

CHAPTER ONE

On a hot sunny day, a big blue road sign beside a busy dual carriageway.

Cars swished past. It's in the nature of road signs that they're only ever glanced at. In the time it took, something like a hundred people looked at the sign, but none of them for long enough to see the outline of a door forming in its lower left-hand corner. At first it was just a vaguely suggested rectangle traced by two-dimensional lines, as though someone had drawn them on with a black marker pen and a ruler. Then panels started to press their way through the waterproof cellulose coating, like mushrooms sprouting through compost. A round brass door-knob popped out and, after a moment, slowly began to turn. The lines around the door darkened. It swung open.

A set of foldaway stairs, such as you'd expect on an old-fashioned carriage, flopped out, groped for a moment in mid-air, and found the grass. A man in a long, brown, slightly damp robe, belted at the waist with rope and hooded with a cowl, walked carefully down the steps. Tucked under his arm was a big thin square; hardboard, possibly, or corrugated plastic, but wrapped in brown paper tied with string.

At the foot of the sign the robed man glanced at the watch on his wrist. He set the square thing down on the grass, knelt beside

it, untied the knots, pulled off the brown paper, carefully folded it up and slipped it into one of his billowing sleeves. He stood up, facing away from the road, and took from his other sleeve a small clipboard. He checked something, nodded to himself, looked at his watch again. He was counting seconds under his breath.

Something snagged his attention, and he looked up at the doorway in the road sign. Standing on the top step of the stairs, tail wagging, was a small brown and white dog; it shook itself and barked. The robed man muttered to himself and made a shooin' gesture at the dog, which took no notice. Behind it, in the gap in nature between the door frame and the door, rain flicked the dog's backside; a few drops trickled down its leg onto the top step of the stairs, and vanished.

The robed man checked his watch again, still counting, and when he reached a certain number he turned round to face the carriageway and advanced five paces, until he was leaning up against the crash barrier. With a broad, friendly smile on his face he lifted the hardboard square over his head. It was white, with two words written on it in big block capitals:

SLOW DOWN

The driver of a red Peugeot, who'd just been about to pull out and overtake, caught sight of the board, frowned briefly, and checked his mirror again. The gap in the traffic he'd intended to pull out into had closed up. He clicked his tongue and braked slightly.

The cowed man watched until the red Peugeot was out of sight, then shouldered his board and walked back to the foot of his folding stairs. The dog wagged its tail hopefully, but the man shook his head and climbed the steps. The door closed behind him, and vanished.

Because everything takes time, even Time itself, there was a pause before nothing happened.

‘This way,’ the manager whispered nervously. ‘Mind your head.’

Because she was only five feet tall, she didn’t bother to duck. Low ceilings and doorways were one of the few hazards of life that happened to other people and not to her. ‘Could we get on, please?’ she said, loudly and briskly. ‘I’m due in Fenchurch Street at eleven.’

The manager didn’t reply, but the back of his neck stiffened. Oh dear, she thought, the public. Still; it was possible that this was his first time, and one had to make allowances. The public had some very funny ideas about this sort of thing. They thought that if you crept along with your shoulders hunched and spoke in whispers, you’d be safe. Probably just as well. If the silly man had any idea of the danger he was in, he’d be halfway to Luton by now, and accelerating.

To put him at his ease, she decided to ask questions. She didn’t actually need the data, but the public liked to get involved. Up to a point.

‘How long’s it been here, did you say?’

‘*At least—*’ The manager stopped, straightened his neck and dropped the whisper. ‘At least two days,’ he said, ‘possibly longer, we can’t be sure. We don’t come down here very often, after all. I mean, we’ve got all that expensive CCTV stuff, there shouldn’t be any need. But—’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘I expect it was the temperature that gave it away.’

‘Humidity level, actually,’ the manager replied. ‘We have to be very careful about damp, you see, so we monitor the humidity.’ He frowned. ‘What I don’t understand is, if the damp meter registers that it’s there, why didn’t it show up on the CCTV?’

‘It’s technical,’ she said, taking a little grey box from her briefcase and looking at it. ‘All right,’ she said, ‘this is as far as you go. I’ll take it from here.’

He turned to look at her, and his face was pale grey. ‘Are you sure?’

She knew better than to be offended. She was twenty-eight

years old, five feet nothing and slightly built. It was understandable. ‘Quite sure,’ she said, without snapping. ‘There shouldn’t be any bother, but if you could please keep your staff out of the lower ground floor until I give you the all-clear—’

The manager was frowning. ‘It’s just,’ he said, ‘when we used to use JWW, the chap they sent was – well, taller, and . . .’

She smiled at him. She had a nice smile, under different circumstances. ‘Let me see,’ she said. ‘That would probably have been Ricky Wurmtoter – six foot seven-ish, broad shoulders, lots of blond hair, bit of an accent?’

‘That sounds like him, yes.’

She nodded. Normally she wouldn’t get heavy with a client, but it was turning into a long day, her shoes were rubbing her heels and she very much wanted to go to the lavatory. ‘Ricky and I trained together,’ she said. ‘He came second in our year, actually. He’s dead now,’ she added. ‘I’m not.’