth back into the hole.

"Where's that daughter of mine?" he barked.

"In America. Did you know she's married Mr. Freeman?"

"Stupid sod. Who's he then?"

"The boss I was talking about, the one who's offered me this job."

"How old?"

"Oh . . . fifty plus."

"What's he look like?"

"Moses."

Mr. Stott produced a bitter, yapping laugh and glanced at the sky.

"Stay fine now," he said. "Time for a cup of cocoa."

The inside of the bungalow was just as much a part of the garden as the outside. Plants stood on every shelf and windowsill and anywhere on the floor where enough light fell; in darker corners lay withered objects going through their dormant phase. To open the cookie tin, Barry had to lift off it two pots of what looked like dead grass. Mr. Stott fussed over the cocoa, getting it almost to the boil before pouring it into blue enamel mugs. Barry explained what had happened at the Foundation.

Putting it into words changed it. His own voice seemed to choose a tone of distrust and contempt when he talked about the Harmony Session and, in doing so, made up his mind for him about what it had meant. Till now distrust and contempt had been only one lot of feelings, implying one of a number of possible meanings. Now he had chosen, and the choice left a sourness, like an aftertaste, and a vague sense of loss. His migraine had cleared up because it was due to anyway around about then; it had been going before he'd reached Pinkie, and it had been given its final marching orders at exactly that point because of the fluke of his being chosen as a "representative" and then giving his signal to Pinkie and getting her answer. That was now the accepted truth, and the other possible explanation had faded into no more than a nice idea.

"Bloody rum thing, the mind," said Mr. Stott. "I natter away to my alpines when I'm on my own. Can't do them a blind bit of good. Only, not noticing, I look at 'em a bit closer while I'm talking, maybe, see something wrong . . . but I can't help telling myself it's the chat made the difference. This Freeman will be her stepfather now, then?"

"I suppose so."

"Guardian while that woman's in America."

"I don't know."

"And your idea is simply run off with her?"

"If that's what she wants, yes."

"Where to?"

"I'll have to think."

"This'd be the first place they'd look."

"But couldn't you—"

"Listen, lad. He's her guardian. He can get my daughter back from the States. They'd have the law on their side, and that's not all. Suppose you read in the papers about a young man kidnapping a girl and running off with her, what'd you think?"

"But—"

"Ah, you might be able to talk your way out of it in the end, especially if I was to back you up, but till they'd got you, they'd have the police out after you, hundreds of 'em. *They* wouldn't know what you were after. Follow me?"

Barry felt cold and sick. There had been just such a manhunt only last spring, on TV each evening and in all the papers until the kid's body had been found in a wood somewhere, a couple of hundred miles from her home. They'd caught the man. He'd been two years older than Barry.

"But if she wants to get out," he muttered.

Mr. Stott put his mug down and picked up a small flowerpot that was almost completely filled with one brown bulb. His fingers teased at the papery old skin around the neck, freeing the last few withered leaves and dropping them on the floor.

"Too late now," he said. "That daughter of mine, she'll do anything for money. I could have bought Pinkie off her five years back. Thought that was what I was doing, setting

them up in Viola Street and paying the rent. Anything more would have meant giving up this lot."

He turned the pot over in his hands, glaring at it. Nobody had ever told Barry about his paying Mrs. Proudfoot's rent. He had some money. He'd been able to hire a detective to find Pinkie and then pay the fee for the Foundation, plus another fifty pounds for Barry's trouble. It had all been his idea in the first place, so it was unsettling to discover that he didn't seem to want Barry to go any further with it now.

"Do anything for money, she would," he said.

"She used to be very religious. She threw me out for mentioning that Pinkie had sent my headaches away. But now—"

"Who's to say with a woman like that? Who's to say about anyone? Those meetings she went to—sort of lot that's sure the world is coming to an end next Friday and then everybody's going to fry in hell except themselves. But there was a minister, you see? Had a row with him, Brasher found out. Women like my daughter, making out they despise all men and same time wanting more from a man than a man can give. More senses than one. Who the hell d'you think she was baking those cakes and stuff for? Not a lot of save-my-soul biddies like herself. It'll have been the minister. Can't say how far they'll have gone together—yes, I mean like that, young man, it's going on all the time—but now suppose some other biddy nips in, younger, cuddlier. I don't know how your Freeman came to hear about Pinkie, but from what you say he's always been interested in that sort of thing, so he might pick up a rumor, come and see for himself. And if he looks like Moses, then he looks like God, and my daughter will have been after him like a cat after a mouse. Then, when he tells her how she can make money from what Pinkie can do . . ."

"I told you. She slung me out for just mentioning it."

"Ah. She's always been jealous of Pinkie."

"Jealous?"

"Bought her a violin for her fourth birthday."

Barry laughed.

"Bet it didn't last long with Pinkie around," he said.

"Broke it first lesson. And again when it was mended. That daughter of mine, she'd got it into her head Pinkie was going to be a child prodigy and herself was going to manage her, touring the world, making a pot of money. Course, she had to give up in the end. You see, she'd spotted early on there was something about Pinkie, and she thought she was going to take charge of whatever it was. Then it turns out Pinkie can heal people—what use is that to her? Where's the money in it? Something she can't understand and she's got no control over? So she joins a sect where they think anything like that is the work of Satan, see. He's good-looking, your Freeman?"

"Terrific."

"There you are then. She's not bad, either, when she does herself up. They'll have sparked all right. First glance, I shouldn't wonder. Don't look at me like that, young man. I tell you it goes on all the time, and a bloody nuisance to all concerned. . . ."

He banged the flowerpot down so vehemently that crumbs of compost jerked out onto the table. He brushed them onto the floor with a sweep of his hand.

"Past helping anyway, that daughter of mine," he said. "You're not. Yet."

His furious blue glare focused on Barry, as though the mere notion of trying to help him was an insult.

"What do you reckon about me taking this job on?" said Barry.

"Ah now, provided you understand your own reasons."

"You're trying to tell me I'm making a mistake."

"Didn't say that. It's something that might get you into a lot of trouble, for a start. It might change you, ways you can't guess at. It's a big step. All I'm telling you is if you understand why you're taking it, you've a better chance of getting it right. So think about it, like I say. Then, if you come and tell me you've decided to call it off, I won't think the worse of you. And if you decide to go through with it, I'll give you a hand. I could find you a bit more money, I daresay. Reminds me—there's fifty pounds I owe you."

"They gave me back the fee. I've got it here. I'm supposed to be paying it back out of my wages."

"That case it's yours. I don't want it. Water under the bridge. But I'll hang on to the fifty, against you need some more later."

"Okay. Thank you very much."

"You better be off, case that Brasher's watching. Spend too long here, and they'll think we're hatching something. Drop me a line, anything you need, and set up an address somewhere I can answer."

"Oh. Right."

The next morning Barry cycled to Ferriby.

It was a sort of ritual act. When the Evanses had first come to Marsden Ash and he had so loathed the place, and so longed for Thurley, he had chosen the moorland up at Ferriby as a kind of substitute. It was nothing like gentle green Thurley, except in being different from Marsden Ash. He used to cycle out there on the first and last day of every holidays. Now he had grown used to Marsden Ash. They'd built a bypass two years back, so the juggernauts no longer boomed past the doorstep. He had friends and haunts and interests. It wasn't that he liked the place, but just as a limpet grows its shell to fit one exact spot on the

rock where it clings, so he had grown to fit this town, these people. Ferriby was a place where nobody belonged. He did not go out there with the deliberate object of following Mr. Stott's advice and thinking about himself, but that was what happened.

It was a day more like March than June, with gutters sloshing wet and the trucks booming along the main road with plumes of spray trailing from their wheels. The rain had stopped, but he had to wear his cape as far as the turnoff. The two-mile climb up the lane helped dry out his jeans and shoes. He was steaming by the time he padlocked the Galaxy to the litter bin on the parking lot. Crows had got at the plastic bag inside the bin and scattered picnic litter across the clinker surface. The lot was empty. It was a fair-size space, built up with a terrace wall at one corner. On fine afternoons there would be twenty or thirty cars up here, many with people still in them who had driven up simply to sit and look at the view, but anyone who wanted to see the circle had to get out and take a little exercise.

Barry merely nodded to the view like an old friend, turned and climbed the steep bank behind the parking lot, and strode down the track that led to the stones.

It was nowhere much, Ferriby. A wide, saucer-shaped depression, heather, and rough grass. When you stood at the middle, the farthest horizon was only half a mile away. The nineteen stones were mostly no more than knee-high, buried in the slowly accumulating peat. You wouldn't have known, looking at any one of them, that it wasn't just an outcrop of rock—unless, that is, you happened to be a geologist and could see that the rock didn't belong on this hill and had been brought from somewhere else. And even when you stood where you could see all nineteen, the ground was so rough that you mightn't have noticed they were arranged in a broken oval, like a drawing of an egg-

shell with the top knocked off. They were old but dull. Even on fine days few people bothered with the circle. Ramblers might walk by on the track to Brant, but the lead workings five miles to the north were more interesting to scramble around. There was an industrial museum up there, just as good a view from the parking lot. On a morning like this the saucer that held the stones was as empty a place as anything you could imagine.

Barry strolled around the circle, continuing the meaningless ritual, touching stone after stone as he passed, beginning on the left of the gap. Nobody knew whether the circle had been built like that deliberately or whether three stones had been taken away. They could even still be there, deep in the peat. He wasn't thinking about this, or anything much, as he went around. The process was a way of telling himself who he was: Barry Evans, who came to Ferriby every so often and did this. And Bear, too, of course.

Just as he got back to the gap the thought suddenly struck him that the circle wasn't only like a broken eggshell. It was also like a magnet. He grinned sourly to himself. Get old Freeman up here some time. Stone Age Harmony Session . . .

Why not? Made just as much sense.

Probably it was the thought of the Harmony Session, or, rather, the Pinkie effect, the chemical trigger mechanism she sometimes seemed to produce in him, but a curious thing began to happen. He had been getting fairly cold as he mooned around, with the wind chill working at his still-damp jeans and his upper body sweaty from the climb, but a vague warmth flowed through him, and then, suddenly, he was outside himself. His consciousness seemed to divide in two, half of it staying in his body, the other half drifting up and hovering twelve feet above him and a little to his right and looking down—amused, inquisitive, pitying—at a

young man in a bright green sweater and blue jeans, lank black hair, sharp nose, thin, pale face, a young man who had made up his mind long ago without ever thinking about it that the world was nothing but a great machine for cheating people, men and women smiling while they thought how to do each other dirt, systems which churned blindly along, smashing up lives, throwing good men out of jobs, driving children out of homes where they'd been happy—nobody safe, the cheaters being cheated by other cheats, only a few, a very few, getting out of the cycle, cheating the system itself, usually by becoming some kind of nut, like Mr. Stott. . . .

Then, suddenly—the sort of change that happens in a dream—the hovering intelligence glimpsed something else. The young man had a shadow. Not outside him but in. A vague shape, blurred at the edges, but strong and dark and dangerous. The young man was afraid of it. It was growing stronger. He needed help.

Barry wasn't aware of his two selves coming together again. What he experienced was the shock of waking—again, just like waking from a dream, a nightmare. He was standing by the last stone, shuddering with cold or fright, thinking, *I have seen Bear. And he's real.*

Fright gave way to anger. He was furious with himself for letting himself become scared by a dream. He slapped his arms violently against his body—to get warm, of course, but also beating himself in punishment. He made his stupid legs jump and jump as he beat, forcing them on long after he was warm again, punishing his body for the trick his mind had played. He'd been intending to go straight home after the visit to Ferriby, but instead, he went and fetched the Galaxy from the parking lot, lugged it onto the moor, and began the eight-mile cross-country ride to Brant.

Slowly, as he picked his way along the slithery track, he

came to terms with what had happened, making a sort of sense of which he could accept. He'd started on a Pinkie-induced high—perhaps he'd already got colder than he'd realized and had reached a trancelike state on the edge of hypothermia—and then the high had turned itself into a bad trip. If it happened with artificial drugs, no reason why it shouldn't with the ones in your own mind. He'd seen things which were not true. He had not actually been outside his own body looking down. Bear was not real.

Even so, Bear was becoming a nuisance. He would have to do something about Bear.

Once over the lip of the saucer which contained the stone circle, the track ran steadily downhill. It was enjoyable, easy riding, even on a morning like this. Barry thought about Bear as he rode. Bear had begun as a sort of half joke of Mom's. When he'd been tiny, apparently he used to throw tantrums, and apparently Mom, trying to tease him out of them, used to say, "You're not my Barry. You're only a horrible wild bear." He couldn't actually remember this happening and only knew about it because she'd mentioned it once in one of those when-you-were-small sessions that parents go in for sometimes. Then, when the migraines had started, Bear had become connected with them. Bear-with-a-sore-head. Not real, of course. Just a way of thinking about himself so that it wasn't Barry (nice lad, doing ever-so-well at school, football, too) being this unpleasant, snarly lump of pain and sickness, but something else. Barry would come back when the migraine was over.

But when had Bear become somebody *else*, somebody not-Barry, somebody he could talk to, who didn't only come into being to cope with the migraines but was there all the time, though usually sleeping? And who might, almost without warning, lurch out of his lair and take over?

Barry realized that he hadn't been aware that this was

what had been happening to him until a few days ago when he had been lying on the lawn at the Foundation. The migraine had really stirred old Bear into life, which wasn't surprising, seeing how bad it was and how long it was since he'd had one. There hadn't been any moment at which Bear might have made trouble because the day had gone so well, but suppose Barry hadn't been picked to be a "representative," suppose Mr. Freeman had taken a different line in his study; then Bear might have broken out into the open.

Got clean away? Taken over? Turned Barry Evans—the real Barry—into a lost and hidden person, remembered only in flashes and in dreams?

It was a frightening thought. He'd have to talk to someone about it.

Who? When? Got to get through with this business at the Foundation first anyway. Find somebody there? Not likely, among those nuts.

There was Pinkie, of course. Yeah.

He got home late for lunch and very hungry.

Part Two

9

On his third morning on the job at the Foundation Barry met the bus from Winchester Station and helped the clients down. You never called them patients. That was very important. In all its literature the Foundation never once said it was in the business of healing. No, it was carrying out a scientific program to investigate Harmonic Energy, and this might in some cases, as a by-product, lead to measurable amelioration in disease phenomena. Clients must not be misled about their prospects, oh, no . . . but Barry guessed there were probably laws which tried to control this sort of thing, and if you didn't claim to be healing anyone, you got around some of them.

He smiled at the clients, murmured "good morning" to anyone he was helping, looked straight in their eyes, answered their questions. He was just wheeling the last chair up the ramp when Sergeant Coyne stopped him.

"I'll take over there, lad," he whispered. "You show the driver where to park. He's new."

Sergeant Coyne whispered all the time. He had been a real sergeant and was only ten years older than Barry. He'd come out of the army after getting a bullet through his windpipe in Northern Ireland. The wound had left him dumb, but after his first Harmony Session he'd found he could talk again, though only in this rasping whisper.

"Could've done it all along, you might reckon," he said. "Only needed a bit of confidence, and watching Miss Pinkie doing her stuff somehow did the trick. Nothing much to it, really."

He had dark eyes and a leathery, humorous face. His

voice gave the impression that he was telling you scandalous secrets, but once you'd got used to it, you found he was friendly and straightforward, like everyone else at the Foundation.

Barry rode up in the bus to the parking area behind the stables, but because the driver wanted to listen to his radio, he walked down alone. He seemed to have got over the foolish feeling his purple uniform had first given him, and now it only fretted him by being tight under the armpits. He was still conscious of a chilliness at the back of his neck where he'd had his hair cut short.

It was a beautiful morning—going to be almost too hot later—but now smelling as fresh and crisp as one of the cakes Mrs. Proudfoot used to bake. Barry was actually thinking about her, wondering when she'd be back from the States, when he rounded the stable block and glanced up at the main building, all gleaming white paint and glittering windowpanes. The house was shaped like a T, with the grand rooms in the crosspiece and the kitchens and what had once been the servants' rooms tucked away in the upright. This was where the working parts of the Foundation now were—the kitchens still, of course, along with offices and storerooms on the ground floor; above that some of the resident clients' bedrooms, and above those the rooms of the women on the Foundation staff. The men slept in the stable block.

Barry had no idea what made him look up. In fact, the gleam and glitter made the building almost painful to see. He was looking away again when his glance seemed to snag on something, a colored spot, a forearm in a pale blue sleeve projecting between the bars of a window at the very top and outer end of the building. The lower sash was up. There seemed nothing but darkness behind the white bars, but a shape stirred, and something gleamed. He was look-

ing at Pinkie. They'd given her back her glasses. He took off his cap and waved. After a slight pause the arm waved back.

She mightn't have recognized him, of course, in his uniform and with his hair short. She might simply have waved back the way people do out of trains. He wasn't sure she knew he was here. He hadn't asked yet if he could see her. After all, she was Miss Pinkie, and he was only a Sphere Five.

(For all its friendliness the Foundation was highly organized. Sphere Fives were the lowest—hall porters and cleaners and such. Sergeant Coyne was a Sphere Four, and so were most of the assistants at the Harmony Sessions, and people like Mrs. Beadle, the head cook. Mrs. Elliott was a Sphere Three. Dr. Geare and Dr. Hamm were the only Sphere Twos Barry had come across. You could tell on sight where anyone belonged by the arrangement of rings around the purple badges they all wore on their chests—it worked like the rings on a naval officer's sleeve. There was only one Sphere One, and that was what you called him. You said, "Sphere One says . . ." Not "Mr. Freeman says . . ." But you called Pinkie Miss Pinkie, whoever you were talking to.)

After that there was a busy period, answering clients' questions in the entrance hall, helping them find their way about, fetching them for interviews and so on, and at last getting them into the Harmony Session. Then a lull. Barry went to get his lunch before the session was finished, so that he could take over in the porter's booth and let Sergeant Coyne off. He was just about finishing when the first of the assistants, two women and a man, still in their white uniforms, came in.

"How did it go then?" asked the fat gray-haired woman who was working behind the self-serve counter.

"H.E. a bit variable," said the man.

"You can say that again," said the taller of the two girls.

The stout woman sighed as if hearing of a bad result at a local football match. Another bad result in a bad season.

"One old fellow started yelling till Dr. Hamm got him quiet. You'd have thought it might have unsettled Miss Pinkie, but she didn't seem to notice. We came up with only nine reps."

"You win some, you lose some," said the other girl.

As she turned from the counter, Barry saw that it was in fact Karen, a plump, earnest, rather thick blonde he'd got into a chat with at supper last night. (Okay, she was a Sphere Four, but a lot of the staff wanted to make contact with Barry, because of his "good" reaction at the Harmony Session.) He hadn't been especially struck with her—jeans and a T-shirt, and you didn't look at her twice—but uniforms did something for some girls. He felt the familiar mild glow of interest—something like an intelligent electric heater might feel when it's first turned on, he'd often thought.

As he crossed with his empty tray to the counter, he made a deliberate effort to decide whether there was any of that in what he felt about Pinkie. More and more, since Mr. Stott's warning, he had come to realize what most people would think and say if a sixteen-year-old boy ran off with a ten-year-old girl—kidnapped her, it was going to look like. So it seemed to him important to be sure in his mind that there was no truth in it. He tried to think about Pinkie and compare his reaction with his thoughts (if you could call them thoughts) about Karen. Yes, there was warmth there, and actual physical sensation, slight but real, across his shoulder blades and the back of his neck; with it went a movement in his mind, but again feeling like something physical, something beginning to open. . . . Inside

himself he knew it was quite different, nothing to do with sex at all. But yes, there'd be problems persuading anyone. Old Stott had been right about that. He felt depressed as he made his way back to the entrance hall.

"That's for you," said Sergeant Coyne, tapping a white envelope on the counter. It was, too—"B. Evans" in large floppy writing. The card inside said, "Will you please come to tea in the nursery wing today, 4:00 P.M.? Louise Butterfield."

"Who's Louise Butterfield?" he asked.

"Mrs. Butterfield to you, my lad. She's a Sphere Three. Lady plays the harp at the sessions."

"Oh. I've got to go have tea with her in the nursery wing. Where's that?"

Sergeant Coyne couldn't alter the tone of his voice, but his eyes widened.

"Up the stairs back end of kitchen passage," he said, "Top floor, turn right. You'll see a notice says 'No Unauthorized persons,' but if you've been asked, you don't have to mind that."

"Thanks."

"That's where Miss Pinkie lives, see? Mrs. Butterfield watches after her."

It was a private apartment. There was a door with a lock to it, a bell push, a peephole. From beyond the door the plinkety sounds of harp scales came faintly, but they stopped at the ring of the bell.

Mrs. Butterfield opened the door. Barry didn't recognize her for a moment because she was standing, though with the help of a stick. He'd seen her that morning being wheeled into the Harmony Session and hadn't realized she could walk. She gave Barry a lovely smile, a typical Foundation smile, full of peace and happiness.

"You must be Barry," she said.

"That's right."

"I'm Louise Butterfield. Pinkie's told me a lot about you."

(False note? A lot—Pinkie?)

"It'll be great to see her again."

"She's just getting up from her rest. She seems extra tired today. It was a difficult session."

"So I heard. Must be a strain anytime."

"She's wonderful how she stands it."

"Right."

Mrs. Butterfield, still smiling, nodded as though they had agreed on something really important, then turned and hobbled down the passage. Barry followed her into a large room brimming with light. The bright-colored furniture looked used and comfortable. There was a harp by the fireplace and an enormous doll's house between the windows. Over in the far corner was a desk with schoolbooks on it, a blackboard, a globe of the world.

"I used to be a teacher," said Mrs. Butterfield. "It's worked out very luckily—that's the Harmony, of course. We do our lessons here and—"

She was interrupted by the crash of the door being flung open. As Barry turned, Pinkie charged headlong into him, the way she used to rush at Mr. Stott. She threw her arms around him and nuzzled her face into his chest. At the same time she tried to jump up and down.

"Hi, mind my toes," said Barry.

When he put his hands round her rib cage to lift her free, she giggled and clung to him yet more ferociously so that he wasn't sure he could force her loose without hurting her. He twisted his head and gave Mrs. Butterfield a sorry-not-my-fault shrug.

Mrs. Butterfield was watching, still with a smile on her

lips but a slight frown on her forehead. She answered his signal with a warning shake of the head. He stopped struggling against Pinkie's hug and went limp.

It worked. As she let go, she pinched him hard on the hip.

"Oi!" he yelped.

She rushed away, around to the back of the big sofa, where she stopped and turned to watch him, so wild with excitement that her laughter was more like screams, unpleasant to listen to. Suddenly she crouched, peeping at him over the back of the sofa. Yes, of course. If she was treating him as a sort of substitute for her grandfather, the next thing would be . . .

He glanced around the room. It was an airy space, lit by its three big barred windows, one in the north wall and two in the east. Beyond the stable roof was a view of wooded fields sloping up to the skyline, lit by the strong afternoon sun. Despite the height and light and openness, there was something prisonlike about the room, just as there had been about the close little house in Viola Street. Perhaps it was the bars on the windows, though they obviously hadn't been put there just to keep Pinkie in. They looked much older than that.

"Okay," he said. "You want to play a game?"

She poked her head up and nodded violently.

"It'll mean pushing the furniture around," he said to Mrs. Butterfield.

"In that case why don't you wait till after tea?" she said. "It's all in the hatch, and the kettle's just boiled. Then you can push the furniture around to your heart's content. It sounds as if your game will be a bit too active for me."

Pinkie straightened up, looking sulky. Then she seemed to make a deliberate effort and switched to her other self, the one Barry knew and preferred, sedate and rather secret.

He smiled encouragingly at her, and she signaled back with a tiny movement of her lips. But she'd changed. There was something different about her, though he couldn't at the moment see what.

"Pinkie will show you where the hatch is, and I'll make the tea," said Mrs. Butterfield.

Pinkie led the way out into the corridor, where she opened the doors of what looked like a cupboard set into the wall. Inside there seemed to be only one bare shelf with a rope going up from its center, but Pinkie took hold of another rope which ran down by the hinges and gave it a tug. With a deep, rattling groan from above the shelf slid upward, and another came into view, carrying a tray loaded with crockery and cutlery. Yet another shelf and tray appeared, this time with honey, jam, butter, scones, and a walnut cream cake. There was a dull thud as the whole contraption stopped rising. Now it looked like an ordinary cupboard, apart from being unusually deep. They each took a tray and carried them back into the room.

"That's quite a gadget out there," he said to Mrs. Butterfield.

"The old lift? It goes right down to the kitchen passage. This all used to be the nursery wing, you see, with a nanny and at least a couple of nursemaids and a whole brood of children. Poor darlings, they'd never have gone down to eat with their parents until they were almost grown-up, except on birthdays and times like that. Mostly they'd stay up here and have all their meals sent up in the lift. Boiled mutton and sprouts, my mother told me. She used to live in a house a bit like this. Help me down into my chair, will you, darling?"

Pinkie steadied her by the wrists as she lowered herself into an upright chair. There was a moment in the process

when the calm, sweet face twitched, as if with a stab of pain. She sighed as she settled.

"I didn't realize you could walk at all," said Barry.

"I couldn't. Six months ago. It's living with Pinkie. The Energy streams through her even when she's not thinking about it. I'm an extremely lucky woman."

Pinkie's face was blank, bored.

"Is Granddad all right?" she asked.

"Fine last time I saw him. Sends his love. He was over the moon a few weeks back because he'd won an award with his new Roscoea."

"What an extraordinary word!" said Mrs. Butterfield.

"Until you see it's only named after some bloke called Roscoe," said Barry. "It's supposed to be yellow, but Mr. Stott's managed to breed a white one."

"I'm afraid I don't know whether it's a canary or a fish," said Mrs. Butterfield.

Yeah, thought Barry. *And Pinkie's told you all about me but never said anything about her granddad's alpines.* He explained, easy and smiling, Foundation-style.

The conversation went on that way. Mrs. Butterfield, though not quite a gusher, was certainly a talker. Naturally she talked mostly about the Foundation. Everybody did. Everybody seemed to share the same enthusiasm, the same trust, and the same rather down-to-earth approach about the mystery they were supposed to be dealing with. It was as though by talking about it in a no-nonsense way, calling it H.E. and so on, they were somehow helping make it more real. But they believed all right. From nobody he'd talked to—Sergeant Coyne, Karen, several other Sphere Fours and Sphere Fives, and now Mrs. Butterfield—had Barry had the slightest hint that they were in any kind of plot or conspiracy. They didn't have to be, of course—the fewer who knew, the better, from Freeman's point of view

—but it was unnerving. Barry wasn't sure how long he'd be able to go on smiling and agreeing without some flicker of his eyes, some twist of his mouth or note of sourness in his voice giving him away, showing that he wasn't really one of them, but only pretending. It was just the sort of situation you'd expect would stir old Bear up, but Bear, since that moment up on the moors at Ferriby, seemed to have gone back into hibernation. So Barry was able to look Mrs. Butterfield straight in the eye and nod and smile and agree that it was wonderful to be here and they were all extraordinarily lucky people.

Pinkie said nothing. At one moment Barry tried to draw her into the conversation. As he finished his first mouthful of the walnut cake, he said, "Almost as good as your mom used to make, Pinkie."

Pinkie looked at him.

"Mom's in America," she muttered.

"And doing marvelous work," said Mrs. Butterfield. "A lot of our clients are coming from there now."

"Mom likes it in America," said Pinkie. "She wants me to go."

"I don't think there's any question of that for the moment," said Mrs. Butterfield, "not until the next stage in the program. There's still a lot of basic research to be done, Sphere One says. *Then* he'll be able to start looking for other people with Pinkie's gifts and other places where the flow lines converge, the way they do here."

She chatted on. Pinkie retreated into herself after her two brief remarks about her mother. Barry could only glance at her from time to time, but he became more and more convinced that something had happened to her, and it wasn't just that she was older. He couldn't make up his mind what, but he felt that she had lost, or was losing, part of whatever it was that had made her special—not her

healing powers, which he'd always thought, even if they were real, were only a sort of by-product of this other quality, but the quality itself. He remembered traveling back with her on the first bus trip from Dallington, and the idea that she had inner landscapes which only she could visit. Now it was as though she found those places harder to reach and the land, when she got there, less welcoming, colder and poorer.

He was guessing. It was only a feeling. She didn't do or say anything which he could use as a clue that he was right, but he thought also that he detected in Mrs. Butterfield's tone, when she mentioned Pinkie, that she was troubled about something too.

After tea he and Pinkie carried the trays out to the hatch. Pinkie pulled at a rope on the other side of the door opening, and the lift began to slide down. Under the cover of its steady rumble Barry muttered, "Still want to get away from this place?"

She looked sideways at him, as though it was the first time that anybody had suggested such an idea to her. Then she nodded.

"Not going to be easy," he said.

"Want to see Granddad."

"I know, I know, but . . . Look, we've got to talk sometime. Alone. Can you get them to let me take you for a walk or something? It'll have to be you does the asking. I'm the lowest of the low."

She looked puzzled. He felt that she wasn't really understanding; somehow it was an effort for her to mesh into the real world. It always had been, slightly, of course, but she'd been quick enough about setting up codes and systems to get around Mrs. Proudfoot.

"Are we going to play a game now?" she said. "I'll get Louise's wheelie."

She darted off down the corridor, leaving the lift still rumbling down under its own momentum. Inquisitive about its workings, Barry craned into the gap and peered up. In the dimness he could just make out the central rope unwinding from a wooden drum. The ropes on either side of the door were spaced too far apart to go directly over the drum, so presumably they ran over some sort of wheel, and the drum was really the axle of the wheel. The rumbling came from wooden bearings. Plenty of friction there. The momentum ran out in a few seconds, but when Barry pulled experimentally at the side rope, he found there was very little resistance. The lift itself must have a counterweight, of course, running up the side of the shaft. Always amused and curious about the workings of things, he was still leaning into the shaft, peering down into darkness, when Pinkie rammed his calf with the step of Mrs. Butterfield's wheelchair.

The game barely worked. Barry managed to push the furniture into positions which made quite a promising maze, but though Pinkie could dodge, there were very few places she could really hide. Besides, Barry found that wheelchairs aren't at all easy to control and maneuver without practice, and he soon realized that for all Pinkie's apparent excitement, her heart wasn't really in it, any more than his was. They tried. Barry crashed and blundered around the sofa, and Pinkie dodged and screamed; for a moment it sounded as though she was working herself into another fit of hysteria, but all at once she straightened from where she'd been crawling behind the table, pushed her glasses straight, and said, in a tired voice, "Let's stop."

Mrs. Butterfield, who had been sitting in a defensive position between her precious harp and the action, laughed with obvious relief.

"I was beginning to worry about my poor chair," she

said. "You've no idea what a good one costs. Where on earth did you learn that extraordinary game?"

Barry explained about Mr. Stott and his garden and the trenches. Mrs. Butterfield shook her head, still smiling.

"It's a mistake to try and go back," she said. "You can't do it, not with anything—places, love affairs, careers, friendships, anything. They're always different. I used to be quite a good harpist, you know. I played with a very good orchestra. I only gave it up and became a teacher when my fingers started to stiffen. And later, when my illness got really bad, I used to sit and stare at my hands—they were all curled up like the claws of a bird, you know—and tell myself stories about what my life would have been like if it hadn't happened. I thought that was all I longed for, to get well and pick up my career. I was good enough, and I think I still am, but now that it's possible, I don't want to do it. You see, something else has happened, something I could never have imagined when my head was full of dreams. Yes, I might become a rich and famous soloist, I might believe I was happy and lucky, but it would be a disaster because I would be missing *this.*"

She really meant it, Barry saw, though she spoke easily enough, without making an emotional meal of what she said. She'd staked a lot on the Foundation, hadn't she, so for her it had to be true. Her life here had to be worthwhile, so in her own mind the career she had given up for it needed to be a starry one. The same applied with all the people at the Foundation, in their different ways. If H.E. was a fairy tale, if Freeman was a crook or a phony or both, then their whole lives would fall apart. Barry would find no allies here. He really liked Mrs. Butterfield, for instance, despite her fluty upper-class voice. He thought she wanted to do the best she could for Pinkie, but nothing he could say or do would persuade her to help him, ever. He was

alone. He'd been aware of this all along, really, but what Mrs. Butterfield said made up his mind.

She caught his eye, flicked a glance toward Pinkie, and said, "You mustn't try and go back. It is always a mistake. Always."

They pushed the room straight, then sat down and talked for a bit, mostly Barry answering Mrs. Butterfield's questions about his home life and why he'd chucked his school, things like that. Pinkie said nothing but sat beside him on the sofa toying vaguely with his fingers and then leaning against his shoulder like a large dog. He only realized she had fallen asleep when he noticed how heavy her head had become.

"She seems to find the Harmony Sessions more and more tiring," whispered Mrs. Butterfield, "especially the ones that don't go very well. And seeing you again. No wonder she was a bit hysterical. I've never seen her like that before."

Carefully Barry eased himself free and let Pinkie down onto the cushions. He rose and stood looking at her, a pasty, pudgy kid in glasses, nothing to notice. But everyone wanted to own her, to use her. She frowned in her sleep and gave a little shudder like the twitch of a sleeping dog. Something inside her dream had done that, but you'd never get there, never know what.

"I hope you'll come again soon," whispered Mrs. Butterfield. "On a day when she hasn't had a session."

"I thought I might take her for the odd walk. Must be good walks around here."

"Oh, yes, that *is* a good idea."

"Don't come to the door. I'll let myself out."

"I might as well. We're not going out again, so I'll set the alarm now."

"Alarm? Up here?"

"Oh, yes. We have to keep our treasure safe, don't we?"

She hobbled with him down the corridor and smiled with extra sweetness as she said good-bye, but the latch clicked sharply as the door closed between them.

10

Mrs. Butterfield's remark about treasure preyed on Barry's mind. Of course, he had known Pinkie was important to the Foundation, but he hadn't really thought what it actually meant when it came to getting her out. For a start the place was very well guarded. There was a high brick wall all around the grounds. Inside it, at night, roamed a savage-looking German shepherd named Norah. The building itself formed another ring of defenses, with security catches on all the downstairs windows, and alarms on windows and doors. All the male staff members, who slept in the stable block, had to be out of the main building by half past eight in the evening, so that the alarms could be switched on. Barry had already begun to think about this last point because of the obstacle it put in the way of simply getting Pinkie out of the house and running off with her when everyone was asleep. (Running off? Oh? Nine miles to the nearest station—no car—couldn't drive one anyway . . .) But he had simply assumed that all this was just a way of keeping out nuts and journalists and people like that. Now he discovered that there was yet another ring, inside the building, around Pinkie. It made him see that the whole system was there to guard her, like the princess in a fairy story, locked in the topmost room of the highest turret of the dragon-guarded castle. She was so precious to them. The whole thing depended on her. People didn't come here because of Mr. Freeman, or his theories, or the gadgets in the Hall of Harmony. They came to see the Healer.

Barry was in the entrance hall, sorting the letters into the residents' rack, when Sergeant Coyne put down the phone in the porter's booth and came out.

"Okay, lad," he whispered. "I'll take over that. Sphere One wants a word with you."

He didn't take the letters at once but looked Barry over, picked a speck of something off his shoulder, walked around behind and tugged at his uniform collar, looked him over again.

"You'll do," he said. "Off you go, then."

When Barry tapped at the door, there was a longish pause before Mr. Freeman called him in. No question of being asked to sit this time, not a Sphere Five talking to Sphere One, but Mr. Freeman looked friendly enough.

"You're finding your feet with us, I hear," he said. "Sergeant Coyne speaks well of you. I am not at all surprised."

"Thank you, sir."

"So does Mrs. Butterfield."

Barry managed to suppress a grunt of surprise. Being reported on by Sergeant Coyne was one thing, but somebody who'd asked you to tea to talk to a kid who'd been your friend . . .

"I want to make that point before I go on," said Mr. Freeman. "I particularly don't want you to feel that any blame attaches to you over what happened yesterday afternoon. As I say, Mrs. Butterfield tells me you handled the situation very well."

He looked up inquiringly, but Barry said nothing. What was coming now? The sack? After only four days?

"Since Pinkie had specifically asked to see you, it seemed best to allow that to happen, but I must tell you that both Mrs. Butterfield and I were anxious about it. Pinkie, as you are of course aware, is central to the functioning of the Foundation. She is extremely precious to us. Anything

likely to place an emotional strain on her is a cause for anxiety. Listen."

He reached out and pressed a button on his cassette player, then turned full toward Barry and watched him with a cold, penetrating stare, neither friendly nor hostile, but more like a scientist watching a laboratory rat go through its maze. The tape made vague thumping sounds. A man's voice gave a startled yell. Feet scuttered. Suddenly the room was filled with a strange, whooping cry, shrill and painful. There was pain actually *in* the noise, though Barry couldn't tell whether the animal that made it was causing the pain or suffering it—hyena at the kill or monkey in a trap. Neither of those anyway. Too shrill.

Mr. Freeman reached out to turn the volume down, but the noise stopped short almost at once. Faint shuffling sounds followed, and then a man's voice, still too loud, said, "Okay. You want to play a game?"

Mr. Freeman clicked the player off.

"You had the volume right up," said Barry.

"Yes."

"It wasn't like that. She just got a bit wild when she saw me and started laughing."

"It was like that, I'm afraid, Barry. Only you did not have ears to hear it at normal volume. You were pleased to see Pinkie again?"

"Course I was. I used to be fond of the kid. Don't know why."

"She has that effect upon those who need her."

"Any case, I'd hardly got in the room. I . . ."

"Certainly, as I said earlier, it was not your fault. If it was anyone's, it was ours, mine. We are putting a severe strain on Pinkie. It was a risk on my part taking you onto the staff, and it remains a risk keeping you here. If I thought you were likely to do anything, consciously or un-

consciously, to exacerbate the strain on Pinkie, I would ask you to leave. But I would do so with very great reluctance because I am genuinely impressed with your personality. I believe that you may have a really worthwhile future with us, Barry. I would not be at all surprised to see you ascending quite rapidly through the spheres."

"Thank you, sir."

"But you will understand why I have decided that it would be in everyone's interest if for the time being you did not see Pinkie again."

"But—"

"For the time being only. I recognize the strength of her feeling for you, and yours for her. I am genuinely sorry to have to take this line. But the work we are doing here is far too important—important for the whole of mankind, for all living creatures, indeed—for me to let such considerations interfere with it."

There was a gleam in the gold eyes, a throb in the voice. He was really putting it over now, the way he did in the Harmony Sessions. Suddenly Barry saw that he wasn't pushing out all this energy to impress one Sphere Five, a mere hall porter. He was telling himself that his work was that vital. If he was a fraud, then he was one of his own victims.

"Yes, I see," said Barry. "But, er, I mean, how long's the time being?"

Mr. Freeman jerked himself out of his mild trance.

"The time being? Oh, a few weeks? It is a question of adjustment, and the energies that flow through this place are such that we all adjust very quickly to the great central harmony."

"What'll you say to Pinkie?"

Mr. Freeman smiled. He'd worked it out.

"That you've transferred to night porter duties," he said.

"It would have been your turn before long, and I will ask Sergeant Coyne to adjust the roster so that the changeover happens at once. Mrs. Butterfield will explain to Pinkie that you are having to sleep while she's awake. Suppose you do four weeks of the night shift. Then in a month's time I may be in a position to decide whether the Harmonic Energy has done its work and you can safely see Pinkie again. I hope you agree to this scheme."

Agree? What else could he do?

"I suppose Mrs., er, Freeman will be home by then," he said.

"I doubt it. She is doing extremely useful work. And to be frank with you, Barry, I persuaded her to go to America for much the same reasons that I am asking you to go on night duty. She is an excellent woman, and I am fond of her. I would like to have her here. But her relationship with Pinkie—much more profound than yours, of course—also distorts the Harmony flow. I think *you* will understand."

The stress on the word was very slight, the smile warm, the gaze friendly.

"Yes, sir," said Barry.

"I think that's all. Been having any more headaches?"

"Nothing to notice. Just being here's a help."

"So most of us find. But if you do have any trouble, be sure to let me know. I have some ability in focusing the Energy, and I will give you a personal session. I wouldn't like you to suffer in silence because you felt I had forbidden you to attend a Harmony Session with Pinkie."

"That's all right, sir."

"Thank you, Barry."

II

Ears pricked, nose snuffing the faint remains of daytime odors, Bear prowled the empty rooms and long, blank corridors. Sometimes he turned out a light or shut a door so that he could stand at a window, face close to the pane, and, undistracted by reflection from inside the room, stare out at the dark. There were rainy and moonless nights when he could see nothing at all, but still he stood there half an hour on end. On nights of clear skies the grounds gradually took shape, but not their daytime shape. Now the shadows became caves of blackness beneath the cedar trees and the lime trees and along the banks of rhododendrons. Anything might be there, dangerous, deadly, in those caves.

Norah was there, somewhere, but he never saw her. He imagined her, often, prowling her rounds outside just as he did his inside, with the same pricked ears and sharpened senses. He felt more like her than any of the sleeping humans. But he never saw her, a wolf shape, lean and quick, slipping across a patch of moonlit lawn between shadow and shadow. At last, after long waiting, he would turn from the window and go on with his round, the conscientious hall porter.

On his third night he had found the door of Mr. Freeman's office slightly ajar. It had been locked the two previous nights. He went in, turned on the lights, looked around. Nothing unusual, nothing special. His first thought was to leave things as they were and come back in the early hours of the morning to see if he could find anything useful. Something prickled at the back of his neck, a Bear

feeling, a sense of distrust. He turned out the light, closed the door, and went up the back stairs toward Mr. Freeman's private apartment. Before he got there, he met Mr. Freeman strolling toward him along the upper corridor. Mr. Freeman nodded as though he meant to pass by without speaking.

"Excuse me, sir," said Barry. "You've left your office unlocked."

"Have I now? That's careless. Be a good chap and lock it for me. This key here. Leave the keys with Sergeant Coyne. I'll pick them up in the morning."

Barry did exactly what he was told, reasonably sure it was some sort of test. Mr. Freeman wasn't careless. If he could set up a hidden mike in the nursery, he could see that his own office was electronically watched and guarded. How had he come to be walking along the corridor at that moment? Barry checked the office window but deliberately didn't stare around for hidden cameras. As he closed the door, he saw that there was an electric contact low down on the jamb and another on the door itself.

It was after that episode that he began deliberately to let Bear come to the surface, to do the night rounds with him, for him. He wasn't at all sure of his own motives for letting this happen. They seemed to change, the same way Bear seemed to change. There seemed to be several Bears, varying from the meaningless pet name Barry used for himself to an almost solid alternative person (creature?) who was waiting, more and more impatiently, to take him over. Somewhere halfway between these two came Superbear. The loner. The only one who knew. Knew what? Knew that the Foundation was a con. Bear against the Foundation. Bear against the system. Bear against the mighty intergalactic conspiracy. Conspiracy what for? If they're all in it, where are the goodies, apart from old Bear and a few

nuts like Mr. Stott? Conspiracy to conspire, that's what. All the baddies—the politicians and the schoolmasters and the doctors who are too bloody indifferent to tell your mom about chocolate allergies—there they are, met for the great annual Conspirators' Dance and Gala, when suddenly in their midst a silence falls! Who is it? What is it? Why, it's Superbear with a great big *B* on his furry chest! Do they tremble and turn pale? Do they, hell! Their golden eyes gaze contemptuously. Voices like Sergeant Coyne's whisper, "Get yourself out of that suit, lad, and put on your uniform and go and empty the wastepaper baskets in the sun lounge. And mind you don't go outside or Norah will have your throat out!"

Superbear was an experiment, a way of coping with Bear, of getting control. It didn't really work. Bear was more than that and different. He was like a scab you can't help picking, a dream that returns and returns against your will, a cliff you keep going back to, to stand on the brink of the huge drop, sweat on your palms, wondering if you dare climb down. You're going to have to, one day. So Barry let him out of his lair, partly for company on those lonely nights, partly in an attempt to learn about him and find ways of controlling him and dealing with him, partly because there was a strange, satisfying excitement about actually being Bear for a while, and partly because he would have got out anyway.

It wasn't only the loneliness and the dark, and Norah out in the dark, that stirred Bear up. Stronger and stronger each day there was the frustration of being Barry, of having got this far quite easily and now being faced with a problem he couldn't solve. He had actually settled down in his cubicle one afternoon and written out a list of things to think about:

1. Talking to Pinkie alone

2. Getting her out of the Foundation
3. Getting clear away
4. Finding somewhere to hide
5. Then what?

(1) and (2) he got nowhere with. (3) he had some ideas about—that was the easiest. (4) depended on Mr. Stott. (5) was a blank. He stared at the paper for a while, then went out for a ride on the Galaxy. On the downs above Harting he tore the paper into shreds and stuffed them down a rabbit hole. But he continued to fret obsessively at the problem during his hours of duty. More and more it was item 5 that bothered him. It wasn't just the problem of how to hide, how to stay alive, after the escape, with half the police of England looking for them. He and Pinkie weren't the only ones. There were Mom and Dad, for instance. What about them, having to cope with the police, for hours on end, and reporters on the doorstep, and not knowing what was going on and whether their son had done what the papers hinted?

Pinkie, too. Suppose it all happened, and then suppose they got caught—pretty well bound to—Barry would have to try and explain why he'd done it. Then it would all come out, what was happening at the Foundation, what was so special about Pinkie. You had to say this for Mr. Freeman: In spite of needing to bring the cash customers in, he'd managed to see the place wasn't besieged by reporters wanting to write sob stuff about Miracle Cures by Child Saint. Of course, the stories might have been Callous Fraud on Crippled Pensioner—he wouldn't want that. But once Barry had turned Pinkie into a sensation by running off with her, what hope was there of keeping quiet any longer that she had this freak knack? Did she realize that? Did she realize anything? How could he go ahead without having a long talk with her first?

So it came back again to the same old cycle of problems without answers, a weary, boring trudge around and around, thinking the same thoughts over and over and getting nowhere new—rather like the rounds Barry did inside the Foundation, along the same unpeopled corridors, into the same silent half-lit rooms, checking the same doors, over and over. No wonder that he would find himself standing in the dark at some window, not knowing how long he had stood there staring out into the dark, sniffing the night air, being not Barry but Bear. Bear wasn't troubled by thoughts. Bear just felt. When thought got you nowhere, it was better being Bear for a while.

One morning, after just such a night as this, Barry came late into the staff canteen for his breakfast and found Karen was there, only just starting on her cornflakes. He carried his tray over to sit with her.

"You're a bit behindhand, aren't you?" he said.

"What about you? I overslept, that's all."

"Hope I do. This night duty is getting to me, and then I had trouble with Norah."

"Norah?"

"The guard dog. Couldn't get her into her cage. She's still got the idea I'm some kind of enemy. She's thick."

"Aren't you scared of her?"

"A bit. Sergeant Coyne says she's trained to knock you down and stand over you and bark till someone comes, but I'd be happier if I'd seen her doing it. To someone else. How are you keeping?"

Karen told him, starting with her weight. He'd heard most of her story before. Her father was a consultant engineer who spent most of his time abroad, and her mother sounded like a typical middle-class bitch whose one idea was that Karen should think and look and dress and behave

the same way she did. Karen wasn't up to fighting her, so she'd found a way out by not eating, becoming an anorexic. Got herself down to sixty-eight pounds, she said, before her mother had heard about the Foundation. She was plump enough now, in a bouncy, strapped-in way, and mildly sexy in her white uniform. Drowsy as he was, Barry enjoyed her physical nearness. He didn't imagine she felt the same for him. She just liked talking, mainly about herself. Time drifted by until a sharp tone sounded.

"Oh, goodness!" said Karen, bouncing up and grabbing her crockery. "Only twenty minutes and I haven't done *anything!*"

She scampered off. Barry, too sleepy to bother, sat where he was until Mrs. Foxe, the fat canteen overseer, came over.

"Off you go now, me boy," she said. "Got to get cleared up before the session starts, haven't I?"

"Sorry," said Barry. "I'd better get back to my room, I suppose."

It was one of the rules: all staff to keep still and quiet while the Harmony Sessions were in progress. The telephones were cut off, and a notice went up on the gates saying that there was no admittance for the next two hours. Normally Barry would have been in bed and asleep by now, so the rule had hardly affected him till this morning.

He practiced his Foundation smile on Mrs. Foxe and left. He dropped into a slouch only as he strolled down the corridor that led toward the back of the building, past what must once have been pantries and sculleries and storerooms. Some were still used for this kind of purpose, but others had become offices and laboratories. The two-minute tone sounded. The building seemed hushed, deserted. He was almost at the door into the stableyard when something he had just passed nagged at his mind, something

both strange and familiar. He turned and looked. It was nothing—well, it was a cupboard in the wall at the darkest point of the corridor. Why . . . oh, yes. It was an odd shape, not quite right for a cupboard somehow . . . but the same as the doors that opened onto the lift up in the nursery.

With no particular purpose he opened the doors. The shelves were inside, bare. He tugged at the rope and listened to the grumble of the wooden wheel far above. The lift slid on down about eighteen inches and jarred to a stop, leaving a slot of black above the top shelf. By getting his knees onto the bottom rim of the hatch he could poke his head through, twist, and peer up. The shaft was pitch-dark.

The last tone took him by surprise. Either they'd cheated over the two minutes, or his timing had gone wrong, but from now on the Harmony Session was in progress. Of course, there was nothing to stop him from slipping out of the back door and across the yard; nobody was likely to spot him, and even if they did, it was too trivial a bit of rule-breaking to bother about. Still, somehow, he didn't fancy having it happen. As much from a childish impulse to hide as from any serious intention of doing something about the Pinkie problem he scrambled up through the slot onto the top of the lift, then reached down to pull the doors shut below him. With a sigh of weariness he settled down, leaning his back against the timber lining of the shaft.

This was no use. This was stupid. The longer he stayed here, the later he'd be getting back to his cubicle, and if he was spotted, the worse the rule-breaking would have become. With another sigh he got to his feet and stood upright. Far above now he could see a faint glimmer of light. The upper doors must have been left slightly ajar. Still without any serious intention of making any use of what he

had found, he heaved at the rope by the door. The wheel above groaned, and the lift stirred beneath him. Because of the gearing, he was having to lift only about a third of his own weight, plus a hefty allowance for friction. It should in theory be possible to heave himself up the whole way, assuming that the mechanism would take the load, but it was no use. The whole shaft would boom with the racket, and in the totally silent building somebody was bound to hear. He eased the lift back down the couple of inches it had risen. There was no point in staying.

But he stayed. He stayed because this was a Bear kind of place, in its darkness, its musty smell, its unvisited secrecy. Now, just like a zoo bear reaching up the walls of its pit, he began to feel his way around the timber lining, solid tongue and groove, unclimbable. Then, on the third wall his paws —his hands—reached through where the lining should have been and touched rough brick beyond. What? Why? Barry took over, inquisitive, and felt around. There was lining on all four sides of the shaft at the top, he was sure. Down here . . . yes, the lining rose about a foot above the top of the door opening. Then it stopped, only on this side of the shaft. But at both edges of the opening, running on down inside the lining, was a deep slot, worn smooth. The two slots faced each other. Something must fit between them, must run between them to wear them so smooth. . . . The counterweight, of course.

As he ran his fingers up the left-hand slot, his knuckles banged into a crosspiece, a horizontal bar of wood which spanned the gap an inch or so from the brickwork. That was right. When they'd put the lift in, they'd realized the counterweight might jam sometimes. They didn't want to have to go ripping out timber to find it, so they'd left this gap. But they'd wanted to make sure that the slots stayed

plumb opposite each other, so they'd put these crosspieces in. . . .

How many? How close?

If there had been fur on his spine, hackles, it would have stood upright. He felt the skin there prickle with excitement, the certainty of action after long waiting. The next crosspiece was about two feet six above the first. He took hold of it, put his foot on the bottom one, heaved, reached up. There was the next rung, waiting for his grasp. He was on a giant ladder, running right up through the building. Very likely the builders had put it here for this very reason, again in case the weight or the lift jammed. They'd need to be able to get up to the problem. Carefully he started to climb.

Each rung was covered with a velvety coating of dust. As he disturbed it, it spilled with a faint rustle down the wall beyond. One or two rungs creaked as they took his weight. He heard no other sound. He saw no chink where the shaft might have opened onto the intermediate floors, nor did he remember seeing doors in the walls of those corridors at this point. He reached the top in less than two minutes.

There was a problem here. The lining, as he'd suspected, ran down a foot below the level of the hatch, and the last rung came two feet below that. The doors were slightly ajar. It was a question of heaving up, much the way he'd been doing all the way up the shaft, but then twisting and reaching sideways to grab the shelf of the hatch, but it would have to be done all in one movement. If there were alarms attached to the doors, he'd set them off. . . .

The hell with it.

He heaved and grabbed. There was a mild rattle and a thump, but no sudden clanging. He hung, panting, slantwise across the shaft, and then worked his feet onto the last

rung, gave another heave and twist, and was kneeling on the shelf looking out into the nursery corridor. All quiet.

He worked himself to a sitting position, took his shoes off, dropped to the floor, and shut the doors of the hatch. Still no sound. A strip of polished wood ran along each side of the corridor carpet. There might be alarm pads under the carpet. What next? The Harmony Session had been going for about twenty minutes or less. He had nearly two hours to explore in. Then they'd come up, have lunch, Pinkie would rest. . . . Which was Pinkie's room?

He stole along by the wainscot, tried a door. Bathroom. The next was a toilet. Other side.

The second door was half open. The moment he peered inside he knew this was it. A kid's room obviously. Yes, and there was the same old black teddy on the bed, wearing the yellow bow tie Barry's mom had made. A bright, clean room, big enough for several kids. Probably been the night nursery in the old days, with half a dozen cots. Huge old built-in wardrobes, more than one kid could possibly need . . .

He opened them, one by one. A few frocks, a coat or two, and some jeans on hangers, looking lost in the big space. Shelves with T-shirts, socks, underclothes, pajamas. But in the one on the corner a dry, dusty smell as if the door was seldom opened. There were suitcases on the floor, and on the other side shelves of winter blankets and spare pillows and so on. Barry piled the suitcases on top of each other and took an eiderdown and a couple of pillows to make himself a nest in the space he'd cleared. He curled himself into it and pulled the doors shut. He felt warm, quiet, comfortable, happy to wait. It was a Bear place, a lair. He did not remember falling asleep.

He twitched awake. Something had touched his cheek. He couldn't think where he was as he blinked at the brilliant pillar of light with the black shape in it. He heard Pinkie's soft giggle.

"You snorted," she whispered. "I heard you."

From beyond the room came the tinkle and plunk of harp scales. Barry shook his head, forcing himself wide-awake, and started to uncurl, but Pinkie slipped into the cupboard and wriggled down beside him.

"I thought you weren't ever coming," she said, keeping her voice so low you could hardly have heard it outside the cupboard.

"Sorry. I couldn't think of a way. They put me on night shift."

"That's what Louise said."

"You didn't believe her?"

"I thought they'd sent you away probably."

"But you just said—"

"I knew you'd think of somehow."

"I didn't. Not by thinking anyway. What'll Mrs. B. do if she finds me here?"

"I like Louise."

"Me too. You think she'll come on our side?"

"She'll tell Dad."

"Dad?"

"I've got to call him Dad."

"I've got to call him Sphere One."

"I know."

"Do you like him?"

"He's the only one who understands. He's clever."

"Understands? You mean, you think he's got it right? H.E. and all that?"

"He knows what it's like."

"I think he's a crook."

She didn't say anything but sleepily smoothed the fur of her teddy. She sounded all right, happy in her quiet way, much more like the old Pinkie than she'd seemed a fortnight ago when he'd had tea with her. He nodded toward the sound of the harp.

"How long have we got?" he asked. "I've got to have a good long talk with you. There's problems, Pinkie."

"I'm supposed to rest till four. She's only just started. I was scared when I heard you snorting. I couldn't get to sleep. I think it's because Dad gave me something. It made me feel very excited."

She was really rattling on by her standards. It was a relief hearing her so chirpy. On the other hand, it was disturbing the way she talked about Mr. Freeman, apparently without fear or dislike, calling him Dad quite easily.

"Some kind of present?" he asked.

She stirred against his side, hesitated, then held her arm into the slot of light that came through the cupboard door. She pulled up the sleeve of her yellow pajamas. On the inside of her forearm he saw three or four small red spots. None of Barry's friends were that far into drugs, not that he knew, but his mind leaped to the connection.

"Jesus!" he said softly. "He's mad! What's he think he's doing?"

"Sometimes it's pills. Different things. Once I was almost sick. Sometimes I'm just sleepy. It was funny today. I saw things which weren't there, and all the people had a kind of light around them, like angels. It was lovely."

"He must be mad! Listen, day I came to tea with you—had he given you something then?"

"I expect so. I don't remember. It's always before the sessions."

"He must have. You were on a crazy kind of high. Does Mrs. Butterfield know?"

"Yes, I told her, and she asked him. He said it was protein to help me in the sessions. They're tiring sometimes."

"Protein wouldn't make you sick or sleepy. And see things."

"You see, when we started having the sessions, it was lovely. Lots of people got better. I could feel it happening. Where I held their hands, I could feel the Energy rushing through. I was so happy helping all those people. It's the only thing I ever want to do. Mom's never liked me doing it, but he sent her away. . . ."

"Why did she marry him?"

"She just wanted to. He's clever. I don't know. People are funny."

"Does she know about him, er, giving you things?"

"I don't think so. I don't think she'd like it."

Barry puffed his breath out and tried to think. You couldn't have told from Pinkie's tone that she was talking about something that mattered to her. His instinct—not only Bear rage but natural human impulse—was to barge in on Mrs. Butterfield, shove her stupid harp away, and yell at her about what was happening. She must half know, surely; she'd obviously been worried that teatime. . . .

What the hell was Freeman up to? What had he been giving the kid? This last lot sounded like LSD or something. . . . Yeah, from what Karen had said and other bits he'd heard, the sessions weren't working the way they used to. Freeman could try faking the odd miracle cure, but that might mean letting some of the staff know . . . and besides, he believed, he really believed in H.E. So he'd start tinkering with his apparatus, tuning it up. And Pinkie was part of it. If he could find a way of heightening her awareness or damping down her contact with the real world . . .

"Why don't you wear your glasses at the sessions?" he said.

"He just tried that out. I do now. We haven't had a good session for ages—not since the one you came to. That was lovely. I told him I thought it was because you were there. I said why couldn't you come to all the sessions, push one of those stupid carts or something. He said one day, when you were ready."

"Stupid?"

"They don't do anything. It's the people who come."

"And you? You do something?"

"I suppose so. I don't like thinking about it. Explaining gets in the way. It isn't like that."

"And you think you're losing it?"

"Losing?"

"As you get older, for instance. Some kids—"

"Oh, no! Please, no! It's the only thing that matters!"

She went rigid. Her fingers tightened around her teddy so that the knuckles whitened. Barry had never heard her sound upset like that.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean—"

"Only I feel so tired. All that part of me. So tired."

"That's why you want to get away?"

"I want to talk to Granddad."

"Is that all? You mean you don't mind Freeman filling you up with chemical muck, and the sessions wearing you out, and being shut up here like a princess in a tower, provided you can talk to that old nut?"

"Don't be angry. It's only a way of saying."

"Okay, okay, but . . . You want to get out of here, right? How long for? A couple of days? A month? Forever?"

"I don't know. Till I've stopped being tired, I suppose."

"And when you come back, you want it fixed so you can see your granddad sometimes, and Freeman stops giving

you shots of muck, and he doesn't wear you out with more sessions than you can take, and so on?"

"I suppose so."

"But you don't mind coming back in the end? On those terms?"

"If it's like it used to be. It was lovely then."

Problems. It couldn't be done, not like that. Freeman had to work her the way he was doing in order to get the cash flow. Suppose they got clear away, suppose they found somewhere to hole out, even then . . . He hadn't thought about Pinkie's actually wanting to come back, to be part again of something crooked and corrupt . . . if it was . . . surely what Freeman was doing with the drugs proved . . .

"I'm not sure we're going about this the right way," he said. "Perhaps we'd do better starting off writing to your mom, telling her. . . ."

Pinkie nuzzled sleepily against his shoulder.

"Don't bother about Mom," she said. "She's no use. You're the only person's any use, Bear. You and Granddad."

"No, but . . ." he began. Then he registered what she'd said.

"How did you know?" he whispered.

"What?"

"About Bear?"

"Oh. Do you mind? I always call you Bear. Inside my head, I mean. You growled at me the first time I saw you. You're my big bear and this is my little bear."

She stroked her teddy and put it into his hands. He turned it over. It was getting a bit bald. Somehow this gave it a scowl. Just a coincidence then.

"I don't mind," he said. "Just don't do it when there's people around, will you? I'll tell you about it sometime. I

want to, anyway, when we've got your problems sorted out."

"Is it going to be difficult?"

"Actually getting you away from here—if that's what we decide to do—looks like being tricky, but I'm beginning to see how it might go. Then, provided we get enough of a start, we ought to be able to make it up to somewhere near Dallington and meet up with your granddad. He says he's going to try to find us somewhere to hide up for a bit. We've got to be lucky, but it isn't that that's got me worried. It's the consequences. You realize, for a start, we're going to have half the police in England after us?"

"We haven't done anything wrong."

"They don't know. Listen, I bet your mom told you not to talk to strangers, didn't she? Not to let them give you sweets? Especially not to get in their cars? Right? Do you know why—I mean, what people like that sometimes do to kids?"

"Sort of. But, Bear, I'd *tell* them."

"They mightn't believe you. Anyway, they wouldn't know until they'd found us. That's what they'd think. And after that it could be really nasty for a while. But okay, suppose they do believe us. You see, it won't only have been the police. The newspapers are nuts on manhunts, especially when there's a sex angle. It'll be all over them, and on TV and radio, too. And then, when we're caught and we try and explain why we've done what we did, they're going to find out about *you.* I'm worried about what might happen to me, right, but I'm more than worried about what's going to happen to you when everybody in England suddenly hears there's this kid who cures your cancer by touching your hands. I don't go for old Freeman much, but I've got to admit he's been pretty clever about keeping report-

ers and people off your back. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"What'll they do to you, Bear?"

"It depends. It'll be pretty rough at first, I suppose, but then when they've sorted out I haven't done anything to you, it should be all right. I'm a bit scared of all that, I got to admit, but really . . . No, it's about you, Pinkie. What'll happen to you. Till you told me about Freeman giving you drugs, or whatever, my idea was you should just go on strike. You've got the whip hand. They can't do anything without you. You wouldn't have to make a great thing about it, not a confrontation. You could just act up being tired and say the only thing would do you any good is going up to Dallington. . . ."

She didn't seem to have been listening.

"If they don't believe us, what'll they do to you then?" she said.

"I don't know. But they will. Why shouldn't they?"

"He's clever."

She murmured the words in a dreamy way, as if she was in some kind of trance. With an inward shudder Barry remembered his joke notion of Superbear at the Conspirators' Dance and Gala, how all the heads had turned toward him, all with Mr. Freeman's strange gold eyes. If he ran off with Pinkie and was caught, he would be in the cogs of the system, almost helpless, while his enemy was at home in the system, able perhaps to make the cogs turn the way he wanted. He might be able to persuade the people who worked the system that Barry was . . .

"I've changed my mind," whispered Pinkie. "I think I'd better stay here after all."

For a moment Barry felt a shock of relief. The whole ugly, dangerous problem was going to be taken away. Then Pinkie reached out and took the little bear out of his hands.

She lifted her head from his shoulder. A wedge of chill seemed to slide down between them.

"No," he said. "We've got to get you out of here."

"There's no hurry."

"Yes, there is. He's a loony. If what he's giving you now doesn't do the trick, what's he going to try next? Yes, listen. Say something to Mrs. Butterfield while you're having tea about seeing funny lights around people because of what he gave you. Tell her whenever that sort of thing happens. So there's somebody you've told beside me. Got it?"

"I've told her before."

"Okay. We'll try for one night next week. Better be a night before a Harmony Session . . ."

"Oh, no!"

"Why not? The more old Freeman's got to cope with, the more chance we'll have . . ."

"All those people. Hoping. Please, Bear."

"Okay, okay. Night after, then. I'll come fetch you. Listen, you know the stable block—you can see it out of your end window in the nursery?"

"Course I do."

"Top floor, three windows along from the left, that's my room. I've got a cloth I polish my shoes with—bright yellow. Look for it on my windowsill every morning. If it's there, it means we're going that night. Got it?"

"Yes."

"I'll come fetch you. All you've got to do is have a good rest that afternoon, after the session. Then, when you go to bed, make sure your clothes are easy to find. Warm clothes. Hang on. There's an alarm on your front door here, isn't there?"

"Yes."

"Where does she keep the key?"

"On her ring."

"Is it only on the door? I mean, can you move about at night without setting it off?"

"Yes."

"Is she a good sleeper?"

"Sometimes she takes pills."

"Might mean anything. Okay. I won't come back to see you again unless things go wrong. I've got a hell of a lot to sort out. One thing about being on night shift—it means I've got my days free. Look after yourself. Act normal. I'll be seeing you."

"Seeing you."

He let her slide out of the cupboard and then unwound himself, creaking with stiffness. The harp was twangling on, a proper piece of music now. He picked up his shoes and stole through the door into the passage. Five and a half paces between the bedroom door and the hatch. Next, how to get the doors of the hatch shut behind him . . .

He had put his shoes on and was sitting on the sill of the hatch, working out the necessary sequence of movements, when he realized that the harp music was coming to a close. You can always tell. A gulp like sickness constricted his throat. The music stopped. The stillness of mid afternoon seemed dense as water. She'd hear the slightest movement. He should have left by the door and risked it. Then he heard the faint rattle of paper, a ripple of wires, and a new piece of music starting. He let out his breath, half twisted onto his right buttock, and reached his left leg out and down, feeling for the topmost rung. The doors were no problem, but it would be different when he had Pinkie to cope with. The tinkle of Mrs. Butterfield's harp followed him down the shaft. He could still hear it as he crouched on the lift at the bottom, listening for footsteps in the stone passage.

Going to be a lot more moments like that, he thought.

Part Three

12

Perhaps it was Barry's own nervousness that made Norah touchy. She couldn't have known tonight was the night—nobody did except him and Pinkie—but she sniffed at the pork chop and growled deep in her throat. Her dark hackles rose. She sensed something was wrong. She was supposed to go hungry all night, so that she would roam the grounds in a hunting mood and then be given her meal next morning when the night porter put her back in her cage. She knew Barry by now and accepted him. He'd assumed she would still do so if she met him out in the grounds in the dark but had decided to make doubly sure by taking the edge off her hunger.

It was a mistake. She was instantly suspicious, being offered the wrong food at the wrong time in the wrong place. He tossed the meat away, and it fell on the grass beside a large rhododendron. The growling died, and her hackles lay flat, and then, when he loosed her from the stubby leash, she sidled over and sniffed again at the chop. With a thief's quick glance she picked it up and slipped off around the bush. A sudden spatter of rain rattled on the big leaves. Barry glanced up. There was a steady, moist wind blowing from the southwest, and the night-black clouds looked low and heavy. He could do without rain, but the forecast had been bad. Anyway, it was too late to change. Everything was set and ready, equipment in places, signals and messages sent. Rain or no rain, tonight was the night when it was all going to have to work. At least rain might keep Norah under cover.

He let himself in at the back door, switched the alarm

system on, and immediately went to the lift shaft. The lift hung there, empty. As he wound it the extra eighteen inches down, he heard the old wooden gears groaning far above. With luck no one would notice the brief rumble among the general stirring of the Foundation, but in the small hours, when all was still, it would have boomed a warning through the whole building. That done, he went to the porter's booth, hung up his keys, and started his normal night routine as though nothing was going to happen different from any other night. Four and a half hours later he climbed the lift shaft.

He took it slowly, using the climb as practice, getting his hands and feet to know without thinking exactly where the next rung would come. This wasn't like the first time; everybody had been in the Hall of Harmony then, but now, perhaps within two or three feet of where the shaft passed through the upper floors, there might be someone sleeping or even, possibly, lying awake in the dark, wondering about the faint creak or scuffle from beyond the wall. Indeed, at one moment Barry was sure he could hear a steady, deep breathing, almost a snore.

The top of the shaft was groping black. Not a glimmer this time to show him the position of the doors and the hatch sill. Clinging with one hand to the topmost rung, he took a flashlight from his breast pocket, switched it on, and gripped it between his teeth. The light shone sideways, but just enough was reflected off the walls of the shaft to let him see the jut of the sill. He took a deep breath, heaved, reached, and was there with barely even a thud. His left hand pushed at the doors, gripped the far edge of the sill. A few seconds later he was sitting with his legs dangling down the shaft and his head and shoulders out in the nursery passage.

He waited, listening to silence. With the flashlight he

rechecked the details of the shaft, trying to fix them in his mind so that he could explain to Pinkie exactly what he wanted her to do on the return trip. Nothing stirred. Nobody seemed to breathe. Using his palm to screen the beam down to a glimmer, he lowered himself to the carpet and stole the five and a half paces to Pinkie's door. He gripped the handle and pulled gently, and then more firmly, before he started to turn it. Slowly. Slowly. The catch came free with a click that he could feel but not hear. He opened the door and went in.

There was a stir of movement from the bed. He flicked the beam across. Pinkie was sitting bolt upright, reaching for her glasses on the bedside table. He turned the beam onto himself and put his finger to his lips, then picked up one of her slippers, put it by the doorjamb, and pushed the door almost shut against it. He crossed to the bed and lifted her quilt off her. As she swung her legs over the side of the mattress, she put her mouth against his ear.

"I did sleep a bit," she whispered.

He nodded, picked her clothes off the chair where they lay folded, and put them on the bed beside her, shining the flashlight on them so that she could see to dress. She'd hidden a good thick pullover under her pillow, presumably so that Mrs. Butterfield shouldn't notice it when she said good night. Typically she started putting it on back to front, and he had to switch it around for her. But she seemed perfectly calm. When she'd finished dressing, he put his mouth against her ear and explained about getting down the hatch. Twice, to be sure. She nodded. He crossed the room and wedged the door open.

When he came back, she was settling her little teddy bear neatly into the middle of her pillow. She had rearranged the quilt. He realized that she was deliberately leaving a Pinkie signal, clear as a written message, so that

Mrs. Butterfield should know she had left of her own free will. He picked her up, carried her out into the passage, settled her feet on the hatch sill, and showed her how to grip the top of the hatch and lean her body over to the side so that she left room for him to climb through.

He was sitting on the sill, poised to begin the twisting and reaching-downward movement, when all of a sudden he became overwhelmingly conscious of the drop below. It was something to do with the dark, something to do with the tension of action, something to do with having slightly less room to maneuver in because of Pinkie standing at the edge of the opening. Every muscle in his body locked itself still with the terror of falling, going tumbling down in the dark, thumping a couple of times against the timber lining and smashing into the lift top thirty feet below. *Stupid. Come on, Bear. You've done it before.*

He willed his muscles to move, and they did, but it wasn't going to be any good. He had almost three feet to reach before his left sole touched the first rung, but after only six inches he found his hands and forearms were still clinging grimly to the sill, trying to drag his body back into the passage. A little farther, and there'd be a point of no return, beyond which he'd be unable to hoist himself back up.

As he hung there, trying to curse himself through the barrier, something brushed his cheek—the back of Pinkie's hand. Perhaps she was just reaching down, puzzled at the delay, to see if it was time for her to begin, but she moved her hand around and laid it against the back of his head, tousling her fingers through the thick hair. The tension seemed to flow out of him. His arms relaxed, and he swung himself easily down and sideways, his foot landing precisely on the rung as though it was a movement he'd practiced a hundred times. He let the impetus flow into the next stage,

down onto the second rung, and came to rest with his right hand reaching up to grip the sill and his left on the top rung.

"Okay," he whispered. "Quick. I can't hold this long."

She seemed to him to make much more noise than he had as she settled onto the sill. Her shoe thumped slightly against the wood as it felt for his shoulder. It scraped by his ear, nudged around, settled. The other foot found his left shoulder. Still holding the sill, she knelt, put a hand around his neck, dropped.

It was just as well he had braced himself for the shock because she seemed to sling herself down, totally trusting, not afraid of the drop or the dark. Her arm jerked chokingly against his windpipe until her other arm came slithering down his and found a hold. He let go of the sill and lowered himself another rung, then rested.

Now, down.

It turned out tougher than he'd expected. No single move was especially difficult, but Pinkie's extra weight and the need for silence, which meant that everything had to be done with unnatural slowness, turned the muscles he was using into hard bars of pain. Soon he was having to will himself not to grunt with the effort. He lost count of the rungs so that when at last he reached down for the lift top, it wasn't there, and he had to climb on down two more to find it. His whole body was quivering by the time he let Pinkie slither down to stand in the dark beside him. When he pushed the hatch doors open, the light from the passage seemed so glaring that for a moment he imagined Sergeant Coyne must be there, shining a flashlight in, having known all along what was happening.

The passage was empty. He slithered down, helped Pinkie to follow, and closed the lift doors. He grinned at her, and her tiny mouth smiled back.

"That was the stiff bit," he whispered. "Now on, it's easy, except that it's sheeting with rain."

He led the way to the back door and held up his hand for stillness. Yes, no mistaking the steady tinkle of water down an iron drainpipe and the slop of overflow from a blocked gutter. He pulled out a black garbage liner from where he had hidden it among the stack of old newspapers that were stored against the wall. Pinkie stood while he pulled it down over her until her head poked out through the corner he had cut off. The cut piece made a clumsy sou'wester. He fastened it in place with a rubber band.

"Miss Refuse Collection 1985," he said.

"What about you?"

"I'm going to have to get wet. There's a guard dog called Norah out there. She knows me. At least she knows me in my uniform. She mightn't, got up like that. But listen, if she does show up, don't run away or anything. Stand still. I've given her a chop, and with a bit of luck she'll be under cover because of the rain. Wait here. I shan't be a second."

He switched off the alarm circuit at the box in the storeroom and came back.

"Funny how things work out," he said. "Freeman put me on night duty to keep me clear of you, but really he was giving us our best chance. I hope he works that out."

She nodded, very definitely, as if he'd been putting forward a serious argument which she had then accepted. It was all right for her. She just took it for granted that old Bear would get her clear. Probably thought H.E. was giving them a push, arranging the lift shaft and the keys and everything so that it all worked out. He shrugged and unlocked the door. Glistening rain sliced down through the lit dark and bounced off puddled cobbles. He shoved her out, nipped back to switch the alarm circuit on, and returned. Jesus, it was raining! He pulled his uniform cap from his

pocket and put it on, but it was soaked through in an instant.

With his hand on Pinkie's shoulder to guide her they moved along by the wall, quickly across the lit gap between the main buildings and the stables and into the darkness beyond. There must have been a goodish moon behind the storm clouds because the night was not pitch-black. As soon as his eyes were used to it, he could see the loom of the great cedars and the main blocks of bushes. He had strolled this way by daylight several times, making a mental note of such landmarks, choosing a path that would take them well clear of invisible obstacles like flower beds. The rain drenched down, slobbering his cap onto his head, soaking through to his shoulders. He seemed to breathe wetness. Each step across the lawn felt like wading through marshland. The bike ride was going to be no kind of fun. Good thing he'd allowed a spare hour—they were going to need it.

Beyond the lawn and trees lay a big walled garden full of vegetables, and to the north of this was a neglected orchard. Between the two ran an area of small outbuildings —potting sheds, boiler rooms for the greenhouses, huts for mowers, even a few old pigsties. Only the ones nearest the house were still used, and as you went farther toward the outer wall, they became more and more neglected, with roofs gappy or collapsed and nettles everywhere. Barry switched on the flashlight to guide their way along the last stretch. The narrow path ended at a door with a bolted padlock. The wall itself was ten foot high and topped with barbed wire.

"Hold it here a sec," Barry said.

He fetched a little hacksaw from the plastic bag he had hidden under a pile of rotted stakes.

"Right," he said. "You hold the light for me. This'll take about ten minutes, I should think."

The padlock was a new one, made with good hardened steel, but the bolt itself was old, and there was room to work at it in the gap between the door and the frame. The new blade bit fast, whining into the metal. *No hurry. Easy. You're doing fine.* . . . He was about halfway through and had straightened for a rest and a change of grip when out of the dark behind him came the noise. In the instant before the impact he thought it was some kind of machine, some trap or alarm he had triggered which made this snarling racket, but then something hit him violently between the shoulder blades, slamming him into Pinkie and then down sprawling on the gritty old ash path. What had hit him did so again but stayed this time, pressing him down, and the snarl became a series of sharp, deep barks.

"Oi!" he yelled. "Norah! It's me! Off! Off! Down! Easy!"

He tried to twist sideways under her, but immediately the barking changed to a freezing snarl close against his nape. He lay still. Jesus! What now? Get Pinkie back to bed; then he could say . . . No hope. Norah must have been sheltering in one of the sheds, heard the hacksaw or the voices. . . . Nobody'd hear her, night like this. Lie still, give her a chance to ease off. . . .

The barking had begun again, but now it faltered, drying to a grumbling snarl. Silence.

"It's only Barry," said Pinkie's stony little voice. "That's a good dog. It's only Barry, Norah."

The weight lifted. Barry rolled carefully to one side. A half growl began as he moved, mixed with Pinkie's calming murmurs. Shakily he rose. Pinkie had managed to hang on to the flashlight somehow, and in its small glow he could see Norah's head and shoulders, the bright, distrustful eyes

and bared fangs, the fur glistening with wet, and Pinkie's hand resting not on Norah's collar but on the dark, puzzled brow. He wanted to yell at Pinkie for the risk she'd taken—kids have got killed by guard dogs—but he knew the yell would be mainly the expression of his own fright. They stood on a balance now, the three of them. . . .

"Okay," he said. "You're a stupid hound, Norah. Take it easy. Careful, Pinkie."

"She's all right."

He grunted.

"Shine the light over this way," he said. "I dropped my saw around here."

The chrome of its handle caught the light and glittered. He picked it up, but as soon as he put it to the metal again, Norah began to growl. Somehow she seemed to recognize that this was one of the things she had been trained to stop.

"It's all right, Norah," said Pinkie. "It's all right."

He sawed steadily. His mind chewed away at the image of Pinkie's hand resting between Norah's stupid brown eyes. What did she *do?* Crazy, the idea of H.E. streaming like an electric current down her arm and through the dog's thick skull. Nothing you could measure, nothing you could think about, but still chew, chew, chew. Like gum, all flavor gone, but it's still there. . . .

The metal pinched on the blade. With the numb fingers of his left hand he held it true for a dozen careful strokes, and suddenly he was through. As he pulled the door open, using the padlock as a handle, Norah's growl joined with the groaning hinges. He could see by the grass growing against it outside that it hadn't been opened all summer.

"You go first," said Pinkie. "She's upset."

She was indeed. He slipped through and stood with his hand around the door edge, ready to pull it shut. After

several seconds Pinkie came quickly through the gap. He almost trapped his fingers as Norah's weight slammed into the wood on the far side, closing the door. Her bark rose, a different note now, harsher and louder. As they moved off down the squelching track, she followed them on the inside, still barking, until her path was blocked by the wall of the vegetable garden. On a still night she would have been heard for miles. Even now, despite the whoosh of wind in the treetops and the rush of rain against the leaves, it was always possible that her barking would coincide with a lull and reach to where Sergeant Coyne slept in the gate cottage, a quarter of a mile down the hill. As she heard their footsteps squelching away, she let out a few frantic yelps and gave up. Nasty while it lasted, though.

The track led out onto a tarred lane. Barry turned right, southwesterly into the wind. The high wall followed the lane for a couple of hundred yards and then gave way to a field hedge. At the end of this first field stood a ramshackle farmyard. Long ago the big house must have had its own home farm with acres of land belonging, but now it all seemed to be farmed by someone else, and this place was used only as a dump for old machinery and straw bales and empty oil drums. Exploring by day, Barry had never seen anyone around. They climbed the iron gate, and he led the way into the tractor shed. The rain on the iron roof rattled and boomed. In the shelter of the screen of bales he had built at the back he lifted up a layer of blue fertilizer bags, propped up the bike he'd hidden beneath them, and switched on the front lamp. Its light shone warmly off the golden straw, making the little space seem almost cozy, like a crib in a Nativity tableau. Barry realized that he was squelching with every step, every movement. He might just have dragged himself out of a swimming pool with all his clothes on.

"How are you doing?" he said.

"My feet are wet, but I'm dry above. Can I take this off now?"

She looked almost like some kind of alien with her rain-fogged glasses and her face, pale as a mushroom, poking up through the shiny black plastic. If this were a film, Barry realized, she'd actually turn out to be an alien. That'd be how she did what she did. Why do you always have to have reasons?

"Okay," he said. "I've got a proper cape and hat for you in the basket. Take your shoes and socks off, and we'll see what we can do. I'm going to find some dry clothes."

"A bit's got in around my neck."

"Too bad."

He stripped off his uniform, wrung out his shirt, and gave it to her.

"Wipe yourself down a bit with this," he said. "Better than nothing. And I've got some biscuits somewhere."

"I'm not hungry."

"You will be. And cold."

She managed to dry herself off a bit and then nibbled reluctantly while he dressed. There was a dark stain on her green sweater along one shoulder where the rain had got in, but there was nothing much he could do about that, and her own body heat ought to cope with it. He was more worried about her feet. Her canvas shoes were wet through, and her jeans soaked to the knees. The luxurious dryness of the clothes he was putting on, even over damp underclothes, made him more aware of the problem. When he was dressed, he lifted her up, sat her on the bales, and stripped off her shoes and socks. Nothing he could do about her jeans. His own dry socks were enormously too large for her feet and came up to her knees.

"What about you?" she said.

"Feet are going to get soaked through in twenty yards," he said. "No point in putting on new ones. You might as well have them."

With his penknife he cut the liner she'd been wearing into four strips and made two rough bags to cover her feet and two sheaths for her legs. He lashed them into place with twine from a bale and pulled her jeans down over them.

"Best I can do."

"Thank you."

"You know, you're an extraordinary kid, Pinkie. You realize you haven't asked me anything, not even when we're going to see your granddad, let alone how we're going to get to him."

"I know you've thought of it all."

"Done my best. I better warn you the next bit's not going to be a picnic, this weather. We've got a twenty-mile bike ride. When do you usually get up in the mornings?"

"Louise's alarm goes off about seven, and she comes and opens my curtains soon after."

"Should be all right. We're heading for the six twenty from Alton. I thought if they spot you're gone before that, they'll try Winchester and maybe Petersfield. Alton gives us an extra chance, and it gets into London at a different platform, too. Same station, Waterloo, can't help that. Seven twenty-nine it gets there. If Mrs. B. doesn't spot you're gone till seven, give her five minutes to tell Freeman, ten minutes for him to decide you're nowhere around and get in touch with the police—we'll be unlucky if they've got anyone waiting for us at Waterloo. Then we've got to bike across London to Euston. I'm more worried about that end, because there isn't a train suits us till just before nine. We're not heading for Dallington, of course, because they'll be looking for us there and King's Cross, but if we

go up the other line, we can get off at Stafford; that's only thirty miles. Sleep in a sort of cave place I know up on the moors and your granddad's coming out to meet us at Ferriby next morning, supposing he can get away without being followed."

"It'll be all right."

"Best I could think of. The other idea was to hire a car and a driver, but then we'd have been in his hands. Much safer, just us. Besides, it would've cost a packet. Your granddad's given me some, but he isn't made of the stuff, so I sold my Galaxy and bought this old rattler . . ."

"Oh, Bear!"

He looked at her and grinned. She was a funny kid all right. You thought she didn't notice anything, but then . . . She'd never even seen the Galaxy. Maybe he'd mentioned bringing it down, talking to Mrs. Butterfield that teatime, but Pinkie'd only been half awake then. . . . Still, she knew. She understood it was something that had mattered.

"Had to change it anyway," he said. "Couldn't fit a seat for you over ten-speed gears. Had enough biscuits? We'd better get going."

He stood her down and helped her into the crackling, new-smelling plastic cape and hat, then got into his own rainproofs.

"Hold it there," he said. "Don't go tramping around. Your footwear's dead in fashion but not what I'd call hard-wearing. I'll be back for you in a sec. Might as well put your glasses away, though, case we have a spill. You won't be needing them next three hours."

He unlocked the bike, stowed the chain in a basket, and wheeled the machine out through the sluicing rain to the gate. When he went back to fetch her, he found her standing still, apparently quite unalarmed by dark and loneliness

and the drumlike roar of the rain. He picked her up and carried her across the boggy yard litter. She was small for her age, but a solid kid all the same. In his mind's eye as he'd planned the journey, he'd imagined her trudging beside him while he shoved the bike up the hills. Now he'd be shoving her weight as well. Hadn't he better forget about the lanes and go by the main roads after all? It was no farther, the hills were easier, and the road markings would be a help on a night like this. Twenty miles. Three hours and a bit. *Oh, come on, Bear, you can do it by the lanes. It's your sort of thing, your kind of night, secret and dark. . . .*

He settled Pinkie on the wall by the gate, heaved the bike over, climbed after it, and lifted her down into the kiddie seat over the rear wheel.

"Bit small for you," he said, "but the fellow in the shop swore he'd sold one to a lady who'd taken her daughter on a cycling tour in Wales, and she was your age. Now listen, all you've got to do is sit tight. Don't try and balance the bike. If I lean, you lean with me. Got it?"

He switched on the lights, wheeled the bike into the middle of the lane, straddled the crossbar, and with a minor wobble or two pumped off into the sluicing dark.

13

Nothing could have made the ride to Alton a fun event, but despite its being pretty well pure hell, it was still somehow glorious. Not that Barry was suddenly endowed with Superbear strength; in fact, he was already tireder than he'd expected, and the weather made everything harder than he'd planned for. It wasn't long before he realized that by the time they reached Alton—if they did reach it—he'd be somewhere near the limit of his strength.

Pinkie's weight was bad enough. It made the levels stiff going and even the gentler downhills nervy; the steep ones felt dead dangerous. The beam lit five yards of glittering downpour, which he squinted at through rain-blinded eyes. Wet brakes barely gripped the slithering wheel rims. The heavy gear felt primitive and inefficient compared with the ten-speed change he'd been used to on the Galaxy, and though he'd oiled every bearing, the whole bike seemed stiff. Time nagged at his mind with every pedal stroke. Twenty miles in three hours is less than seven miles an hour—child's play, you'd have thought, on anything. But after half an hour he knew they had nothing to spare.

Their course lay northwest. The valleys ran roughly east and west. None of the hills rose more than a few hundred feet, but most were steep, and the ancient, high-hedged lanes—picked out perhaps centuries before by packhorses and foot travelers—twisted irrationally among them. Standing up on his pedals, Barry would pump along some undulating ridge, not daring to use the downslopes to gather speed for the next short up in case the up wasn't there and

he found himself plunging full tilt into a valley. He had had time to explore the full route only once and had been more concerned to memorize landmarks and not get lost in the maze of lanes than to take note of ups and downs.

Along these uplands the economic speed was little more than that of the wind, which blew gustily from behind him. Anything faster, and his cape turned into an air brake. Indeed, when the odd gust swirled the wrong way and came at him head-on, the buffet felt almost as if he'd ridden into some solid obstacle, unseen in the dark.

The valleys were worse. The road would plunge with no warning into a black tunnel of hazel coppice. Brakes hard on, but no sense of slowing, steep bank rushing up as the lane twisted, became steeper, blacker, slither of loose leaves, out of control . . . yell "Hold tight!" and try and hit the bank slantwise. . . .

It happened like that a couple of times before Barry decided that the only safe thing was to get off and walk before he lost control, or at least to stand on one pedal and scoot, ready to jump down as the rush began, though half the time he discovered that the precaution hadn't been necessary and he could have ridden the whole way down. But in other places the lanes cut deep beneath the land surface and ran between cliffs of earth, reeking with wild garlic, which often hid juts of the underlying rock. Hit something like that full speed, and the escape would be over. Then in the bottom they would hear the rush of a swollen stream, and Barry would lean against the handlebars and trudge up the far slope, always deciding too early that it had eased enough for him to ride and trying to do so and then having to get off again.

That was not all. There was the numbing wind chill on his hands, the slop of water in his shoes, the slash of rain in his eyes, and the weary rattle of raindrops against his head.

Worse still were the bouts of doubt, the moments when he became convinced that he had missed the way. When he had ridden the route, he had brought a one-inch map, marked all possible landmarks on it, and then spent part of his night shifts learning them by heart. He had not realized how little he would see—that he could actually be on the lookout for a pair of white cottages not ten feet from the road and still miss them and then go pounding on into the dark, convinced that he hadn't passed them and was now astray in the maze of lanes, with time running helplessly away. . . .

Yet, despite doubt and panic, cold, risk, effort, and weariness, Barry was happy. Bear was happy. They were going to make it. *He* was going to make it, rather. He had hardly noticed, but since Pinkie had called him by his secret name in the cupboard, Bear had been strangely quiet. Even in the long night hours at the Foundation he had existed as little more than a fancy, a faint mind shadow. Now he was at the surface again, but somehow not separate. Working not just together with Barry but as one, doing something which only they—he—could have done. The slog and struggle were suffused with physical happiness. The rain-cleaned air was good to breathe, good to feed the lungs, making strong blood for the heart to pump through the arteries to muscles that might ache as they toiled but did not whine. And the brain, too, fed on that good blood, thought sense, kept the map clear, refused the nudgings of panic. The sense of wellness, of life being good, was so strong that it seemed to spread out beyond his body, to make a sort of bubble, or force field, around him and Pinkie, moving along the black lanes with them at its center. The rain and the night and the road, the old-fashioned bike with its frustrating gears, even the hedges and the fields and woods beyond were part of the bubble, felt

with him, shared his happiness. Of course, it was stupid to think of a bike's being happy, let alone a raindrop as it flicked through the lamp beam, golden for its moment before it slapped into tarmac and stopped existing as an individual drop, lost in wetness, but Barry discovered that that was how he was thinking.

It happened when he was on foot, shoving up a slope. He had dismounted when the effort of pedaling hard stopped being worthwhile, had gripped the back of the saddle with his right hand and the handlebars with his left, and leaned into a straining trudge.

Deprived of her hold on his waist, Pinkie put her left hand on his wrist. The pitch of the slope eased. Through a gap in the overarching hazels a shaft of rain shot down and glittered in the lamplight, like sparks from a firework, fountaining down. As he pushed into the gold shower, Barry's mind took hold of the whole experience and put it into shape, into thoughts he could think about. He pushed on up the hill.

"You doing something?" he asked.

"I want to help."

"You're helping all right."

"Mustn't think about it."

"Can't stop myself. Kind of person I am."

But it was true. The bubble had somehow shrunk with the discovery of its existence. It was still there but reached barely beyond him. And its center was not Barry or Barry-and-Pinkie; it was the point at which her chill hand touched his wrist. What did she do? What was she doing to him? Was it all that different from what she'd done to Norah?

"Is it a lot farther to go?" she said.

"Fair bit. We're halfway. You all right?"

"I'm cold."

She wasn't complaining, just telling him. Poor kid. The effort of pedaling had kept Barry warm under his rainwear despite the wetness of hands and face and feet. Pinkie had just had to sit.

"Can't you think yourself warm?"

"Me?"

"I don't see why not. I mean, if you can . . ."

"It isn't like that."

"Okay. Sorry. Pity you can't walk. We'll stop at the top of the hill and try and warm you up a bit."

"All right."

Where the slope eased he lifted her down and made her do knee bends and arm slaps while he felt for biscuits in the basket. They were under trees still, but he could see the faint arch of sky where the woods ended. Despite the leaf cover, it was difficult to find anyplace where the rain didn't come through as heavily as if they'd been out in the open. He ate a couple of biscuits while Pinkie slapped obediently in the dark beside him.

"Better?" he asked.

"A bit."

"On we go then."

They wobbled out from under the trees and were gathering speed along a level before Barry realized that something had changed. It had almost stopped raining. What had seemed like rain in the wood had been mostly drips off all those leaves. But now, apart from an occasional spattering, the lamp beam shone clear through onto the glossy black wetness of the road. It made a fantastic difference. A mile or so later, as the road dipped into another valley, he found that he could actually see beyond the reach of the lamp beam. Night was ending. When they climbed out on the far side, he could see the trailing edges of the storm lit

faintly gray and pale streaks of the beginnings of daylight in the clearing sky to the southeast.

"Look at that," he said. "If we'd started an hour later, we wouldn't have got wet at all. We've been traveling with it."

Now that he no longer needed the lights, he switched them off. Steadily the dawn brightened, and as it did, the soaked landscape started to come alive. Anywhere with trees or bushes a racket of birdsong began. In a farmyard a tractor engine clattered. They passed a milk cart by a cottage gate; the milkman's whistling came from behind the house. Later a small blue van breasted a hill and came toward them. The driver was the first witness all night who could have told anyone which way they'd come, and with luck he hadn't noticed Pinkie huddled against Barry's back; a bicyclist slogging along in the wet dawn wasn't that extraordinary a sight. The later it got, the more likely they were to be seen but the less likely to be noticed.

And they were making better time, with the rain gone and the road properly visible. Barry pushed his hood back, opened the collar of his cape, and let himself steam as he rode. The steepest valleys were all behind them now. The storm drifted north, leaving a sky that changed from pearly to blue as the sun came up.

The last two miles were along a main road. More traffic whipped past, spraying out spume. Alton High Street was almost empty. Twenty minutes to spare. He turned into an alley between two shops, where he undid the lashings around Pinkie's feet and legs and put her back barefoot into her sodden shoes. When he straightened to pedal the last couple of hundred yards to the station, his legs were so feeble that for a moment he thought he couldn't even stand.

There was no sign of anything that looked like a police

car at the station. He bought their tickets from an unquestioning clerk, wheeled the bike out onto the platform, and put it into the guard's van of the waiting train. With a basket in each hand and Pinkie beside him he squelched up along the train. Every seat was empty because Alton was the start of that line. They climbed into a pleasant, mild, greenhousy warmth, settled facing each other by the far windows where the sun came in, and ate biscuits and raisins. Pinkie took off her shoes, and Barry balanced them on a window ledge in the sun to begin to dry. Some men with heavy, grumbling voices got in farther down the same carriage. More people, not many, moved along the platform, choosing where to sit. Nine minutes dragged achingly by. Pinkie had fallen asleep before the train started. Six twenty.

At six thirty Barry took his little radio from a basket and held it to his ear, trying to hear the news bulletin through the clatter of interference from the overhead cables. Trouble in Lebanon. Big CND rally. Test Match pitch underwater. Fire in holiday camp. Nothing about a kid missing—too soon. Eight o'clock earliest.

The train stopped every five minutes or so, and more people got on. An Indian in a turban took the seat next to Pinkie, who stirred but did not wake. Barry had to move the baskets onto the rack to make room for a fat young woman, who then read incredibly slowly through the *Sun,* page by page, not missing anything. The more people, the better, because it meant Barry and Pinkie became less noticeable.

He ached, body and mind, with tiredness. It was getting on toward his normal bedtime now, and for the last week he had needed to cut down on sleep in order to make all the preparations for the escape—exploring the route, trading the bikes, buying maps and tools and so on, picking up the money Mr. Stott had sent. Everything had demanded a

twenty-mile bike ride at least. But in spite of exhaustion, he was too keyed up to sleep. Just as well. Last thing he wanted was for the train to reach Waterloo and all the passengers leave except him and Pinkie, snoozing in their corners. Sure way to get noticed.

He found himself gazing vaguely at Pinkie. She didn't have that especially angelic look some kids take on when they're asleep. Her glasses had slid crooked, and her plain, pale face had somehow closed itself away. It was like the wall of a house that has no windows on the outside; perhaps there's an inner courtyard with flowers, and a fountain, and a child nursing a kitten, but you don't know about any of that from the street. He wondered if in order to do what she did, Pinkie needed to be like that. When she gave, she gave enormously. You couldn't do that without killing yourself, not all the time. You had to have a way of putting the shutters up. . . . Anyway, how long could she go on? Looking at her now, studying her for tiny signs, Barry thought that even in sleep she seemed worn, stretched, thinned. . . .

Was it all worth her while? Sort of subject for a pub argument: You have this gift; the world needs it; the more you give, the less chance you have of becoming anything except your gift. Must you go on giving? Look at pop stars. A lot of them destroy themselves, giving the fans what they want; drug to keep going, heavier and heavier; and then the overdose. Of course, they'd chosen, it was their own lookout. Pinkie had *been* chosen, so she was different. Except she'd told him it was all she ever wanted to do. Anyway, she'd chosen old Bear, all that time ago, sneaking up on him in the corridor outside the secretary's office at Marsden Ash Junior. "You've got a nasty head. . . ." Had she somehow known then she was going to need him? Oh,

rubbish. But just thinking about that morning was good as a hot breakfast. . . .

It was, too. Of course, some of the warmth and restfulness and sense of renewal came from the food he'd eaten, the sun, and the cradlelike swaying of the train. But not all. There was an inward glow along his spine and across his shoulder blades, a feeling inside him of fresh reserves being raised, like troops streaming out from his innermost citadel to replace the exhausted, battered, almost defeated armies at the front. Could Pinkie do that, even asleep? Did she have to be there? Could you do it by thinking about her? Could you do it for yourself without using her at all? No. To the last question anyway. Somehow he was sure of that. She'd said she couldn't think herself warm, hadn't she?

He shook his head, looked at his watch, and found he'd missed the seven o'clock news. By miles. He was sure he hadn't slept, but time had done a curious trick, collapsing almost an hour into a few minutes of sunny brooding. The train must have stopped several times, unnoticed, because it was crowded now. People were standing all down the center aisle. And outside the windows lay factories and tower blocks and railway sheds and all the sprawl of outer London. The train rattled and snaked its way on. It was 7:23. Mrs. Butterfield would have found Pinkie's bed empty just after seven. They'd have worked out by now that Barry was missing, too. Perhaps Freeman was phoning the police at this very moment. Five minutes to Waterloo Station if the train was on time. . . .

Pinkie woke of her own accord, and he helped her cram her half-dry shoes on over his socks.

Nobody was waiting at Waterloo. Barry felt very exposed and obvious as they rode the two miles across London to Euston. A policeman was strolling across the main con-

course there but barely glanced at them as they lined up for tickets. They bought hot milk and tasteless hamburgers at the cafeteria, and Barry listened to the eight o'clock news. Surely by now. . . . But no. Lebanon, CND, Test Match, fire—nothing. The train north left at 8:58. It was less than half full.

Now Barry dared sleep, dipping in and out of darkness, never sure till he looked at his watch whether he'd been unconscious for seconds or minutes or even hours before some change in the beat of the wheels had broken through to wake him with a false signal of getting there. Fragments of dreams recurred: They had arrived, got down normally, but then things, absurd things but still sinister, had started to happen—Pinkie somehow still on the train as it moved away, or the bike chained with the wrong lock, or policemen waiting on the platform, but why were they wearing swastika armbands? Or crossing the moor, and the helicopter hovering lower, and the bike melting away, and the good thick gorse that had seemed to screen them withering to nothing while the drub of the rotor (the drum of the train wheels) closed in . . . All nonsense, known to be nonsense, even while the dream was running, but repeated over and over, both boring and panicky . . .

Barry wasn't aware of the dreams ending and himself falling into a true, deep slumber or of the weight against his side as Pinkie came and snuggled there. He'd last seen her curled up on the seat opposite, but she was fast asleep against his side when he was woken by the word "Stafford" on the train intercom. He came to with a panic start and heard the message repeated. Perfect. He shook her shoulder, and she woke blinking.

"Almost there," he said. "Good dreams?"

"I don't have dreams."

"Sometimes wish I didn't. I don't know. Listen, this might be the dodgiest place yet. I'm going to give you your ticket. Come through the barrier a bit after me. Try and look as if you belonged with someone else. Okay?"

But there were still no police, no questions. Pinkie stood guard over the bike while Barry bought food and spare shoes and socks for her; her own were good as dry by now, but it would be stupid to get caught like that again. He walked the bike away from the town center, leaving her to trail along behind. As soon as the streets were clearer, they mounted and rode, for the first mile or so along a main road but after that off into the lanes, heading northeast toward the hills. This route he'd only been able to plan from a map, there'd been no chance to explore it, but in thirty miles he reckoned he'd be reaching roads he had covered from Marsden Ash.

The rain had fallen heavily here also, a great wide front moving across England and clearing away to leave a steamy, sodden landscape, blue sky mottled with hummocky white clouds, a strong noon sun. It was hot work hauling along the lanes, even at a gentle pace. At any serious rise he got off and made Pinkie walk, too. There was no hurry. They ate their lunch at the edge of a fresh-reaped field. Flies came out of nowhere and swarmed around. It was a country of stodgy little villages and small fields, with the odd coal tip heaving up. Not pretty like Hampshire or Thurley, not hard and dark like the valleys around Marsden Ash, but friendly and close, in a grubby sort of way. The farms were busy with early harvest. But although it felt a different sort of place from the ones Barry knew, in anything that mattered it was the same. The people here, if they guessed who the young man and the child were at the edge of this field, would . . . Hey! News! He looked at his watch. Almost one o'clock. He just caught the headlines. New missile sys-

tem. Preparations for CND rally. Lebanon. Test Match off. Floods in Cumberland. Fall on stock exchange. Nothing about a missing kid and night porter.

"What's up?" he muttered.

"He hasn't told them."

"Why not? He must have. He'd be crazy. . . . He is crazy, I suppose."

"He knows you won't hurt me."

"Yeah . . . yeah, I suppose he does."

"And he doesn't like the wrong people knowing."

"Yeah . . . Listen! There's more than one kind of wrong people, isn't there? Did you say anything to Mrs. Butterfield about what he's been giving you?"

"You said to."

"Right. And she'll have asked him . . . Hey! He might decide she's in it! She asked me to get you away!"

"Poor Louise."

"Don't you see? One lot of stuff he gave you sounded dead like LSD to me. He'd go to prison for giving that to a kid. If he thinks we've got that far, he *can't* go to the police!"

"Louise would tell him."

"He won't believe her. Liars don't."

"He'll do something. He's clever."

"Yeah. We'll carry on according to plan, right? Act like everyone's on the lookout for us."

"If you want. I don't think anything's going to happen today."

"Not if I can help it, it isn't . . . Wait a minute. What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"Do you know something I don't?"

"I don't think so."

"I don't mean . . . Listen, I know things by seeing

them, or reading or hearing about them, or working them out from other things I know. That's the only way I *can* know anything. But you—you've got to accept you're not an ordinary kid, Pinkie. When you help people get well, you're in touch with something pretty mysterious, right?"

"It's just there."

"For you it is. But you don't understand how it works, do you?"

"Don't want to."

She was answering stiffly now, unwillingly, but he pushed on.

"What I'm trying to get at is this. Whatever you're in touch with—mightn't it do more than helping you get people well? For instance, mightn't it tell you things?"

"What sort of things?"

"Like knowing nothing's going to happen today?"

She frowned and shook her head.

"You wouldn't have to know how you knew," he said. "You'd just know."

She picked unhappily at a fray of her jeans. A fly crawled down her cheek. She didn't seem to notice. Another thought struck him.

"And you knew about Bear," he said.

"It's just a name."

"Do you really think so? It's important, Pinkie. Important to me."

He reached out and took her hand. She didn't pull it away, but it felt somehow dead in his grip. Nothing happened: no flow, no strange warmth, no sense of being in touch with all the intricate universe. They sat in a warm field on their cycling capes, and flies hazed around them. He let go.

"Perhaps it's not my sort of thing," she said. "It isn't always."

"Last night when we were riding to Alton, it was all right then. In fact, it was terrific. Magic. And that was you."

She looked around the field.

"Perhaps this isn't a very good place," she said.

"Oh, come off it! You can't . . . Sorry, it isn't your fault, but that's got to be rubbish."

"Thinking doesn't help."

"That's got to be rubbish, too!" he said—shouted almost.

She turned her head away, withdrawing into herself.

"Sorry," he said again. "Like I said, it's not your fault."

She remained withdrawn. All the exhaustion, all the nervy waiting and action of the last eighteen hours flooded suddenly through him, like a physical event, some unwanted chemical spreading through his system with the moving bloodstream. Now the twenty-five miles to the cave above Brant seemed an impossible distance, though they had all afternoon and evening to get there. He glanced at Pinkie, still picking at her jeans. Why'd he bothered? he wondered. It was all rubbish. She couldn't do anything for him, and look what he'd done for her. At the same time he hated himself for the feeling. Suppose she knew about it. Suppose she were to reach out her hand and take his and switch on the flow and make him feel good again—what would that prove? Nothing. Except that Pinkie was able to control him, the way she'd controlled Norah.

The sourness increased, the feeling of everything having somehow come out wrong. Perhaps it was the effect of tiredness; perhaps the letdown of finding that probably the police were not after them, so most of his effort and precaution hadn't been needed; perhaps frustration at his failure, after all, to talk to Pinkie about Bear. Or was it frustration? Was it something else? Almost a sense of relief because Pinkie wasn't going to do anything about Bear?

Couldn't do anything about Bear? Why'd he wanted her to anyway? He needed Bear, didn't he? Bear was his secret friend, his only friend, the only one he could trust. . . .

Pinkie turned her head and looked at him.

"There are *places,* you see," she whispered. "He's right about that."

"Who is?"

"Dad."

He snorted to his feet, picked up his cape, and rolled it to put in the basket. Pinkie did the same with hers. They bicycled on toward the hills.

14

The pale blue invalid car took an age to climb the lane to Ferriby. Barry watched it, standing back from the rim of the parking lot so that only his head projected over the skyline. At the same time he studied the rest of the lane. One of the reasons he had chosen Ferriby for a meeting place was that he'd be able to see, with plenty of warning, whether anyone was following Mr. Stott up the hill. No sign of that, only the little blue blob threshing slowly up. In his mind's ear Barry could hear the noisy engine, roaring at the limit of its power to reach ten miles an hour, and Mr. Stott cursing it on. The whole hillside was sharp with dawn light, but the main road in the valley bottom was blurred with thin mist and shadow. The actual point where the lane turned off from the road was concealed by the long bulk of an old mill, with blind and broken windows and a sinister dark stack. There was very little traffic so early, but even so it was difficult to check that everything that disappeared one end of the mill came out the other end. In fact, one dark car did seem to vanish and not emerge, but a police car had come swirling along in the other direction just at that moment, with its flasher blinking and its siren audible even at this distance in the dawn stillness, and naturally he'd been more concerned to see that go the whole way through. He wasn't especially bothered. It would take even a fast car several minutes to climb the lane, and by that time he'd be well away with Pinkie on the track to Brant. They couldn't bring a car up there after him.

"Hey! Pinkie!" he said. "Back a bit, or I'll have to lock you to the bike."

She was in a state of high excitement, jumping around or darting forward for a better view. Just now the blue car had disappeared behind a copse, and she seemed to think that by getting herself right out onto the skyline, she would somehow be able to see through the trees. Barry was glad to see her so lively. She'd been listless and silent ever since yesterday's picnic in the field. The cave had been a worse idea than he'd expected, and neither of them had slept much, though he'd managed to make what should have been adequate mattresses from the hay some farmer must have stored there before last winter, and they'd needed to get up before daybreak to get here this early, so no wonder the kid was tired. But she had perked up when Barry had pointed out Ferriby Circle and told her they were reaching the rendezvous, and now she was almost out of control.

When the car emerged from behind the copse, he could hear the burr of its engine and see the shape of the driver in the single seat, though, of course, not yet make out it was Mr. Stott. Hey! Suppose old Freeman . . . Oh, rubbish. He checked the lane. Still empty. Couple of vans on the main road and in a farmyard beyond the mill a tractor being got out. All clear.

At last the invalid car nosed over the lip of the lane and into the lot. Barry waved to Mr. Stott, signaling him to wheel and park so that the car was out of sight from below but near enough for conversation while Barry kept his eye on the lane. Pinkie skipped beside the car as it circled. The rackety little motor stopped with a sputter, the door swung open, and Pinkie jumped in. The car—little more than a hoked-up motorcycle really—joggled on its springs as she hugged her grandfather around the neck and kissed his scarlet cheeks. He snarled happily at her to leave him alone.

She let herself slither down onto the rough surface and stood jumping up and down. Mr. Stott heaved his body around on his powerful arms and sat glaring at Barry through the open door.

"Bloody near didn't come," he said. "Been nothing on the radio. Thought you'd mucked it up."

"Anyone try to follow you?"

Mr. Stott snorted.

"Think I'd be here?" he said.

"What about watching your house?"

"Who's to tell? See it from a mile off. You get campers all over the shop this time of year, stupid sods—they'd only have to set up a tent. I thought of that, so I left before it was light. Been half around Derbyshire to get here."

"That sounds okay then."

"Your idea is this quack hasn't gone to the police?"

"Doesn't look like it."

"Course he has."

"He likes to keep things to himself. And you remember I said in my letter I thought he'd been giving drugs to Pinkie to pep her up for the Harmony Sessions? Suppose he knows I know, and suppose some of that's illegal—"

"Wanted to ask you about that, young woman."

Rather reluctantly, Barry thought, Pinkie began to roll up her sleeve. Mr. Stott craned to study the needle marks with the same malevolent-seeming intensity with which he used to peer at some boring little alpine in his garden. Barry's eye was caught by a movement at the bottom of the lane. He edged sideways for a better view. It was only a tractor—the one he'd seen starting in the farmyard—now coming up the hill with a few bales on a trailer. A shepherd sat on the bales with a dog beside him, a nice peaceful image. Better than that, the tractor would block the lane for a bit. . . .

"That daughter of mine know about this?" barked Mr. Stott.

"We think that's why he sent her to America," said Barry.

"Mom wouldn't like it," said Pinkie.

"He hasn't got her completely under his thumb then?" said Mr. Stott. He sounded pleased. Barry realized that though he said he loathed his daughter, and though he was telling the truth, still, in a way he admired her. He actually wanted her to go on being the way she was.

"I tried to get her address, but she's moving around," said Barry.

"Silly cow. Got to tell her, though, somehow. Now listen, young man, I've found you somewhere to stay. Here."

Mr. Stott handed him a piece of card, the sort he used for his file index of alpines. All it said was "Elsie Tannick, 19 Palmerston Road, Brant."

"That's great," said Barry. "What do I tell her?"

"Told her already."

"The truth, you mean? But—"

"She won't let on. Wanted to marry me, forty-eight years ago, stupid woman. Well out of it, I tell her. Been helping her with her pension, few pounds a week, these nine years. You'll be all right with her."

"That's terrific!" said Barry.

Problems seemed to be solving themselves slap, slap, slap, like a house of cards falling down. No police after them, meeting up here as planned, somewhere safe to hole up . . .

"Do you know a doctor we can trust?" he said. "If we could prove what Freeman's been doing to Pinkie . . ."

"Have to think about that. Now, young woman . . ."

Barry moved back to the edge of the parking lot to check the progress of the tractor. It was just disappearing behind

the copse. Nothing else in the lane. Pinkie was trying to explain about the Harmony Sessions and what she did in them. Better let her get on with it. He walked quickly across the parking lot and up the steep bank to the moor. The whole bleak bowl lay empty, except for his bike on its side near the track. *Good old bike,* he thought. *You've done us proud. Sorry I cursed you so to begin with.* He trotted back. Everything seemed to be going incredibly smoothly, but he couldn't relax. Old Bear was stirring, wanted to growl. It had something to do with being so tired and keyed up and then having the pressure ease so suddenly. Bear wasn't ready for this. He was still sniffing for danger.

Mr. Stott never cleaned his car. In places the dirt was so thick that he could almost have grown alpines on it. As he came back across the lot, Barry noticed (or did Bear notice? If Bear hadn't been on the prowl, would it have meant anything?) the print of a man's hand on the curve of the back bodywork, just above the bumper. It was splashed with recent road muck but still clear, so it couldn't have been put there all that long ago. With a vague prickle of alarm Barry knelt and peered under the car. Eight inches from his nose, wired to a chassis member, he saw a black plastic box, dirt-spattered with spray from the road, but much cleaner than anything else around. He felt around it with his fingers. There seemed to be no cables or pipes connecting it to the machinery of the car. He scrambled out.

"When did you last have anything done to the car?" he said.

Mr. Stott glared up at him.

"Couple of months. Why?"

"Something wired underneath. Something new."

He darted to where he could see the lane. Still only the tractor, quarter of a mile down. False alarm. Perhaps the

gadget—bleeper or whatever it was—wasn't working; perhaps Mr. Stott had lost his followers despite it, driving around before dawn; perhaps it wasn't a bleeper anyway, just something to do with the car . . .

He was still staring at the tractor when the man on the bales shifted his position and laid his hand on the dog's collar. The gesture spoke, but for a moment Barry didn't understand it. The man was wearing a flat cap and had a sack draped around his shoulders, but . . .

It was Sergeant Coyne.

The dog was Norah.

"Pinkie! Quick! Bike!" he shouted.

"What's up?" said Mr. Stott.

"Tractor coming up the lane. I thought it was only shepherds, but—"

"Off you go. See if I can block them."

"Right."

As Barry raced across the cinders, he heard the noisy little engine clatter into life. He caught Pinkie up as they scrambled up the bank.

"Is it Dad?" she asked.

"Couldn't see who was driving. But it's Sergeant Coyne. And Norah."

"Oh."

He held the bike for her as she climbed into her seat, then mounted, rose onto the pedals, and just managed to get moving on the surface of the track. It was both soft and slippery, desperately hard going and treacherous, too. He seemed to be making barely more than a walking pace, and of course, they were leaving the trail of their tire prints, clear as clear. On the way over he'd walked the bike beside the track all this last mile. The ground hardened for a few yards, letting him pick up speed before the next soft bit. If he could keep this up . . . He hadn't thought of a tractor

—go anywhere on that—have to stop and uncouple the trailer—if Mr. Stott could hold them up in the lane a couple of minutes—how fast tractor go over rough ground? Twelve? Bike couldn't do that, not this bit—over lip, downhill, track harder, twelve easy—yes, get to place where track cut sideways across steep scree—tractor couldn't take it—topple over—come on, Bear!

The hill silence spread around them, spoiled at the center by a little knot of noise, the rattle and squeak and groan of the bike as it took the uneven ground, the whispering slither of the tires, the rasp of breath in his throat. And then, from behind, came the tock of the tractor as it crossed the horizon, that sound of unescapable pursuit he had heard in dream after dream, heard as train wheels, engines of tanks, rotors of chopper, closing, closing. He looked around.

His head seemed to twist on his neck before his mind could order it not to be stupid. He saw nothing before his front wheel wobbled, veered, caught a tussock at the side of the track, and sent the back wheel slithering out sideways. Down they came.

Pinkie shrieked. Barry sprawled clear across the rasping heather, scrambled up, and turned. The bike was on its side, Pinkie half under it. He rushed to pull the bike off her. She shouted. The bike was caught in something, caught somehow around her leg. She'd managed to jam her right leg in between the back wheel and the support of her chair. He lifted the bike more gently and let her ease herself free. She'd lost her glasses.

"You okay?" he gasped.

"Something's happened to my chair. It went soft. I felt it."

Barry looked. Yes. The right-hand support, never built for her weight, had buckled at last under the impact of the

crash. The chair seat had been forced down onto the mudguard, jamming that against the tire. Nothing he couldn't straighten out in five minutes, except that the chair would go again. You can't do much about once-bent metal. . . . He turned with a sigh to see where the tractor was. It came jolting across the moor, only a few miles an hour, still with the trailer attached, picking its way. Sergeant Coyne's head and shoulders projected above the cab. Barry couldn't see who was driving because the windshield was half misted.

"Leg okay?" he asked calmly.

"Sore," said Pinkie, and took a hobbling step. "What's happening?"

"Find your glasses in a sec," said Barry.

No chance of outrunning them, with Pinkie's leg. No chance of outrunning them anyway. Coyne was a keep-fit fanatic. Still moving slowly in the strange lull between action and action, Barry bent and took the bike chain from the basket. In a certain kind of Bear fantasy he had sometimes fought off a street gang, swinging the chunky padlock at the end of the chain. He wasn't planning to use it like that now. He wasn't planning anything really. It was an almost instinctive move to make Coyne pause, to give him a chance to start arguing his case. He was wrapping the end of the chain around his right palm when Norah hit him.

He saw only the last instants of rush and leap, saw but did not understand the black and tawny blur, the glitter of fangs, the mauve of her tongue. He was still turning, still off balance. She belted the wind out of him as he sprawled.

At once she was on him. Her black lips wrinkled to bare her teeth six inches from his face. Her deep snarl froze him. She raised her head and began to bark, a steady, unhurried signal, telling Sergeant Coyne that she had done her job, caught her prey.

Instinctively, now that her head was up, Barry tried to

wriggle sideways, but he'd scarcely twitched a muscle before her jaws were slashing close above his face and the warning growl froze him once more, helpless. Even if his mind had decided it was worth the risk, his body was too frightened to move.

Pinkie came into sight, hobbling forward, arms feeling vaguely toward the noise. Her lips were moving, but Norah's snarl drowned the words.

"Keep clear!" he managed to croak. "For chrissake, keep clear!"

She was hesitating when Norah swung sideways, still with her front paws on Barry's chest but slashing at Pinkie with head and shoulders and a deeper and more deadly-sounding snarl. The shift of weight let Barry take a full breath.

"Keep away!" he shouted. "Dangerous! Not the same!"

Pinkie backed off, out of his line of vision. She must have got it. This was something different from two nights ago, when he'd been wearing his uniform, was part of the system Norah was trained to obey. Here he was enemy, and whoever tried to help him was enemy, too.

Norah went back to barking. Barry lay still. It wasn't over yet.

Her body above him hid Sergeant Coyne's arrival. The first he knew of it was when the weight left his chest and the snarl slowed to a quiet growl. He sat up. The sergeant's chest heaved with running, but his leathery face was calm as he bent to pat Norah's still-bristling hackles.

"There's a clever girl," he whispered. "There's a clever girl."

He looked at Barry.

"Try anything, lad, and she'll have you."

You couldn't really tell with his strange voice, but he

didn't sound fierce or angry. The Foundation had that sort of effect on people.

"Lost something, Miss Pinkie?" he said.

"My glasses came off."

"Give us a minute, and we'll find them."

Pinkie was several yards from the bike, bent double, patting the ground. She sounded quite ordinary, too, as though nothing special had happened. The tractor stopped twenty yards away. The knock of its engine stilled, and Mr. Freeman climbed down from the cab and strode toward them. He was wearing a long dull green cape, which made him look even larger, even more Moses-like than usual. The early sun glinted off his beard, too gold to be true. It wasn't true, Barry suddenly realized. He'd dyed it that color.

For one strange moment Barry seemed to see him quite clearly as two separate people, people whose bodies occupied precisely the same space without the slightest blur of overlap. They wore one cloak; the light wind flapped at its folds. They left one set of footprints on the track as they strode along it. One was a phony, a crook, a chancer, a loony with a dyed beard. The other was a seer, leader, hope of the world. He was—Barry suddenly perceived—at least twenty years older than he looked. Over seventy, perhaps. This didn't make him weak or pitiful. It made him heroic. He was a fighter against time, against age and death. If all his hopes and schemes came to nothing, he still wouldn't ask for pity. He didn't merely look terrific. He was.

It didn't make any difference. The other one was there, too, just as real. And they were both wrong.

The moment of vision—very like the vision Barry had had of himself a few weeks ago on a rainy morning in this precise place—ended, and he was watching his enemy approach. Mr. Freeman stopped to pat Norah.

"Thank you, Sergeant," he said. "She did very well. You

were right about bringing her. Will you take her back to the tractor now?"

"Miss Pinkie's gone and dropped her glasses, sir."

"All right. See if you can find them. You can get up now, Barry, but please remember that Norah is still with us. Come over this way, will you?"

Barry rose. He was trembling—mainly the aftereffects of effort and then terror, but also a sudden rush of new tension. The crisis hadn't come yet. Mr. Freeman's attempt to get Sergeant Coyne out of earshot proved that.

"What have you done to Mr. Stott?" he said.

Mr. Freeman was already strolling toward Pinkie, who seemed to have stopped looking for her glasses and was now hobbling off toward the stone circle. She couldn't have seen it was there. She just seemed to be drifting, like a leaf on water caught in some unseen current.

"Was that who it was?" said Mr. Freeman. "Of course. I should have guessed. A remarkable old gentleman."

He sounded amused but only slightly interested. Barry's response was an uprush of pure rage, Bear rage, hot, thrilling, uncontrollable. To be lied to like that, so obviously, out of sheer contempt! Of course, Freeman knew who it was; he'd got here by following the invalid car, hadn't he? But he couldn't resist the chance to add to the idea of his own mysterious power, as if he'd turned up because he was all-seeing, a sort of God. . . . The chain and padlock still swung from Barry's right hand. Three quick steps, a backward and forward whip of the arm, the heavy lock slashing into that neck at maximum impetus, exact on its target between vertebra and vertebra—snap! And the tower of dead flesh which had been his enemy tumbling into the heather like a demolished mill stack. Barry knew, because Bear knew, that it was going to happen just like that. He

could not miss. The exact moment had come: Bear's moment.

The impulses to send his muscles into that rush, that blow, were already on their way when something cried out in the silence of the moor, a short, wailing yelp, not loud but full of pain. An animal sound, calling to an animal, to Bear. For a fraction of an instant he hesitated, stopping the arm in its backward motion, and glanced toward the sound. Pinkie was standing facing him in the gap by the missing stones. Her skin gleamed. Pale light seemed to be flowing out of it so that it shone like a signal. The pain and the cry and the light were all part of the same thing.

With that hesitation the moment of certainty was lost. The chain could still slash forward, still probably hit the neck, hurt, wound—but kill? And after? The incalculable network of consequences, the alterations in his own life and destiny that would flow from that spasm of action, exploded in Barry's mind. He was appalled. He lived in a real world where things weighed what they weighed and no Bear magic could change them. Somehow he took control, forcing Bear back, away, down into darkness. The rush of attack became a momentary lurch and stumble.

"Twisted her ankle?" said Mr. Freeman.

He had heard Pinkie cry out and quickened his pace. They walked toward her, picking their way along separate twisting paths between the heather patches.

"I am very impressed with you, Barry," said Mr. Freeman.

"Uh?"

"Don't misunderstand me. You have made a serious mistake, both dangerous and distressing to innocent people, but I have no doubt you acted for what you thought were good reasons. I can see myself at your age and in your shoes

doing much the same. I hope I would have had the resource you have shown in carrying it through."

And Mr. Stott is a remarkable old gentleman. What's he up to?

"Pinkie, too, no doubt . . ." Mr. Freeman went on but then stopped. The track he had been following twisted to one side to get around a large mound of old, tangled, almost impenetrable heather. Barry's track turned the other way but not so sharply. He hurried on and found Pinkie now leaning against one of the stones, running her hands over it and patting it like a completely blind person, though she must have been able to see, so close, what she was touching.

"You all right?" he said.

"I hurt my leg. Ouch!"

He lifted her and settled her onto his left hip. She snuggled close against his shoulder. He found he was trembling, partly with unused adrenaline and partly with the slowly realized shock at what he had almost done. She didn't seem to notice.

"I was wrong, Barry," called Mr. Freeman. "It was no mistake. No mistake at all."

Barry turned, surprised by the velvety, preaching tone, the throb of excitement. Mr. Freeman, instead of following his track around the heather clump, had picked his way right into the middle of it and was standing there. He seemed to be floating a little above ground level. Presumably there was some kind of mound under the heather, or possibly a hidden stone. He faced directly toward the mouth of the broken circle.

"The ancients were wiser than we remember," he said in the same loud voice, as though he was preaching to the silent stones. "They had not yet dulled their sensitivity to the Harmony by overreliance on the five superficial senses

of the body. They understood that there are not only times and places but places beyond time."

"What's he on about?" whispered Barry.

"Places."

"Like you said yesterday?"

"Suppose so."

She seemed dazed. It could have been the fall, or the tiredness of the last two days, or the shock of capture.

"I wonder who owns the land," said Mr. Freeman, quietly but with a throb of excitement in his voice.

Once again, but with his intellect this time, Barry was aware of Mr. Freeman's double nature. He'd decided that Ferriby Circle was a "place"—whatever that meant—and that the whole business of Barry's escaping with Pinkie had been arranged, without any of them knowing, so that he should come to Ferriby and find the circle. And now his first instinct was to ask who owned it. He wanted Ferriby for himself. He wanted to own it and use it, in the same way that he owned and used Pinkie. He would lie and cheat and fake evidence to get it and then probably use it to cheat people out of money they couldn't afford. But at the same time he was totally sincere, a true believer. He believed in his Seven Energies far more deeply than Barry believed in anything. He wanted money, but more than that, he wanted power, and more than that, he wanted knowledge. If he'd lived a thousand years ago, he'd have been a magician who spent his time doing hocus-pocus to cheat peasants out of a few small coins, but he'd still have been certain that one day he would draw the right signs on the floor and throw the right herbs in the fire and say the right words, and then the enormous powers of hell would rise in the room and be his slaves, and he would rule the world and be told all its secrets. A man like that, a thousand years ago, would have sacrificed his own daughter on

his crazy altar if he thought it might do the trick. A man like that, in these days, would fill a kid with mind-bending chemicals for the same kind of reason.

An unmistakable shout floated across the moor. Halfway along the track to the parking lot, still a couple of hundred yards from the circle, Mr. Stott was wrestling with his wheelchair. One of the wheels was stuck, and he was bellowing his frustration, but as Barry watched, he reversed free and came slowly on, wriggling his way past obstacles over the heavy ground. He must have got his chair out from behind the seat of his car and then somehow forced himself and it up the steep bank and onto the track. His face, even at this distance, glowed scarlet with effort and anger.

Mr. Freeman had heard him, too. He glanced around, called to Sergeant Coyne and gestured to him to head the intruder off. The sergeant, who had been waiting with Norah a few yards from the tractor, hesitated a moment, then loosed Norah from her leash and spoke to her. She settled onto a grassy hummock. He crouched beside her, pointing toward Barry. Her ears came up, and her gaze fastened. The sergeant made signals to Barry to make sure he understood the dog was still watching him, then turned and trotted off to intercept Mr. Stott.

For a moment hope flared. The tractor. If he could move a bit farther out of Freeman's line of vision . . . with Coyne out of the way there was only Norah . . . Freeman had turned the engine off, but if he hadn't pocketed the key . . .

Pinkie stirred on his shoulder.

"Don't go," she whispered. "Something . . ."

"What?"

"Can't you feel—"

"No."

He was outside the mystery, if there was one. He could not even perceive that anything might be happening for him to be outside of. The moor was a wide, bleak space containing five people, a dog, a tractor, and a circle of stones. That was all.

"Pinkie," called Mr. Freeman.

She hid her face in Barry's shoulder. Mr. Freeman looked around.

"Bring her here," he said, speaking in a low but urgent voice, like a stage performer prompting an assistant when something has gone wrong with the act.

Pinkie seemed to cling even closer. Barry stayed where he was.

"Bring her here," repeated Mr. Freeman. "Now. The harmonics . . ."

Her arms were as hard as tree roots, gripping a cliff face. Barry shook his head. His own grip tightened on the chain where it hung from his right hand. Mr. Freeman's face changed. His nostrils widened, and his eyes seemed to darken from gold to hot brown. His look was one of aimed fury, like a beam of force coming out of a weapon, glaring directly at Barry as he climbed down, thrashed his way out of the heather, and strode toward him. Barry turned to run.

It was hopeless, of course, with his own tiredness and Pinkie's weight to carry. In half a dozen paces he felt Mr. Freeman's hand grab him by the shoulder to heave him around. His foot slithered on a wet patch; he staggered and broke accidentally free. His heel caught on something, and he staggered still farther, thrashing for balance. Still Pinkie clung to his neck as if she'd been soldered there. This time, though, he did see Norah coming.

Sergeant Coyne must have told her to watch him and bring him back if he tried to run away. That must have been part of her training. In her simple dog brain his at-

tempt to keep Pinkie from Mr. Freeman must have triggered the response. The thirty yards or so she had to cover let her reach maximum impetus for that massive flowing onrush with which the wolf brings down a caribou three times its own weight. She was stretching into the final elastic bound before the leap of attack when Barry, still off balance, saw her coming.

His answer was instinct. It was Bear, doing what he was there for. In his effort to keep his feet he had thrown his right arm back. Now it flailed forward in a whipping arc that flung the chain and lock out beyond it. He let the movement take him right off balance, falling clear of the line of Norah's leap. In the middle of the tilting moorland he watched her and saw with precise, slow clarity the instant of impact.

She was in the air, leaping for the target of his left arm where it held Pinkie. She had seen him beginning to fall and had allowed for the movement in her leap. Now she saw the arm coming around, saw that the fist would miss her, turned her head, and opened her jaws to snatch the wrist as it went by. She had not seen or had not understood the chain before the padlock slammed into her, catching her edge-side on between the corner of her jaw and her ear.

Her head jerked sideways. She yelped. Then she was out of sight as Barry fell.

The impact broke Pinkie's grip at last. Barry let his fall become a controlled roll which brought him to his feet, poised and steady, facing the next attack with the chain swinging from his hand. Everything seemed slow-motion but intensely vivid. He saw Pinkie still sprawled by a tussock of yellowish grass. He saw Mr. Freeman moving toward her. He saw, a hundred yards away, Sergeant Coyne turning and beginning to run. But all the time he was

watching Norah struggling up a few paces in front of him. She shook her head once, then charged again.

This time it was different. She had lost her training. He could see it in her eyes, hear it in her snarl. The lock must have hurt her badly. There was blood over her ear and along the side of her jaw. First time she had gone for his arm to pull him down and hold him helpless until Sergeant Coyne arrived. This time she was going for his throat.

He wasn't frightened. He did not think. He felt his lips harden to bare his teeth as he poised to meet the attack, left arm guarding his neck, right arm back, chain ready again. And Norah too seemed to realize that something had changed. In all her life, all her training and work, she had known that her prey was supposed to be afraid of her; when she attacked, they would cringe or run; when she caught them and snarled, they would freeze with terror where they lay. Now she was faced by a human who met her with other signals, with the grimace of a fighting animal. She answered snarl with snarl but converted her rush into a probing feint.

How did he know it was only a feint? How did he know to answer with no more than a warning twitch of the chain and a slight sideways leaning of the body? It was Bear knowledge, the primitive instinct of how to fight such an enemy coming to the surface when it was needed, telling him without thinking this was not only a contest between fangs and weapon blow but a battle between two wills, fought with signals. As Norah swerved from her feint, he took a half step forward. He jerked his wrist so that the chain swung whistling around his head. This, too, was a feint, an assertion of dominance. Norah answered with a growl and sidled off in an arc, looking for a fresh line of attack. It was thus that she came face-to-face with Pinkie.

Mr. Freeman must have reached Pinkie's side a second

or two earlier, knelt, and touched her shoulder, and Pinkie had responded by jerking away and sitting up. Barry, concentrating on Norah, had been aware of movement at the corner of his vision. No one could know what Norah was aware of, what muddle of training and impulse made her attack this different target. Perhaps it was the suddenness of Pinkie's movement, perhaps what had happened in the garden two nights ago had caused her to think of Pinkie and Barry as being a sort of joint enemy, or perhaps she was simply half-mad from the pain of her hurt and would have attacked anything. For whatever reason, she suddenly flew at Pinkie, knocking her flat, and immediately made a violent lunge and seized her where the neck joined the shoulder. She twisted around and began to drag her back across the ground.

Mr. Freeman shouted and lurched forward on his knees to grab the dog by the collar, trying to pull her off and beating down with his free hand at Norah's head. Pinkie threshed, screaming. Barry rushed in, but as he came, Norah loosed her hold and turned on Mr. Freeman. The sudden movement took him by surprise and broke his hold on her collar. She lunged in beneath his forearms, and the pair of them went down with Norah on top, growling in a deep rumble though her muzzle was buried in his beard. Pinkie struggled up, her face white and her sweater mottled with blood.

"Tractor!" shouted Barry. "Get in the cab!"

She couldn't see it, of course. He gave her a shove in that direction, then ran to grab Norah's collar and try and heave her clear. He was heaving not only Norah but Mr. Freeman. She wouldn't let go. Then Sergeant Coyne was there, kneeling to prize her jaws apart. Barry hauled her off. The sergeant joined him and took her collar from the other side, whispering to quiet her. She paid no attention but wrestled

violently between them, slashing at arms and legs. By keeping their grip and straining away from each other so that she was held at arm's length between them, they managed to drag her over to the tractor. On the way they passed Pinkie, hobbling in the other direction. Barry yelled at her to get in the cab, but she didn't seem to hear him. Sergeant Coyne slipped the leash through Norah's collar and fastened her to the tow bar. They ran back, panting, to where Mr. Freeman was lying with Pinkie on her knees beside him.

The golden beard was soaked with blood. There was a crimson pool in a fold of his cloak beneath his neck. The tanned face was muddy gray. His lips were blue but moving, and his gold eyes stared at the sky.

Pinkie was holding his left hand in both of hers and craning over his body, whispering to him. She didn't seem to notice their coming, even when Sergeant Coyne knelt on the other side of the body and lifted the beard clear to expose the neck. There was nothing to see but blood-smeared skin and flesh, with more blood coming in pulses from the middle of the wound.

"It's too quick," said Pinkie in a desperate voice. "I can't. Oh, I can't!"

Sergeant Coyne felt methodically at the bloody mess, found a spot, and pressed hard with his thumbs. The blood pulse dwindled.

"In the tractor, lad," he whispered. "Walkie-talkie. Switch on and press the 'Talk' switch. Fellow called Brasher other end. Tell him to get an ambulance up here double quick. Then the police. Right?"

"Right," said Barry.

He ran back to the cab, found the transmitter, worked the switches, and spoke. A voice answered, and he gave the message. It struck him as he switched off that the police

would be coming for him. It didn't seem to matter any longer.

He was walking back to the others when he saw Pinkie let go of Mr. Freeman's hand. A moment later Sergeant Coyne stood up. It was over. Barry sighed and looked around the empty moor. Mr. Stott was still there, still wrestling his way along the track. The whole fight, from the moment of Norah's attack to when they'd pulled her clear of Mr. Freeman's body, must have taken less than twenty seconds.

15

Problems are never completely solved. What seems to be the answer becomes the start of several new problems or of the old problem in a new shape. Not even a death can break the chain, unless it happens to be your own.

From the first Barry knew that Mr. Freeman's death was an end but not a solution. He carried Pinkie back to Mr. Brasher's car, which now stood in the parking lot beside Mr. Stott's, and smeared her shoulder with antiseptic from Mr. Brasher's first-aid kit. The bite marks were not as bad as he'd feared, thanks to the layers of clothing Pinkie had been wearing because of the cold dawn start. He bandaged them best he could and put her on the back seat. She immediately fell asleep. Shock, he thought, so he covered her with a rug from the car and another from Mr. Stott's. He went back and helped Mr. Stott off the moor, then went and fetched his bike, took a wrench from the basket and removed the buckled chair and straightened the mudguard.

An ambulance climbed the lane, its blue light blinking. Before it reached the top, two police cars were on the hill behind it. The ambulance men brought Mr. Freeman's body down, then fetched Pinkie and took her, still fast asleep, to the ambulance. They whooped off down the lane, with one police car for escort. Two more police cars arrived. Nobody for a long time paid any attention to Barry. The policemen were up on the moor, photographing and measuring. Sergeant Coyne stood beside Mr. Stott's car, holding Norah on a leash. She seemed tame again now but

whined a bit and shook her head, puzzled by the pain in her jaw. Barry felt intensely sad for her. For some reason this seemed to be a stronger emotion than horror at Mr. Freeman's death or worry about whether Pinkie would be all right or apprehension about what was going to happen to him now. Perhaps they'd insist on Norah being destroyed. It wasn't her fault. She'd been a sort of tool—rather like Barry, in some ways, he felt. Two of a kind.

Over and over his mind ran through the last few minutes after he'd seen the tractor climbing the hill and realized who was on the trailer. It was like that process you put yourself through when you've woken from a nightmare and work yourself free of its horrors by running it through your mind, changing details, erasing the stupid bits, inserting sensible episodes until the story, though still the same, is magically different, its monsters tamed, yourself in full, everyday control. But in this story there was nothing Barry could alter. There was nothing that he could ever have altered. Mr. Freeman's death had been a complete accident, absolutely unforeseeable, but from the moment Barry first set foot in the Foundation it had been going to happen, in this place, at this time, with this horror. He was sure of that. Only a minute before his death Mr. Freeman had spoken and acted as though something important was building up, and Pinkie, too. . . .

It had been an accident. It had been inevitable. Yet it was still Barry's fault. He couldn't have done anything else, any more than Norah could have, but he was as much to blame as she was.

Time went slowly by. Sergeant Coyne and Mr. Stott talked a bit. They seemed to understand each other. They were both old soldiers, used to people being horribly killed. Mr. Stott must have seen what happened. He was a long way away, but he had good eyesight. That was something.

At last feet scrunched on the cinders where Barry sat with his legs dangling over the edge of the parapet while he stared unseeing at the hills opposite. The road below was busy with people going to work. The day was only just beginning for them.

"Right, let's have you now," said a man's voice.

Groggily Barry stood. There were two men in plain clothes. One of them jerked his head, and Barry walked with them up onto the moor and along the track to the circle. The area near the missing stones was roped off with white tape on stakes and guarded by a uniformed policeman. A TV camera crew had arrived from somewhere. One of the plainclothes policemen began to ask questions while the other took notes of Barry's answers. Neither of them looked as if he ever believed anything. Barry gave his name and address, and then they took him straight into the details of Mr. Freeman's death. Barry found he could describe it with detached clarity—first *this,* then because of it *that,* but meanwhile *that*—as though he'd been telling a friend the plot of a film he'd seen. He pointed out the positions where he thought everyone had been at the various times. The policemen had evidently heard the story already, from Sergeant Coyne probably, though he couldn't have seen how the fight with Norah had begun. Mr. Stott had been too far off for details. There was only Barry who really understood—and Pinkie, if she remembered anything.

There was a long pause when he'd finished while the policeman taking notes went on writing.

"Okay," said the other one. He'd sounded totally bored so far, but now a tinge of interest crept into his voice. "That'll do for that for the moment. Now about what you were doing up here with this kid in the first place . . ."

"I was bringing her to see her granddad. That's Mr. Stott. You see—"

"Long story, eh?"
"Well . . . yeah . . . bit . . ."
"Take it down at the station, then."

Barry became used to police stations over the next few weeks—the hard chairs and the waiting, and the glimpses of other people in more or less trouble than him, and always the same lot of questions as last time. He thought, that first day, that he was going to spend the night in a cell, but Dad turned up and got him out somehow.

"Somehow" was the word. The most frustrating thing about getting caught up in something like a police investigation is that you never can see how the system works, why things happen to you, what's really going on. Nobody tells you anything. You may not actually be in a prison cell, but that's still how it feels, as though all you could see of the outside world was a patch of a courtyard, which you stare at through a small square window. Somebody crosses the yard, carrying a file of papers; you hear voices arguing; three doors in your corridor open and close, but not yours. You try to fit these events into a pattern; you can't help it, though you know they may have no connection with your problem. And when at last somebody does come to visit you, it's a stranger who doesn't tell you who he is, doesn't answer your questions, but asks you ones you've answered twenty times already and then goes away.

At times Barry almost believed they were doing it because somehow they knew about Bear, knew that this was just the way to infuriate him and drive him into the open, and then he'd do or say something which they could pounce on. But both Barry and Bear were too wary to let it happen. That moment on the moor when he had nearly attacked and killed Mr. Freeman had frightened them

both, badly, in different ways. So Bear lurked grumbling in his lair, and Barry saw that he stayed there.

Slowly he discovered that the treatment wasn't, in fact, deliberate, wasn't even part of a general softening-up process. It was how things were, because the system was a system, and he might as well get used to it. From the first he told the exact truth (except about one thing, and they hardly bothered to ask him that). Yes, he used to keep an eye on Pinkie at school because her mom had worried about her; yes, she'd gone away, and he'd lost sight of her till Mr. Stott had given him money to fake an illness and get into the Foundation to find out how she was; he'd managed to exchange a signal with her that told him she wanted to get away; Mr. Freeman had given him a job, but he hadn't managed to see Pinkie alone for a bit; when he had, he'd tried to explain to her about the problems of running off with her, but then she'd told him about Mr. Freeman's giving her drugs and he'd realized he had to give it a go; and so on. They weren't much interested in the escape—nothing for them there—and they got bored with the fight on the moor after the first few times.

One morning there was a new man with the two he was used to. Same old questions, though; same old answers—Pinkie, Stott, the Foundation, the job, tea with Mrs. Butterfield, night duty, finding the lift shaft, Pinkie's cupboard, Pinkie's arm . . . Always the flat, oh-yes voices had prodded away at that bit. They didn't believe anything, but that least of all. When he suggested they should get Pinkie to confirm what he said, they just looked at him. They had, and they didn't believe her either.

This morning, though, it was different. The new man asked questions. He was interested. And the other two were bored in a different way from usual. Till now they had been

the patient hunters, waiting for him to make a mistake. Now they'd given up.

They still didn't tell him anything, and he never discovered what had caused the change. He guessed that the new man was more interested in the Foundation than he was in Barry. Had Mrs. Butterfield told him something? Or Dr. Geare? Had he actually found the remains of what Freeman had been giving Pinkie? It didn't matter. Barry was off the hook now as far as the police were concerned.

It wasn't only the police. Barry had to go and see a social worker called Mr. Rucker, a gray-faced, bald little man with forty-three other problem citizens in his files. He was the sort of man who in the old days would have really stirred old Bear up. You could imagine him sending people off to prison camps with the same gray, unchanging frown and then making the same neat notes in their files. The police saw Barry as a quarry; Mr. Rucker saw him as a piece in a huge, messy, fluid, unfinishable jigsaw puzzle. Mr. Rucker's life was doing the puzzle, and he was good at it. He made Barry have an interview with the headmaster of a new school over at Manton, and despite the missed year and the term's being so close to starting, Mr. Rucker "somehow" worked the system so that Barry was offered a place, and "somehow" Barry found himself cornered into giving it a try.

There were journalists, too, for a bit. For a couple of days quite a crowd of them hanging around the doorstep. It was a bit like the first lodgings the Evanses had stayed in after leaving Thurley. That had been next to a pub, and you found vomit on the sidewalk when you went out in the morning. Now you found cameramen. But soon someone at the police station must have leaked the fact that there didn't seem to be a sex angle, and they had to switch to the much less rewarding guard-dog-slays-health-crank ap-

proach. It was just a stroke of luck that they didn't go for the child-saint-performs-miracle-cures story. It turned out that the BBC *Checkpoint* team was all geared up to do an exposé of the Foundation and had a lot of dissatisfied ex-patients waiting to tell their tales; these people being there and ready were the ones the journalists got hold of. Besides, Pinkie's mom was back in England. According to Mr. Stott, she'd taken Pinkie to stay somewhere secret about twenty miles away and was going back to America with her as soon as she could. Meanwhile, there was precious little chance of her letting anyone interview her daughter. When Barry himself talked to journalists, he told them the truth but not much of it.

Only once, in all these different kinds of questioning, did anyone ask him the thing that mattered. They all were looking through their own cell windows, all trying to piece together a picture that made sense to them out of niggling little clues. They couldn't even see the real point because it was too big for their windows—or too small to notice. It depended how you thought about it.

A policeman asked the question, casually, at the end of the session at which the new man had turned up and the hunt had gone dead. He wasn't especially interested. For him it was a sort of footnote, outside the main story—a bit of gossip for his wife that evening, maybe.

"Did you ever see Pinkie heal anyone, Barry?"

Barry shrugged, shook his head, produced a pitying smile.

When they let him go, he started for home. Mom always worried when he was at the police station. It wasn't fair not to go and tell her at once that it looked as if it was all over now. But he had a sick taste in his mind. Usually he did his best not to think about Pinkie much. That was over. Noth-

ing like it was going to happen again in his life. In a way it was like Thurley—the more clearly you remembered it, the fouler life around you began to seem. Not that the policemen would have cared much if he'd told them yes, Pinkie could do it, it was real. Gossip for the wife still. Very few things that happen to you really matter. Why should you then feel bound to betray one of them, saying it's not true?

He prowled, purposeless, down High Street toward home. But he knew he wasn't ready to go there yet. On the corner of Carver Street he stopped and stood, muttering to old Bear under his breath, like one of those loonies you sometimes see lurching along the sidewalk, yelling to strangers or to no one at all about how somebody cheated them out of their rights twenty years ago. Was he going to become like that himself, one day?

The whole thing was over. Even the police had given up.

At the end of Carver Street lay Farm Road. A hundred yards along that stood the gaunt old warehouse with Viola Street beside it. At least he still had the sense, just, not to go mooning up that way.

He must have been standing on the street corner for twenty minutes, feeling steadily more and more at odds with himself, more and more unreal and meaningless, when a car rolled to a stop at the end of Carver Street and waited for a gap in the traffic. He wasn't consciously aware of its being there until the front passenger's door swung open and Pinkie ran toward him, laughing as he picked her up. She tousled his hair and wriggled with pleasure. She'd put on a bit of weight. Yes, she was almost fat. Over her shoulder he saw the car door close and the car reverse and park. It was a taxi. There was somebody only vaguely visible in the back seat.

"Great to see you," he said. "I was just wondering if I ever would."

"I made them take me to Viola Street. I wanted to see it. Mommy didn't."

She sounded smug.

"That's her there now?"

"We're going to America next week."

"I heard it was soon. You *made* her, Pinkie?"

"Oh, yes. You told me once. Don't you remember? She can't *do* anything."

"I've been talking to the cops all morning. I think they've given up."

"They told Mommy we could go."

"It's all over."

There seemed to be so little to say. She was too heavy for him to carry for long and felt awkward on his arms, though a few weeks back, up on the moor, she had clung to him as though she had been part of him. He let her slide to the sidewalk. She took hold of his hand.

"What's the matter, Bear?" she said, her voice almost drowned by the clatter of a passing truck.

"Nothing. Oh, it's stupid. Only I told them this morning I didn't think you could help people."

She smiled her almost invisible smile. He was glad to see it there still, despite her new openness and freedom.

"One of them had a toothache last time," she said.

"Oh. Did you . . ."

"He was too shy, with the other one watching."

"They're human sometimes."

Another long pause. Difficult to talk anyway, through the traffic racket. A hoot from the waiting car. This was the moment he'd been longing for, without knowing it, his last chance. It should have been in some friendly room, or out on a walk among trees, or high on the windy moor. Too difficult in the hurry and fume of Marsden Ash High Street.

"Something's *really* the matter, isn't it, Bear?"

"Suppose so. Not your sort of thing."

"Please, Bear."

"Nothing."

"You're afraid."

"Yeah."

"Tell me."

She put her other hand on his. It was no good. He felt no flow, no warmth across the shoulder blades, no strange peace. The car hooted, twice this time. He looked down and saw that Pinkie was staring up at him, biting her lower lip and frowning. She wasn't calling on mysterious forces to help him but was humanly troubled with his trouble. In his mind's eye he saw her crying out to him up by Ferriby Circle, luminous with a pain he could never reach or understand.

"It's Bear," he said.

"Oh?"

"I want to get rid of him."

"Oh, no!"

"He's going to take over. He's dangerous. He'll do something one day. He nearly killed Mr. Freeman up on the moor. If you hadn't stopped me—"

"It was Norah—"

"Before that. I was going to break his neck with my chain. I suppose you couldn't have seen without your glasses, but you shouted and stopped me."

"I don't remember. I can remember falling off the bicycle and then waking up when they were carrying me out of the ambulance."

"Don't you see? Bear's dangerous. Suppose something like that happened again? They'll say I'm mad and lock me up for the rest of my life. It's not like just losing my temper sometimes. It's real."

A long blast on the car horn. A movement in the back seat as the passenger cleared packages away in order to get out. Pinkie was talking, whispering, earnest still but cheerful. Half of what she said was lost in traffic racket.

". . . because he's frightened? If you'd only . . . to be happy . . . on TV. It was lovely . . . that one looked happy, I . . ."

Her mother was coming toward them across the sidewalk. Pinkie swung around, seeming to sense her presence.

"Look, Mom, it was Barry! I told you it was!"

Her mother inspected Barry from head to toe, staring at him with bright, rejecting eyes.

"Hanging around street corners," she said. "About all he's fit for."

Pinkie actually laughed, a normal kid's laugh.

"He was waiting for us," she said.

"Couldn't have known."

"Course he did. That's why he was waiting."

Pinkie's mother puffed out an exasperated breath, a genteel, feminine version of Mr. Stott's shattering snort. She hadn't changed physically, not that Barry could see, but something about her had. Perhaps it was only that Pinkie had learned to tease her, to cope with her by treating her as a bit of a joke, and she was adapting to the role, almost beginning to enjoy it. Or perhaps it was living in America and having to be pleasant to people if she wanted to persuade them to go to the Foundation. Anyway, the change was very slight, to judge by her next remark.

"And this taxi's costing us a pound a minute, what's more."

"All right. Coming. Bye, Barry."

"Great to see you. And if ever you want . . ."

"I'll send you a postcard. Love to Granddad."

"Okay."

And that was all. He watched the taxi slip into a gap in the traffic and slide away, out of sight in ten seconds. She'd changed, yes. Laughed, chatted, shown her feelings, teased her mom. She was going to look after herself from now on. She didn't need a guardian or protector, not anymore.

Strangely, he didn't feel depressed. Nothing had really happened, nothing you could explain or talk about. He wasn't sure whether Pinkie had understood about Bear, now or ever. When she'd cried out to him up by Ferriby Circle, he'd been convinced that she'd actually seen Bear, as he had once, almost in the selfsame spot. But she wasn't wearing her glasses, so how could she? And in any case she'd forgotten. He'd never know, any more than he'd know whether he'd seen that pale light shining from her, or whether it had been only an effect in his own mind.

What had she been trying to say just now? Some TV program she'd seen, one of those wildlife pieces, with bears in it. "That one looked happy." Fat lot of use.

He turned toward home. The September noon was bright and pleasant. Somehow, despite the traffic fumes, it felt like a spring day. His skin crawled pleasantly in the warmth. He stretched and yawned, easing the muscles below the skin, feeling the wholeness of himself settle peacefully into place, as though he had just woken from winter sleep, sleep fretful with intrusive dreams, and now was prowling out into the sun, blinking at the last quick-melting snowdrifts, sniffing the air of a world made new.

PETER DICKINSON is an award-winning writer whose books include *Giant Cold; The Seventh Raven; City of Gold,* winner of the Carnegie Medal; *Tulku,* winner of the Whitbread Award and the Carnegie Medal; *Annerton Pit; The Blue Hawk,* winner of the *Guardian* Fiction Prize; *Chance, Luck, and Destiny; The Gift; The Dancing Bear; Emma Tupper's Diary; The Weathermonger;* and *The Devil's Children.* He lives in England.

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It was stupid to think of a bike being happy, let alone a raindrop as it flicked through the lamp-beam, golden for its moment before it slapped into tarmac and stopped existing as an individual drop, lost in wetness; but Barry discovered that that was how he was thinking.

It happened when he was on foot, shoving up a slope. He had dismounted when the effort of pedaling hard stopped being worthwhile, had gripped the back of the saddle with his right hand and the handlebars with his left, and leaned into a straining trudge.

Pinkie put her left hand on his wrist. The pitch of the slope eased. Through a gap in the overarching hazels a shaft of rain shot down and glittered in the lamplight, like sparks from a firework, fountaining down....

What did she do? What was she doing to him? Was it all that different from what she'd done to Norah?

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