**Chapter two**

Greville knew where Bridge Street was. It was a nondescript kind of road, with a bus depot at one end and an enormous roundabout at the other. The roundabout was big enough and busy enough to need a network of passageways underneath for the use of people who preferred the risk of being mugged to being run over. It had been easy enough to get the time off work. He’d told his head of department that he had ‘an appointment’ and that he’d take his lunch break early. The man had barely raised his head from the return on complaints that he was compiling for HMRC long enough to nod permission. An advantage to Greville’s leading such a blisteringly unexciting life was that he was allowed leeway when it came to needing an occasional bit of flexibility.

He crossed the road at the pelican crossing to get to the side with the odd numbers. Number 21 was an Indian takeaway that looked dusty and deserted. Although takeaways probably all looked deserted at this time of day. Number 23 was a betting shop. A man came out while Greville was standing there, letting out a burst of televised racing with him. Number 21A was just a blue door with its number hanging crookedly. Greville didn’t particularly remember seeing it before, but then he’d never previously been looking for it.

He went closer. He couldn’t see a company name plaque. There wasn’t a door bell system of any sort. He peered through the glass in the top half of the door and could see an unmanned reception desk. Even though he couldn’t see anyone around, he knocked to see if someone would come. They didn’t.

Greville checked his watch. He was still a few minutes early, so perhaps whoever it was that was meeting him would be along shortly. There being nothing else to do, he wandered slowly in the direction of the roundabout, with the intention of wandering slowly back again. He wasn’t even sure what the purpose was of him being there. The puzzles on the notice board had evidently been some sort of test, which he had passed. But what was its purpose? Was he going to get a prize? The company’s idea of a prize (there was a bi-annual quiz, which could be entered by teams of six providing that they all worked in the same department) was allowing winners to choose items from the stationery catalogue to the value of ten pounds.

Or perhaps it was a ruse designed to winnow out those who could be tempted to do puzzles in company time and then compound the crime by using the company’s phone and bunking off in company time? The head of compliance had once made the department’s fresh-faced new intern go around the company and ask for assistance to log onto a computer that wasn’t his. Naturally, people wanted to help the lost-looking boy, but when they did, they got into trouble for breaching the IT security policy. What they *should* have done was to demand proof of identity and then call security to have him escorted from the premises. Thus Greville wouldn’t rule out that the whole thing was a complicated sting of compliance derivation. Still, at least it was something different to do, and if he got a few box files out of it, to help organise his paperwork at home, then so much the better.

It was exactly twelve o’clock when he arrived back outside the blue door. There were still no signs of life inside the building. He searched more carefully for a bell and couldn’t find one. He pressed against the door to check whether it had been unlocked all along, and it remained obdurate. Time ticked onwards. He took out his phone and tried calling the number that he’d called the day before. Instead of ringing, this time the ‘number unobtainable’ tone sounded. He dialled again, making sure not to mis-dial, with the same results. Greville checked his watch again. It would be mildly disappointing to walk away without getting to the bottom of the mystery, but he couldn’t wait there all day. If no-one appeared by ten past, he would go back to work. The long way, past the post office, to make up for missing his run. Perhaps the whole thing was an orchestrated lesson on what happened to people who were enticed by puzzles. They were sent on wild goose chases to empty buildings.

Two seconds before his watch reached ten past, the blue door was flung open and a plump man in a black suit burst out. He looked up the road towards the bus station, then towards the roundabout, finally noticing Greville.

‘Who are you?’ he demanded, rather irritably.

‘I’m Greville Hunt,’ he began. ‘I...’

‘*Are* you?’ the man asked, tilting his head. He took a step backwards and rake a suspicious, searching gaze over Greville, pressing a pudgy finger to his lips as he did so. Greville obviously didn’t look as much like a Greville to him as he’d done to the old lady in the park. The man came to a decision.

‘Maybe you are. Come on in then, Gravel, and let’s see what you’re made of.’

‘It’s *Greville*,’ said Greville. He hadn’t heard the old nickname since he’d left school. Gravelly Greville. A peculiar nickname really, because he hadn’t had a gravelly voice, and he’d certainly had no particular affinity with gravel. Or at least, he hadn’t until the nickname itself encouraged his peers to pick it up and throw it at him whenever it was conveniently to hand. The man either didn’t hear him or chose to ignore him, and marched into the building, leaving Greville to tag along behind.

They went past the empty reception desk. It looked as if it had been empty for a long time – completely devoid of phone, computer or company brochures and lightly coated in dust. There was a single lift at the end of the corridor, and the man pressed the button to summon it.

‘How long will this take?’ Greville asked. ‘Only I can’t be too long because I...’

‘Time won’t be a problem,’ said the man, jabbing at the button another few times. ‘In fact, it will be the least of your problems.’

This carried the threat of a compliance honey trap. ‘Why exactly am I here?’ he asked. ‘I mean, why...’

The man looked at him as if he’d asked something exceptionally stupid. ‘You’re here because you noticed the puzzles,’ he said. ‘And because you solved them. And because you rang us to tell us that you’d solved them. That means that we want you.’

‘Want me for what?’

The man grew suddenly irate. ‘*I* ask the questions, not you. You’d do well to remember that.’

A worrying clanking sound heralded the arrival of the lift. It seemed to settle with a bump, and the doors half-opened. The interior was quite dim. The man pushed then wide enough to squeeze his bulky frame into the lift, and Greville followed. It was a tight fit considering that the man’s rounded middle was taking up quite a lot of room. He pressed a button and the lift doors ground reluctantly together. The lift began to rise haltingly, while making a noise like a handful of large stones being dragged down the side of a car.

Up close, the man was giving off a smell like washing which has been allowed to fester instead of being hung straight out to dry. His suit was shiny in places from frequent and prolonged wear. His hair was jet black, slightly receding and combed straight back, giving him a general air of vampiracy. He was several inches shorter than Greville, and probably several stone heavier, even though Greville was in fact slightly heavier than he looked due to the solidity of his physique from the running.

The back of the lift was mirrored, and Greville found his gaze being drawn to the mirror as their close proximity meant that otherwise he and his companion would be staring at each other. In the mirror, the man’s reflection seemed rather blurred. Greville checked his own reflection, which was as it should be. He was still tall and lanky and ginger. He looked back to his companion’s reflection, which was still blurred. Perhaps the mirror next to him hadn’t been cleaned for a while, which was plausible, given the layer of dust on the reception desk. Or perhaps there was some sort of condensation? There wasn’t enough light to be certain. Or maybe the mirror had degraded over time, like the one in Greville’s grandmother’s living room, which hung over the fire. Or perhaps...? The lift screeched to a halt, sparing him from further speculation.

The lift doors didn’t open, which was dismaying, if not exactly surprising. Unperturbed, the man did something that Greville didn’t see, and the mirrored back of the lift slid aside. There was a security grille, of the sort that featured in horror films set in the basements of American industrial buildings, and he wrenched it open, stepping into a corridor. Greville followed him. The corridor stretched in both directions as far as the eye could see, and was set with doors at the interval you’d expect if every room was twelve feet square. All the doors had shiny brass knobs.

The man listened carefully at a door, muttering to himself as he did so, then did the same a few doors along. He seemed happy, turning the door knob and peeping into the room before throwing the door wide.

‘Come along,’ he said, rather impatiently.

Greville looked into the room, which was about the same size as a school gymnasium. It had the wall bars, and it also had the windows that were a lot wider than they were tall, set in a row near the high ceiling. The room had one desk, right in the middle, holding one computer. It was a very old computer, with a cathode ray tube monitor and a chunky keyboard, and the various components had aged to different shades of yellow. Wires trailed right across the floor from the computer to the wall and Greville, who couldn’t help but notice these things, marked it down as a health and safety cause for concern.

When he looked back the way he’d come in, the wall showed no trace of the other doors. The tiny rooms must have been knocked into one and the insides of the doors plastered over. Maybe it had been too expensive to remove them and block them up properly.

‘Right, sit down there and let me know when you’ve done,’ said the man, and turned to go.

‘Hang on,’ said Greville. ‘Who are you? And what am I doing here?’

The man made a cross noise, but he stopped and turned back around.

‘I’m Mr Valentine,’ he said. ‘And you’re here to be tested, to see whether you’d be of any use to us. Just answer the questions, and we’ll see how you get on.’

‘Like an aptitude test?’ Every time Greville had been required to sit an aptitude test, he’d found several books in the library on passing them, and worked through the examples in his usual thorough fashion. He’d always managed to get whatever role he’d gone for, although whether it could be attributed to the help he’d got from the books or whether he was naturally apt, it was impossible to say.

‘Yes, an aptitude test,’ said Mr Valentine.

‘But I’ve only got an hour for lunch,’ Greville said. ‘And I left at...’

Mr Valentine rolled his eyes. ‘Time isn’t a problem,’ he said, repeating what he’d already said. ‘Now, I’d suggest that you get on. That is, if you’re still interested in this opportunity.’ He walked briskly to the door, his footsteps echoing on the bare wooden floor, went into the corridor and banged the door behind him.

There were a lot of things that didn’t make sense. To start with, the corridor between the lift and the room was far longer than it could possibly be, given the external dimensions of the building. The same applied to the gymnasium in which Greville currently stood. It simply shouldn’t fit. Unless whoever owned the building had bought a certain floor of the entire terrace. Or perhaps the corridor’s endless appearance could be attributed to mirrors. It was all a bit of a puzzle. However, the man had referred to an ‘opportunity’, and had also said that Greville didn’t need to worry about time, which implied that this was part of the selection process for an internal promotion.

The last time Greville had gone for promotion, he’d had to answer some frankly bizarre questions, asking him things like whether he could explain to a foreigner how to use the Tube and how he would get out of a blender due to be switched on in a minute’s time if his height were to be reduced to three inches. HR liked to think that it was on the cutting edge of everything, so perhaps this new approach had been prompted by something the head of HR had come across at a convention.

Greville sat down at the computer, which lit up as soon as he moved the mouse. The screen displayed the first question, which was a familiar sort of puzzle where there were four different shapes forming a series, and Greville had to choose which of a further four shapes would complete the series. Yes, this whole thing was evidently something dreamed up by HR. It hadn’t taken long for them to revert from an innovative approach of puzzles and passwords to the tried and tested formula of what shape comes next. Reassured, Greville bent to the task at hand.

After some time, and it was hard for him to gauge exactly how *much* time, he got to the end of the questions. His eyes were gritty and his back was stiff, and when he looked around the gym, it seemed to him that the light had changed. Either the weather outside had completely changed, going from cheerful sun to being overcast, or it was getting dark.

He was still concerned about getting back to work, and wanted to find out exactly how late he was. His watch was of no help as it seemed to have stopped at ten past twelve. His phone had stuck at the same time. He eyed the wall bars. The change in the light was oddly unnerving, and he wanted to orientate himself by looking out. Perhaps it could be attributed to a thunder storm suddenly rolling in. Storms did sometimes appear out of nowhere in the summer, if the variables in the weather were aligned in the right way.

He went over to the bars and tested one by tugging on it, and finding it secure, he climbed carefully until he could see out of the window. Anyone seeing Greville in his suit, all elbows and knees, would think that he was probably more adept at mental challenges than physical ones, but this wasn’t really the case. He looked out of the window and saw that it had grown dark. The streetlight were on, and cars had their headlights on too.

He climbed back down. Perhaps he ought to look for Mr Valentine? After all, it wasn’t reasonable for him to have been left by himself for all this time. He went to the door and turned the knob, but it turned without engaging the catch. He was stuck in the room until someone came to let him out. A call to the puzzle number resulted in the ‘number unobtainable’ tone, as he’d suspected that it would. He would have to wait to be released, unless he wanted to commit the indignity of banging on the door and shouting. A man who shies away from ringing doorbells does not embrace banging and shouting until he is considerably more desperate.

Greville sat back down, and wanting anything else to do, wondered how he’d got on in the test. He wasn’t usually one to dwell on his performance in tests. If he had tests or exams to sit, he revised as hard as he could, and then once they were done, as far as he was concerned, that was that, and no amount of fretting or self-flagellation would change the results. Nevertheless, it was normal for him to be left with an impression of how he’d done, even if it was only that he thought he’d probably passed, or that he thought he’d probably failed. On this occasion, his mind was a blank, and the more he thought about the test, the more he couldn’t even remember what it had been about. Not even one single question. Not even vaguely what the questions were to do with. It was probably the after-effects of concentrating too hard for too long a period.

The brass door knob turned and Mr Valentine entered.

‘There!’ he said, clasping his pudgy hands together. ‘That’s that done. Now we’ve just got to do the other bit.’

‘But it’s getting late,’ Greville said, gesturing to the windows. ‘I should have been out hours ago. I had a lot to do today, and I...’

‘Well, you’ve got a lot to do here too,’ Mr Valentine said. ‘And I’d wager that this will be more important than anything you’ve got to do at the office. And no-one will even notice that you’ve gone.’ He dropped Greville a wink that was grotesque rather than playful. ‘Now, let’s get on with the next stage, because you’ve done rather nicely so far. Really rather nicely.’

He headed out of the room without looking back, and was the perfect distance in front of Greville so that the swung-open door slammed in his face. When he emerged into the corridor, he was creeping along the doors again, and paused to peep in at a keyhole. He straightened, started as if he’d forgotten something and reversed direction so smartly that Greville barely had time to get out of his way, then went back to the door he’d just left and opened it. Greville knew it was exactly the same one because there was a stain on the carpet that he’d thought might be coffee right on the threshold.

Greville glanced in, curious to see what it was that he’d forgotten in a room containing only a computer and a chair, and found himself looking into a tiny, very modern meeting room equipped with a desk in the exact shade of wood which was currently fashionable and two expensively upholstered chairs. The window had floor to ceiling blinds, which were fully closed.

This experience did seem to be turning into a job interview. Greville’s heart speeded up a gear as he speculated what he could get asked about that he hadn’t had the chance to revise. The possibilities seemed dauntingly endless.

My Valentine steepled his fingers, displaying nails that were far too long. Often when people had long nails, Greville wondered how they managed to keep them clean. He didn’t have to wonder this with Mr Valentine as his nails were far from pristine. He could well have spent the afternoon weeding borders without wearing gloves.

‘Right, Gravel, tell me about yourself,’ he said.

That old interview favourite. Greville started with his full name, hoping that the man would get the hint and stop calling him Gravel, then moved onto his education, and began a synopsis of his work history. Mr Valentine had his gaze fixed on the ceiling as if he was utterly bored, and it wasn’t long before he interrupted.

‘No, no, no,’ he said. ‘Not all that. I’m not interested in that sort of thing; I know it already. Tell me the interesting stuff. Do you know how to fight with a sword?’

This wasn’t so far removed from the tiny-person-in-a-blender scenario.

‘Yes,’ said Greville cautiously. ‘But...’

‘Prove it!’ he said. He opened a shallow drawer concealed beneath the table and pulled out two cutlass-style weapons, and threw one to Greville, hilt first. Greville hadn’t been lying; he actually *could* use a sword. His interest had started, as was usually the way with small boys, with wielding a stick and pretending to be a knight, then he’d progressed to a plastic sword and finally to a fencing foil when he’d been at university and had been trying to impress a girl.

There wasn’t much room for fighting in the tiny meeting room – in fact, there was barely enough room for the table and chairs. Ordinarily he’d have relied on speed and agility to get him out of trouble, but here he was trapped and Mr Valentine was bearing down on him steadily but with relentless strength. It took Greville a second or two to switch from interview mode to martial arts mode, and then he began to duck and parry, sneaking past his opponent’s defences with the odd touch while avoiding being touched in return. The idea of being touched by Mr Valentine, even with a sword, wasn’t pleasant. And Greville had quite a high threshold for revulsion. He was the type who would happily have conversations with the type of people that others might shun. People who were dressed oddly or who spoke strangely or who had odd ideas. He afforded them all the same courtesy.

When the combat continued beyond the first minute, he wasn’t sure how to proceed. This was obviously more than a quick test to see how he reacted to sudden, unexpected challenges. Greville began to wonder if it was more sensible to try to defeat him or to let him win, and it was hard to wonder very coherently when being hacked at with a sword which he hoped was blunter than it looked.

He decided to try and win, upping the pace, defending neatly with moves that his body remembered even though his conscious mind had forgotten, whipping through his guard, hopping out of range where necessary. Mr Valentine’s brow was already beading with sweat whereas Greville, with his conditioned cardiovascular system, wasn’t really even warmed up yet.

Mr Valentine made an effort to match the pave, but he was tiring. This was almost too easy, and after another few moves, Greville got the tip of the sword squarely to his throat and he dropped his guard in surrender. Blackish blood oozed out, and when Greville moved the weapon, he saw an open wound in his skin.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I…’ He began to pat his pockets for a handkerchief. Greville never went anywhere without the means of blowing his nose, having been brought up to abhor sniffing. In the meantime, Mr Valentine swiped at the wound with his sleeve, then licked his finger and wiped it over the cut. No more blood came out, and by the time Greville had found his packet of tissues, it was obvious that there would be no need for them.

There was a long silence while Mr Valentine looked wordlessly at Greville, and Greville tried valiantly to think of something appropriate to say. He got no clues from his interviewer’s expression; his face wasn’t the sort that could easily be read, unanimated to the point of flabby blankness. Mr Valentine beat him to it

‘I like you. You’re the best one we’ve had so far. Can you start tomorrow?’ he asked.

‘Start what?’ Greville managed. He felt that he was in well over his head.

‘Your new job. You’ve got the promotion.’

He opened the drawer that was set into the table and rummaged about in it, although there couldn’t have been much to rummage through because it was very shallow, designed more for effect than practical use. He closed and opened it several more times with increasing irritation, then on the fourth attempt, drew out a thick paper bundle, threaded together with pink ribbon.

‘Your contract,’ he said, pushing it across.

‘But…’

‘Everything’s agreed,’ Mr Valentine said, a note of briskness entering his tone. ‘Now, if you’ll just sign at the bottom.’

As he spoke, he leaned closer and closer until Greville could feel touches of spittle on his face. It burned where it touched. The man’s teeth were looking whiter and more pointed. Greville hoped that it was a trick of the light.

‘Can’t I read it first?’ Greville asked. He never signed anything unless he’d gone through it carefully and understood as much as he was able.

*‘Read* it? ` he repeated. ‘I haven’t got time to sit here while you trawl through all that. I’ve got other things to do.

`I could take it home with me?’ Greville suggested. Mr Valentine’s colour rose a fraction.

‘No, no, no. That won`t do at all. It will only say what it’s supposed to while it’s inside this building. Outside, it will either say something completely different or it will say nothing at all, and you wouldn’t be able to read a blank document, would you, eh?’

He wasn’t making any sense at all, but Greville had lost the will to try to puzzle it out. All he wanted to do was to get out of that building, back to the normal world where things happened in a predictable fashion.

`I suppose not,’ he said in response. He opened the contract at random and tore out one of the thick, stiff pages.

`Here you are. Take this home and see what it says when you get there.’

Greville glanced at the page, very conscious of Mr Valentine`s impatience and not that worried by it. *Everyone* was always annoyed at auditors, and he’d grown so accustomed to it that it sometimes barely registered. This bit of the contract was the usual stuff about Misuse of the Internet. Whoever had drafted this contract seemed to have a sense of humour because it stated that any lapses would be punishable by half a dozen lashes to be delivered in the main entrance hall, and that any further transgressions would result in three days’ hard labour.

‘Are you going to sign it or shall I interview the next person on my list?’

Greville suddenly felt reckless. It didn’t happen to him very often as he usually liked to proceed in a logical, measured way, so it was rather intoxicating when it did. He reached into his pocket for his stainless steel biro.

‘Use this one,’ Mr Valentine said, pushing a very slim pen towards him. Greville twisted the top off, and where there should have been a nib, instead there was a vicious spike. He must have unscrewed the wrong bit. He looked up at Mr Valentine, who bared his teeth.

‘In blood,’ he said. ‘All contracts here are signed in blood.’

He watched very closely, as if there was something to be learned from the manner in which Greville proceeded. A contract on heavy, handmade paper, bound in pink ribbon, to be signed in blood. Greville was almost disorientated with the strangeness of it all, so he plunged the lance into his finger and made a red smear above his name. Which he noted was spelled correctly. Even under the greatest duress, his compliance instinct remained intact. He handed the contract to Mr Valentine, who set it aside and gave him another identical copy.

‘Your copy,’ he said. ‘If you would be so kind.’

What was another few drops out of eight pints? He wiped another smear in the appropriate place and held the page open until it had dried.

Mr Valentine took the contract and put it in the drawer, waited a few seconds checked the drawer again, then put the other copy in there too. There was no way that a second copy would fit in there – the first copy would have been a squeeze all by itself. Perhaps the drawer was connected to some sort of chute – but the rest of the table was too spindly for anything like that.

‘One of those copies was mine?’ he pointed out. Mr Valentine rolled his eyes.

‘And you shall have it back tomorrow. I told you – it’s of no use outside this building – no use at all. Now, make sure that you’re in bright and early tomorrow, as we have a lot to do.

‘In *where* early?’ Greville managed. ‘Here?’

‘No! Why would you come *here*? I’ll see you in the lobby of the office at nine tomorrow morning. Now then, I’ll just see you out as I’ve got rather a lot of other things to do.’

They returned to the tiny lift, which began a creaking descent downwards. Down and down and down. Suddenly it began to plummet as if the cable had snapped, falling faster and faster. Greville braced himself for impact, surprised when none came. Surely they were far beyond the depth of any basement. Then the lift slowed to an uncertain halt, the doors stuttered open and they were back in the lobby. Greville said a hasty goodbye and made his way back onto the street.