

MARMALADE

The room was too hot, or too cold, or something: either way, he couldn't sleep. He mashed his pillow up, flattened it, punched it in frustration and threw it onto the floor. He never liked staying in hotels at the best of times: they were simultaneously too like and too different from home to be comfortable. This hotel was no exception: it was cheap and neat and bland and its main merit was that every room in every hotel in the chain was the same – clean and neat and bland – so at least the familiarity of the room and its resemblance to thousands of identical rooms in identical hotels around the world was calming.

In fact, he thought as he tried to get his head level on the remaining pillow, this room wasn't the same as all the others. The furniture was slightly old and worn, with odd chunks scalloped out of it as if some small creature had been nibbling at them. And there was an unusual smell, sweet and heavy, like a citrusy aftershave or – yes – like marmalade. He would have risked the cold night breeze and opened the window to diffuse it, but – as with all the rooms in all the hotels in this chain – the window could not be opened, and so the smell, the marmalade smell, hung heavy in the air.

He couldn't sleep so he lay there, sometimes with eyes closed, sometimes with eyes open. He was increasingly aware of the amount of lights in the room: an orange smoke alarm light, blinking in the ceiling: a red TV light, glowing like a miniature sunset on the wall: the green of a phone charger, the blue of a laptop charger, the sickly yellow of a street light leaching through a gap in the curtains. There was noise too: a constant variety of humming sounds from ventilation systems, air-conditioning, and heaters, as well the occasional burst of conversation and laughter in the corridor as lift doors opened and closed. And always the smell, thick and sticky in the dark around him.

For a while, he dozed off and dreamed of shapes in the dark, small eyes gleaming, a sense of fur. He awoke as easily as he had fallen asleep, no long able to sleep but still sleepy, restless and heavy in the bed. He thought about turning on the light and reading for a while, but the effort was too much, and he continued to lie there. He began to think about the smell, which had increased in his mind to an actual presence in the room, a fruity ghost. He wondered what it really was, how it had got there, and where it was coming from. Perhaps someone had spilled a bottle of cologne in the bathroom: perhaps it was just the cheap shower lotion the hotel provided for its guests: or maybe it really was marmalade. For a moment, a vision of a large lidless jar, sticky round the rim and full of chunks of orange peel, came into his mind. He dismissed the image: in a hotel as clean and bland as this one, nobody would allow a half-empty jar of marmalade to pollute the tidy air.

He turned over in bed, closed his eyes, opened them again, looked at the tiny lights, red and green and blue and yellow. He turned over again and thought about reading. He lay on his back, closed his eyes, thought about going to the bathroom and decided against it. He was drowsy again, and this time he might really sleep. Eyelids finally heavy, he rolled onto his side: his hand flopped over the side of the bed, and touched a paw.