

THE DAY HAS COME
TO MAKE A KILLING

THE
FEAR
INDEX



ROBERT
HARRIS

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Copyright

About the Book

His name is carefully guarded from the general public but within the secretive inner circles of the ultra-rich Dr Alex Hoffmann is a legend - a visionary scientist whose computer software turns everything it touches into gold.

Together with his partner, an investment banker, Hoffmann has developed a revolutionary form of artificial intelligence that tracks human emotions, enabling it to predict movements in the financial markets with uncanny accuracy. His hedge fund, based in Geneva, makes billions.

But then in the early hours of the morning, while he lies asleep with his wife, a sinister intruder breaches the elaborate security of their lakeside house. So begins a waking nightmare of paranoia and violence as Hoffmann attempts, with increasing desperation, to discover who is trying to destroy him.

His quest forces him to confront the deepest questions of what it is to be human. By the time night falls over Geneva, the financial markets will be in turmoil and Hoffmann's world - and ours - transformed forever.

About the Author

Robert Harris has written seven previous novels - *Fatherland*, *Enigma*, *Archangel*, *Pompeii*, *Imperium*, *The Ghost* and *Lustrum*. His work has been translated into thirty-seven languages. For his collaboration with Roman Polanski on the film version of *The Ghost*, he won both the French César and the European Film Award for best adapted screenplay.

A graduate of Cambridge University, where he studied English, he joined the BBC and later wrote for the *Observer*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

He is married to Gill Hornby. They have four children and live in a village near Hungerford in West Berkshire.

Also by Robert Harris

FICTION

Fatherland

Enigma

Archangel

Pompeii

Imperium

The Ghost

Lustrum

NON-FICTION

A Higher Form of Killing (with Jeremy Paxman)

Gotcha!

The Making of Neil Kinnock

Selling Hitler

Good and Faithful Servant

THE
FEAR INDEX
——
ROBERT HARRIS



HUTCHINSON
LONDON

To my family
Gill,
Holly, Charlie, Matilda, Sam

Acknowledgements

I WISH TO thank all those whose expertise, generously given, has made this book possible: first and foremost Neville Quie of Citi, who made many helpful suggestions and introductions and who, along with Cameron Small, patiently helped me through the labyrinth of shorts and out-of-the-money puts; Charles Scott, formerly of Morgan Stanley, who discussed the concept, read the manuscript and introduced me to Andre Stern of Oxford Asset Management, Eli Lederman, former CEO of Turquoise, and David Keetly and John Mansell of Polar Capital Alva Fund, all of whom provided useful insights; Leda Braga, Mike Platt, Pawel Lewicki and the algorithmic team at BlueCrest for their hospitality and for letting me spend a day watching them in action; Christian Holzer for his advice on the VIX; Lucie Chaumeton for fact-checking; Philippe Jabre of Jabre Capital Partners SA for sharing his knowledge of the financial markets; Dr Ian Bird, head of the Large Hadron Collider Computing Grid Project, for two conducted tours and insights into CERN in the 1990s; Ariane Koek, James Gillies, Christine Sutton and Barbara Warmbein of the CERN Press Office; Dr Bryan Lynn, an academic physicist who worked at both Merrill Lynch and CERN and who kindly described his experiences of moving between these different worlds; Jean-Philippe Brandt of the Geneva Police Department for giving me a tour of the city and answering my queries about police procedure; Dr Stephen Golding, Consultant Radiologist at the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford, for advising me on brain scans and putting me in touch with Professor Christoph Becker and

Dr Minerva Becker who in turn helpfully arranged a tour of the Radiological Department of the University Hospital in Geneva. None of these, of course, is responsible for the errors of fact, misguided opinions and Gothic flights of fantasy that follow.

Finally a special word of thanks to Angela Palmer, who selflessly allowed me to borrow the concept of her stunning art works and bestow them on Gabrielle Hoffmann (the originals can be seen at angelaspalmer.com), and also to Paul Greengrass, for wise advice, good friendship and the sharing of numerous Liquidity Replenishment Points along the way.

Robert Harris

11.7.11

1

Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.

MARY SHELLEY, *Frankenstein* (1818)

DR ALEXANDER HOFFMANN SAT BY the fire in his study in Geneva, a half-smoked cigar lying cold in the ashtray beside him, an anglepoise lamp pulled low over his shoulder, turning the pages of a first edition of *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* by Charles Darwin. The Victorian grandfather clock in the hall was striking midnight but Hoffmann did not hear it. Nor did he notice that the fire was almost out. All his formidable powers of attention were directed on to his book.

He knew it had been published in London in 1872 by John Murray & Co. in an edition of seven thousand copies, printed in two runs. He knew also that the second run had introduced a misprint - 'htat' - on page 208. As the volume in his hands contained no such error, he presumed it must have come from the first run, thus greatly increasing its value. He turned it round and inspected the spine. The binding was in the original green cloth with gilt lettering, the spine-ends only slightly frayed. It was what was known in the book trade as 'a fine copy', worth perhaps \$15,000. He had found it waiting for him when he returned home from his office that evening, as soon as the New York

markets had closed, a little after ten o'clock. Yet the strange thing was, even though he collected scientific first editions and had browsed the book online and had in fact been meaning to buy it, he had not actually ordered it.

His immediate thought had been that it must have come from his wife, but she had denied it. He had refused to believe her at first, following her around the kitchen as she set the table, holding out the book for her inspection.

'You're really telling me you didn't buy it for me?'

'Yes, Alex. Sorry. It wasn't me. What can I say? Perhaps you have a secret admirer.'

'You are totally sure about this? It's not our anniversary or anything? I haven't forgotten to give you something?'

'For God's sake, I didn't buy it, okay?'

It had come with no message apart from a Dutch bookseller's slip: 'Rosengarden & Nijenhuis, Antiquarian Scientific & Medical Books. Established 1911. Prinsengracht 227, 1016 HN Amsterdam, The Netherlands.' Hoffmann had pressed the pedal on the waste bin and retrieved the bubble wrap and thick brown paper. The parcel was correctly addressed, with a printed label: 'Dr Alexander Hoffmann, Villa Clairmont, 79 Chemin de Ruth, 1223 Cologny, Geneva, Switzerland.' It had been dispatched by courier from Amsterdam the previous day.

After they had eaten their supper - a fish pie and green salad prepared by the housekeeper before she went home - Gabrielle had stayed in the kitchen to make a few anxious last-minute phone calls about her exhibition the next day, while Hoffmann had retreated to his study clutching the mysterious book. An hour later, when she put her head round the door to tell him she was going up to bed, he was still reading.

She said, 'Try not to be too late, darling. I'll wait up for you.'

He did not reply. She paused in the doorway and considered him for a moment. He still looked young for

forty-two, and had always been more handsome than he realised – a quality she found attractive in a man as well as rare. It was not that he was modest, she had come to realise. On the contrary: he was supremely indifferent to anything that did not engage him intellectually, a trait that had earned him a reputation among her friends for being downright bloody rude – and she quite liked that as well. His preternaturally boyish American face was bent over the book, his spectacles pushed up and resting on the top of his thick head of light brown hair; catching the firelight, the lenses seemed to flash a warning look back at her. She knew better than to try to interrupt him. She sighed and went upstairs.

Hoffmann had known for years that *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* was one of the first books to be published with photographs, but he had never actually seen them before. Monochrome plates depicted Victorian artists' models and inmates of the Surrey Lunatic Asylum in various states of emotion – grief, despair, joy, defiance, terror – for this was meant to be a study of *Homo sapiens* as animal, with an animal's instinctive responses, stripped of the mask of social graces. Born far enough into the age of science to be photographed, their misaligned eyes and skewed teeth nonetheless gave them the look of crafty, superstitious peasants from the Middle Ages. They reminded Hoffmann of a childish nightmare – of grown-ups from an old-fashioned book of fairy tales who might come and steal you from your bed in the night and carry you off into the woods.

And there was another thing that unsettled him. The bookseller's slip had been inserted into the pages devoted to the emotion of fear, as if the sender specifically intended to draw them to his attention:

The frightened man at first stands like a statue motionless or breathless, or crouches down as if

instinctively to escape observation. The heart beats quickly and violently, so that it palpitates or knocks against the ribs ...

Hoffmann had a habit when he was thinking of cocking his head to one side and gazing into the middle distance, and he did so now. Was this a coincidence? Yes, he reasoned, it must be. On the other hand, the physiological effects of fear were so directly relevant to VIXAL-4, the project he was presently involved in, that it did strike him as peculiarly pointed. And yet VIXAL-4 was highly secret, known only to his research team, and although he took care to pay them well - \$250,000 was the starting salary, with much more on offer in bonuses - it was surely unlikely any of them would have spent \$15,000 on an anonymous gift. One person who certainly could afford it, who knew all about the project and who would have seen the joke of it - if that was what this was: an expensive joke - was his business partner, Hugo Quarry, and Hoffmann, without even thinking about the hour, rang him.

'Hello, Alex. How's it going?' If Quarry saw anything strange in being disturbed just after midnight, his perfect manners would never have permitted him to show it. Besides, he was accustomed to the ways of Hoffmann, 'the mad professor', as he called him - and called him it to his face as well as behind his back, it being part of his charm always to speak to everyone in the same way, public or private.

Hoffmann, still reading the description of fear, said distractedly, 'Oh, hi. Did you just buy me a book?'

'I don't think so, old friend. Why? Was I supposed to?'

'Someone's just sent me a Darwin first edition and I don't know who.'

'Sounds pretty valuable.'

'It is. I thought, because you know how important Darwin is to VIXAL, it might be you.'

“Fraid not. Could it be a client? A thank-you gift and they’ve forgotten to include a card? Lord knows, Alex, we’ve made them enough money.’

‘Yeah, well. Maybe. Okay. Sorry to bother you.’

‘Don’t worry. See you in the morning. Big day tomorrow. In fact, it’s already tomorrow. You ought to be in bed by now.’

‘Sure. On my way. Night.’

As fear rises to an extreme pitch, the dreadful scream of terror is heard. Great beads of sweat stand on the skin. All the muscles of the body are relaxed. Utter prostration soon follows, and the mental powers fail. The intestines are affected. The sphincter muscles cease to act, and no longer retain the contents of the body ...

Hoffmann held the volume to his nose and inhaled. A compound of leather and library dust and cigar smoke, so sharp he could taste it, with a faint hint of something chemical – formaldehyde, perhaps, or coal-gas. It put him in mind of a nineteenth-century laboratory or lecture theatre, and for an instant he saw Bunsen burners on wooden benches, flasks of acid and the skeleton of an ape. He reinserted the bookseller’s slip to mark the page and carefully closed the book. Then he carried it over to the shelves and with two fingers gently made room for it between a first edition of *On the Origin of Species*, which he had bought at auction at Sotheby’s in New York for \$125,000, and a leather-bound copy of *The Descent of Man* that had once belonged to T. H. Huxley.

Later, he would try to remember the exact sequence of what he did next. He consulted the Bloomberg terminal on his desk for the final prices in the USA: the Dow Jones, the S&P 500 and the NASDAQ had all ended down. He had an email exchange with Susumu Takahashi, the duty dealer in

charge of execution on VIXAL-4 overnight, who reported that everything was functioning smoothly, and reminded him that the Tokyo Stock Exchange would reopen in less than two hours' time following the annual three-day Golden Week holiday. It would certainly open down, to catch up with what had been a week of falling prices in Europe and the US. And there was one other thing: VIXAL was proposing to short another three million shares in Procter & Gamble at \$62 a share, which would bring their overall position up to six million - a big trade: would Hoffmann approve it? Hoffmann emailed 'OK', threw away his unfinished cigar, put a fine-meshed metal guard in front of the fireplace and switched off the study lights. In the hall he checked to see that the front door was locked and then set the burglar alarm with its four-digit code: 1729. (The numerals came from an exchange between the mathematicians G. H. Hardy and S. I. Ramanujan in 1920, when Hardy went in a taxi cab with that number to visit his dying colleague in hospital and complained it was 'a rather dull number', to which Ramanujan responded: 'No, Hardy! No, Hardy! It is a very interesting number. It is the smallest number expressible as the sum of two cubes in two different ways.') He left just one lamp lit downstairs - of that he was sure - then climbed the curved white marble staircase to the bathroom. He took off his spectacles, undressed, washed, brushed his teeth and put on a pair of blue silk pyjamas. He set the alarm on his mobile for six thirty, registering as he did so that the time was then twenty past twelve.

In the bedroom he was surprised to find Gabrielle still awake, lying on her back on the counterpane in a black silk kimono. A scented candle flickered on the dressing table; otherwise the room was in darkness. Her hands were clasped behind her head, her elbows sharply pointed away from her, her legs crossed at the knee. One slim white foot,

the toenails painted dark red, was making impatient circles in the fragrant air.

‘Oh God,’ he said. ‘I’d forgotten the date.’

‘Don’t worry.’ She untied her belt and parted the silk, then held out her arms to him. ‘I never forget it.’



IT MUST HAVE been about three fifty in the morning that something caused Hoffmann to wake. He struggled up from the depths of sleep and opened his eyes to behold a celestial vision of fiery white light. It was geometrically formed, like a graph, with thinly spaced horizontal lines and wide-apart vertical columns, but with no data plotted – a mathematician’s dream, but not in fact a dream, he realised after squinting at it for a few seconds; rather the result of eight five-hundred-watt tungsten-halogen security lights shining brilliantly through the slats of the window blinds – enough wattage to light a small soccer ground; he had been meaning to have them changed.

The lights were on a thirty-second timer. As he waited for them to turn off, he considered what might have interrupted the infrared beams that criss-crossed the garden to trigger them. It would be a cat, he thought, or a fox, or a piece of overgrown foliage waving in the wind. And after a few seconds the lights were indeed doused and the room returned to darkness.

But now Hoffmann was wide awake. He reached for his mobile. It was one of a batch specially produced for the hedge fund that could encrypt certain sensitive phone calls and emails. To avoid disturbing Gabrielle – she detested this habit of his even more than she hated him smoking – he switched it on under the duvet and briefly checked the Profit & Loss screen for Far Eastern trading. In Tokyo, Singapore and Sydney the markets were, as predicted, falling but VIXAL-4 was already up 0.3 per cent, which

meant by his calculations that he had made almost \$3 million since going to bed. Satisfied, he turned off the device and replaced it on the nightstand, and that was when he heard a noise: soft, unidentifiable, and yet oddly disturbing, as if someone was moving around downstairs.

Staring at the tiny red dot of light of the smoke detector fixed to the ceiling, he extended his hand cautiously beneath the duvet towards Gabrielle. Lately, after they had made love, if she couldn't sleep, she had got into the habit of going down to her studio to work. His palm traversed the warm undulations of the mattress until his fingertips brushed the skin of her hip. Immediately she muttered something unintelligible and rolled her back to him, pulling the duvet tighter around her shoulders.

The noise came again. He raised himself on his elbows and strained his ears. It was nothing specific - an occasional faint thump. It could just be the unfamiliar heating system, or a door caught in a draught. At this stage he felt quite calm. The house had formidable security, which was one of the reasons he had bought it a few weeks earlier: apart from the floodlights, there was a three-metre-high perimeter wall with heavy electronic gates, a steel-reinforced front door with a keypad entry system, bulletproof glass in all the ground-floor windows, and a movement-sensitive burglar alarm, which he was sure he had turned on before he came up to bed. The chances that an intruder had got past all that and penetrated inside were tiny. Besides, he was physically fit: he had long ago established that high levels of endorphins enabled him to think better. He worked out. He jogged. An atavistic instinct to protect his territory stirred within him.

He slid out of bed without waking Gabrielle and put on his glasses, robe and slippers. He hesitated, and peered around in the darkness, but he could not recall anything in the room that might be useful as a weapon. He slipped his mobile into his pocket and opened the bedroom door - a

crack at first, and then fully. The light from the lamp downstairs shed a dim glow along the landing. He paused on the threshold, listening. But the sounds - if there had ever been sounds, which he was beginning to doubt - had ceased. After a minute or so he moved towards the staircase and began to descend very slowly.

Perhaps it was the effect of reading Darwin just before he fell asleep, but as he went down the stairs he found himself registering, with scientific detachment, his own physical symptoms. His breath was becoming short, his heartbeat accelerating so rapidly it was uncomfortable. His hair felt as stiff as fur.

He reached the ground floor.

The house was a belle époque mansion, built in 1902 for a French businessman who had made a fortune out of extracting oil from coal waste. The whole place had been excessively interior-designed by the previous owner, left ready to move into, and perhaps for that reason Hoffmann had never felt entirely at home in it. To his left was the front door and immediately ahead of him the door to the drawing room. To his right a passage led towards the house's interior: dining room, kitchen, library and a Victorian conservatory that Gabrielle used as her studio. He stood absolutely still, his hands raised ready to defend himself. He could hear nothing. In the corner of the hall, the tiny red eye of the movement sensor winked at him. If he was not careful, he would trigger the alarm himself. That had already happened twice elsewhere in Cologne since they moved in - big houses wailing nervously for no reason, like hysterical rich old ladies behind their high ivy-covered walls.

He relaxed his hands and crossed the hall to where an antique barometer was mounted on the wall. He pressed a catch and the barometer swung outwards. The alarm control box was hidden in a compartment behind it. He

reached out his right forefinger to enter the code to switch the system off, and then checked himself.

The alarm had already been deactivated.

His finger stayed poised in mid-air while the rational part of his mind sought for reassuring explanations. Perhaps Gabrielle had come down after all, had switched the system off and had forgotten to turn it back on again when she returned to bed. Or he had forgotten to set it in the first place. Or it had malfunctioned.

Very slowly he turned to his left to inspect the front door. The gleam of the lamplight reflected in its glossy black paint. It appeared to be firmly closed, with no sign it had been forced. Like the alarm, it was of the latest design and also controlled by the same four-digit code. He glanced back over his shoulder, checking the stairs and the corridor leading to the interior of the house. All was still. He moved towards the door. He tapped in the code. He heard the bolts click back. He grasped the heavy brass handle and turned it, then stepped out on to the darkened porch.

Above the inky expanse of lawn, the moon was a silvery-blue discus that seemed to have been thrown at great speed through scudding masses of black cloud. The shadows of the big fir trees that screened the house from the road swayed and rustled in the wind.

Hoffmann took a few more paces out into the gravel drive - just far enough to interrupt the beam of the infrared sensors and set off the floodlights at the front of the house. The brightness made him jump, pinning him to the spot like an escaping prisoner. He put up his arm to shield his eyes and turned to face the yellow-lit interior of the hall, noticing as he did so that a large pair of black boots had been placed neatly to one side of the front door, as if their owner had not wanted to trail in mud or disturb the occupants. The boots were not Hoffmann's and they were certainly not Gabrielle's. He was also sure they had not been there when he arrived home almost six hours earlier.

His gaze transfixed by the boots, he fumbled for his mobile, almost dropped it, started dialling 911, remembered he was in Switzerland and tried again: 117.

The number rang just once - at 3.59 a.m., according to the Geneva Police Department, which records all emergency calls, and which subsequently issued a transcript. A woman answered sharply: *'Oui, police?'*

Her voice seemed to Hoffmann very loud in the stillness. It made him realise how visible he must be, standing exposed under the floodlights. He stepped quickly to his left, out of the line of sight of anyone watching from the hallway, and at the same time forward, into the lee of the house. He had the phone pressed very close to his mouth. He whispered: *'J'ai un intrus sur ma propriété.'* On the tape his voice sounds calm, thin, almost robotic. It is the voice of a man whose cerebral cortex - without his even being aware of it - is concentrating all its power entirely on survival. It is the voice of pure fear.

'Quelle est votre adresse, monsieur?'

He told her. He was still moving along the facade of the house. He could hear her fingers typing.

'Et votre nom?'

He whispered, *'Alexander Hoffmann.'*

The security lights cut out.

'Okay, Monsieur Hoffmann. Restez là. Une voiture est en route.'

She hung up. Alone in the darkness, Hoffmann stood at the corner of the house. It was unseasonably cold for Switzerland in the first week of May. The wind was from the north-east, blowing straight off Lac Léman. He could hear the water lapping rapidly against the nearby jetties, rattling the halliards against the metal masts of the yachts. He pulled his dressing gown tighter around his shoulders. He was shaking violently. He had to clench his teeth to stop them chattering. And yet, oddly, he felt no panic. Panic was quite different to fear, he was discovering. Panic was moral

and nervous collapse, a waste of precious energy, whereas fear was all sinew and instinct: an animal that stood up on its hind legs and filled you completely, that took control of your brain and your muscles. He sniffed the air and glanced along the side of the mansion towards the lake. Somewhere near the rear of the house there was a light on downstairs. Its gleam lit the surrounding bushes very prettily, like a fairy grotto.

He waited for half a minute, then began to move towards it stealthily, working his way through the wide herbaceous border that ran along this side of the house. He was not sure at first from which room it was emanating: he had not ventured down here since the estate agent showed them round. But as he drew closer he realised it was the kitchen, and when he came level with it, and edged his head around the window frame, he saw inside the figure of a man. He had his back to the window. He was standing at the granite-topped island in the centre of the room. His movements were unhurried. He was taking knives from their sockets in a butcher's block and sharpening them on an electric grinder.

Hoffmann's heart was pumping so fast he could hear the rush of his own pulse. His immediate thought was Gabrielle: he must get her out of the house while the intruder was preoccupied in the kitchen. Get her out of the house, or at the very least get her to lock herself in the bathroom until the police arrived.

He still had his mobile in his hand. Without taking his eyes from the intruder, he dialled her number. Seconds later he heard her phone start to ring - too loud and too near for it to be with her upstairs. At once the stranger looked up from his sharpening. Gabrielle's phone was lying where she had left it before she went to bed, on the big pine table in the kitchen, its screen glowing, its pink plastic case buzzing along the wood like some tropical beetle turned on its back. The intruder cocked his head and

looked at it. For several long seconds he stayed where he was. Then, with the same infuriating calmness, he laid down the knife - Hoffmann's favourite knife, the one with the long thin blade that was particularly useful for boning - and moved around the island towards the table. As he did so, his body half turned towards the window, and Hoffmann got his first proper glimpse of him - a bald pate with long, thin grey hair at the sides pulled back behind the ears into a greasy ponytail, hollow cheeks, unshaven. He was wearing a scuffed brown leather coat. He looked like a traveller, the sort of man who might work in a circus or on a ride in a fair. He stared in puzzlement at the phone as if he had never seen one before, picked it up, hesitated, then pressed answer and held it to his ear.

Hoffmann was convulsed by a wave of murderous anger. It flooded him like a light. He said quietly, 'You cocksucker, get out of my house,' and was gratified to see the intruder jerk in alarm, as if tugged from above by an invisible wire. He rapidly twisted his head - left, right, left, right - and then his gaze settled on the window. For an instant his darting eyes met Hoffmann's, but blindly, for he was staring into dark glass. It would have been hard to say who was the more frightened. Suddenly he threw the phone on to the table and with surprising agility darted for the door.

Hoffmann swore, turned and started back the way he had come, sliding and stumbling through the flower bed, along the side of the big house, towards the front - hard going in his slippers, his ankle was twisted, each breath a sob. He had reached the corner when he heard the front door slam. He assumed the intruder was making a dash for the road. But no: the seconds passed and the man did not appear. He must have shut himself in.

Oh God, Hoffmann whispered. God, God.

He flailed on towards the porch. The boots were still there - tongues lolling, old, squat, malevolent. His hands were shaking as he keyed in the security code. By this time

he was yelling out Gabrielle's name, even though the master bedroom was on the opposite side of the house and there was little chance she could hear him. The bolts clicked back. He flung open the door on to darkness. The hall lamp had been switched off.

For a moment he stood panting on the step, imagining the distance he had to cross, calculating his chances, then he lunged towards the staircase, screaming, 'Gabrielle! Gabrielle!' and was halfway across the marble floor when the house seemed to explode around him, the stairs tumbling, the floor tiles rising, the walls shooting away from him into the night.

2

A grain in the balance will determine which individual shall live and which shall die ...

CHARLES DARWIN, *On the Origin of Species* (1859)

HOFFMANN HAD NO memory of anything after that - no thoughts or dreams disturbed his normally restless mind - until at last, from out of the fog, like a low spit of land emerging at the end of a long voyage, he became aware of a gradual reawakening of sensations - freezing water trickling down the side of his neck and across his back, a cold pressure on his scalp, a sharp pain in his head, a mechanical jabbering in his ears, the familiar sickly-sharp floral smell of his wife's perfume - and he realised that he was lying on his side, with something soft against his cheek. There was a pressure on his hand.

He opened his eyes and saw a white plastic bowl, inches from his face, into which he immediately vomited, the taste of last night's fish pie sour in his mouth. He gagged and spewed again. The bowl was removed. A bright light was shone into each of his eyes in turn. His nose and mouth were wiped. A glass of water was pressed against his lips. Babyishly, he pushed it away at first, then took it and gulped it down. When he had finished, he opened his eyes again and squinted around his new world.

He was on the floor of the hall, laid out in the recovery position, his back resting against the wall. A blue police light flashed at the window like a continuous electrical storm; unintelligible chatter leaked from a radio. Gabrielle

was kneeling next to him, holding his hand. She smiled and squeezed his fingers. 'Thank God,' she said. She was dressed in jeans and a jersey. He pushed himself up and looked around, bewildered. Without his spectacles, everything was slightly blurred: two paramedics, bent over a case of gleaming equipment; two uniformed gendarmes, one by the door with the noisy radio on his belt and another just coming down the stairs; and a third man, tired-looking, in his fifties, wearing a dark blue windcheater and a white shirt with a dark tie, who was studying Hoffmann with detached sympathy. Everyone was dressed except Hoffmann, and it suddenly seemed terribly important to him to put on some clothes as well. But when he tried to rise further, he found he had insufficient strength in his arms. A flash of pain arced across his skull.

The man in the dark tie said, 'Here, let me help,' and stepped forward with his hand outstretched. 'Jean-Philippe Leclerc, inspector of the Geneva Police Department.'

One of the paramedics took Hoffmann's other arm and together he and the inspector raised him carefully to his feet. On the creamy paintwork of the wall where his head had rested was a feathery patch of blood. More blood was on the floor - smeared into streaks, as if someone had skidded in it. Hoffmann's knees sagged. 'I have you,' Leclerc reassured him. 'Breathe deeply. Take a moment.'

Gabrielle said anxiously, 'He needs to go to a hospital.'

'The ambulance will be here in ten minutes,' said the paramedic. 'They've been delayed.'

'Why don't we wait in here?' suggested Leclerc. He opened the door on to the chilly drawing room.

Once Hoffmann had been lowered into a sitting position on the sofa - he refused to lie flat - the paramedic squatted in front of him.

'Can you tell me the number of fingers I'm holding up?'

Hoffmann said, 'Can I have my ...' What was the word? He raised his hand to his eyes.

'He needs his glasses,' said Gabrielle. 'Here you are, darling.' She slipped them over his nose and kissed his forehead. 'Take it easy, all right?'

The medic said, 'Can you see my fingers now?'

Hoffmann counted carefully. He ran his tongue over his lips before replying. 'Three.'

'And now?'

'Four.'

'We need to take your blood pressure, *monsieur*.'

Hoffmann sat placidly as the sleeve of his pyjama jacket was rolled up and the plastic cuff was fastened around his bicep and inflated. The end of the stethoscope was cold on his skin. His mind seemed to be switching itself back on now, section by section. Methodically he noted the contents of the room: the pale yellow walls, the easy chairs and chaise longues covered in white silk, the Bechstein baby grand, the Louis Quinze clock ticking quietly on the mantelpiece, the charcoal tones of the Auerbach landscape above it. On the coffee table in front of him was one of Gabrielle's early self-portraits: a half-metre cube, made up of a hundred sheets of Mirogard glass, on to which she had traced in black ink the sections of an MRI scan of her own body. The effect was of some strange, vulnerable alien creature floating in mid-air. Hoffmann looked at it as if for the first time. There was something here he ought to remember. What was it? This was a new experience for him, not to be able to retrieve a piece of information he wanted immediately. When the paramedic had finished, Hoffmann said to Gabrielle, 'Aren't you doing something special today?' His forehead creased in concentration as he searched through the chaos of his memory. 'I know,' he said at last with relief, 'it's your show.'

'Yes, it is, but we'll cancel it.'

'No, we mustn't do that - not your first show.'

'Good,' said Leclerc, who was watching Hoffmann from his armchair. 'This is very good.'

Hoffmann turned slowly to look at him. The movement shot another spasm of pain through his head. He peered at Leclerc. 'Good?'

'It's good that you can remember things.' The inspector gave him the thumbs-up sign. 'For example, what's the last thing that happened to you tonight that you can remember?'

Gabrielle interrupted. 'I think Alex ought to see a doctor before he answers any questions. He needs to rest.'

'What is the last thing I remember?' Hoffmann considered the question carefully, as if it were a mathematical problem. 'I guess it was coming in through the front door. He must have been behind it waiting for me.'

'He? There was only one man?' Leclerc unzipped his windcheater and with difficulty tugged a notebook from some hidden recess, then shifted in his chair and produced a pen. All the while he looked encouragingly at Hoffmann.

'Yes, as far as I know. Just one.' Hoffmann put his hand to the back of his head. His fingers touched a bandage, tightly wound. 'What did he hit me with?'

'By the looks of it, a fire extinguisher.'

'Jesus. And how long was I unconscious?'

'Twenty-five minutes.'

'Is that all?' Hoffmann felt as if he had been out for hours. But when he looked at the windows he saw it was still dark, and the Louis Quinze clock said it was not yet five o'clock. 'And I was shouting to warn you,' he said to Gabrielle. 'I remember that.'

'That's right, I heard you. Then I came downstairs and found you lying there. The front door was open. The next thing I knew, the police were here.'

Hoffmann looked back at Leclerc. 'Did you catch him?'

'Unfortunately he was gone by the time our patrol arrived.' Leclerc flicked back through his notebook. 'It's strange. He seems simply to have walked in through the

gate and walked out again. Yet I gather you need two separate codes to access the gate and the front door. I wonder - was this man known to you in some way, perhaps? I'm assuming you didn't let him in deliberately.'

'I've never seen him before in my life.'

'Ah.' Leclerc made a note. 'So you did get a good look at him?'

'He was in the kitchen. I watched him through the window.'

'I don't understand. You were outside and he was inside?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry - how could that be?'

Haltingly at first, but with growing fluency as his strength and memory returned, Hoffmann relived it all: how he had heard a noise, had gone downstairs, had discovered the alarm turned off, had opened the door, seen the pair of boots, noticed the light shining from a ground-floor window, worked his way round the side of the house, and watched the intruder through the window.

'Can you describe him?' Leclerc was writing rapidly, barely finishing one page before turning it over and filling another.

Gabrielle said, 'Alex ...'

'It's all right, Gabby,' said Hoffmann. 'We need to help them catch this bastard.' He closed his eyes. He had a clear mental picture of him - almost too clear, staring out wildly across the brightly lit kitchen. 'He was medium height. Rough-looking. Fifties. Gaunt face. Bald on top. Long, thin grey hair, pulled back in a ponytail. He was wearing a leather coat, or maybe a jacket - I can't remember which.' A doubt swam into Hoffmann's mind. He paused. Leclerc stared at him, waiting for him to continue. 'I say I've never seen him before, but now I come to think of it, I wonder if that's so. Perhaps I have seen him somewhere - a glimpse

in the street, maybe. There was something familiar ...' His voice trailed off.

'Go on,' said Leclerc.

Hoffmann thought for a moment, then fractionally shook his head. 'No. I can't remember. Sorry. But to be honest - you know, I'm not trying to make a big deal of it - I have had an odd feeling of being watched just lately.'

Gabrielle said in surprise, 'You never mentioned anything to me about it.'

'I didn't want to upset you. And besides, it was never anything I could put my finger on, exactly.'

'It could be that he's been watching the house for a while,' said Leclerc, 'or following you. You may have seen him in the street without being aware of him. Don't worry. It'll come back to you. What was he doing in the kitchen?'

Hoffmann glanced at Gabrielle. He hesitated. 'He was - sharpening knives.'

'My God!' Gabrielle put her hand to her mouth.

'Would you be able to identify him if you saw him again?'

'Oh yes,' said Hoffmann grimly. 'You bet.'

Leclerc tapped his pen against his notebook. 'We must issue this description.' He stood. 'Excuse me a moment,' he said. He went out into the hall.

Hoffmann suddenly felt too tired to carry on. He closed his eyes again and leaned his head back against the sofa, then remembered his wound. 'Sorry. I'm ruining your furniture.'

'To hell with the furniture.'

He stared at her. She looked older without her make-up, more fragile and - an expression he had never seen before - scared. It pierced him. He managed to smile at her. At first she shook her head, but then - briefly, reluctantly - she smiled back, and just for a moment he dared to hope the whole thing wasn't that serious: that it would turn out to be some old tramp who had found the entry codes on a scrap of waste paper in the street, and that one day they would