

Thursday

4 a.m.

The beating of a helicopter swooping low over the Lovelace estate must have been what first shook Cathy from sleep, but what had brought her to consciousness was the much softer click of a door. She stretched an arm out and across the bed. The sheet was warm and she could still feel the imprint of Banji's body on it, but he had gone.

She'd fetch him back, she decided, pulling on her dressing gown and making her way down the corridor to the front door. By the time she reached it, he had already crossed the landing and was nearly at the walkway.

'Banji.'

He stopped and turned.

A tall man, toned by the gym, there was something about the way he stood there under the dark rotating blades of the helicopter that made her doubt that it was him. But as the helicopter flew away he seemed to return to the skin of the man she knew. He yawned and smiled, and said, 'It's early.' And yawned again. 'Go back to bed.'

'I will if you will.'

He shook his head. 'Better not.' He was speaking so softly she could barely make out what he was saying. 'I've got a lot on.'

'Lyndall was expecting to see you at breakfast. She'll be disappointed.' Even in the dim light she could see how his expression softened at the mention of her daughter. 'Come on,' she said. 'Come back to bed.'

'Nah.' He gestured with his arm – half a wave and half a waving of her off. 'You're all right. I'll catch her later.' A decisive turn and he strode off down the walkway.

Biting back her disappointment, she crossed the landing and went to stand at the edge of the balcony so she could see over the low wall. From there she followed his progress for as long as she could. Which wasn't long: he was moving at such a pace his brown skin had soon faded into the night.

It was hot there but so much hotter inside; she stayed where she was, looking out on the concrete and steel of the Lovelace buildings and the web of walkways that connected them.

The estate was the last stand of a twentieth-century modernist dream which years of neglect had turned into a dangerous nightmare of piss-stained crevices. It was scheduled for demolition and boards were beginning to take the place of windows and front doors, while neighbourliness was being replaced by long farewells or midnight flits.

She looked out at the separate blocks, each on different levels, which were joined by the spiralling walkways stretching to left and right. Usually so noisy, the estate was now subdued. With every door closed and every window dark, she might almost be able to hear the Lovelace residents breathing in their sleep.

As she stood there, a neon bulb winked out on the walkway opposite. Another that the council would not bother replacing; darkness was heralding the end of the Lovelace. Sighing, she went back inside.

She was halfway to bed when she heard a footfall. Cheered by the prospect of Banji's return, she hurried into the lounge, dodging the clutter of furniture (two comfy sofas and too many over-cushioned old chairs that she was always promising Lyndall she would prune), to reach the flat line-up of steel windows that faced out onto the estate. She was just in time to catch sight of a shadow flitting by.

Too slight a figure to be Banji. Must be Jayden, who lived with his mother at the other end of the landing. On his way, she guessed, to help out in the market.

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Submission to the internal inquiry of the Metropolitan Police into
Operation Bedrock

Submission 987/S/1-15: photographic evidence produced by Air
Support Unit 27AWZ pertaining to surveillance prior to the outbreak
of the disturbances

location: Lovelace estate

subject: routine surveillance

This evidence was collected at 4:01:23 on [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
when Air Support Unit 27AWZ, India 95, passed over the Lovelace
estate in Rockham.

In response to an ongoing request by [REDACTED] 27AWZ
carried out a routine passing surveillance on the estate.

As the ASU passed over Flat 45, Lovelace Block 3, a man, IC3,
emerged. Camera facilities were employed to photograph this man,
later identified to be the man known as Banji. He turned to address
someone (not visible) who stood in the open doorway of Flat 45. The
conversation was brief. The man then proceeded unaccompanied down
the runway and towards the south-western exit of the Lovelace estate.

A female figure, IC1, stepped out from Flat 45 and watched as the
man departed.

The ASU did not continue its surveillance.

4.15 a.m.

Peter Whiteley was just about to leave the bedroom when he heard Frances sigh. He turned to look at the bed. She was lying perfectly still, and although he thought that the sheet, which was all that was covering her, might have shifted, it was too dark to be sure.

Another, quieter sigh, but still no movement. She must be sighing in her sleep.

The burble of a police radio told him that they were gearing up for his arrival. He left the bedroom and made his way downstairs.

The kitchen was even hotter than the bedroom. Not that this stopped Patsy from springing out of her basket at first sight of him and bouncing over, her rasping tongue making a tour of his face. 'Only time you're friendly to me,' he said, feigning affection by stroking her silken back, 'is when there's no one else to feed you.' Her answer was one last slurp of his lips before she raced across the kitchen to stand by her bowl so she could wolf down what he put there in less time than it took him to fill the kettle.

He called out, softly, through the open window. 'You there?'

The officer, who must have been perched on the stone bench just below the window, popped into view: 'Morning, sir.'

'Good morning.' Peter lifted his gaze to the dark sky. 'Or almost.'

'I'll fetch your driver, shall I?'

'Tell him half an hour.'

Peter unbolted the kitchen door (strange the habit that had them locking the door at night despite the fact that the windows were open and the house guarded back and front) and stepped out.

Dark and a smell like dry bracken. So dark he could only just make out the cluster of bushes that, once full and green, were now wilting into the cracked soil. He went a few steps further into the garden, feeling the warmth of the spiky grass on his bare feet and the dust that each one of his steps stirred up. The night seemed to

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press down on him, the air heavier and much hotter than any English night should be. He could just make out the shadowed outline of the beech at the bottom of the garden, with its uneven cankered trunk standing stark against the blackened sky. An ancient tree: he hoped it would find a way to pull in moisture from the thickened air.

It was so quiet that he heard the kettle clicking off. He made his way back into the kitchen, leaving the door ajar.

'Help yourself.' He fetched down two mugs. 'One for me as well. No sugar.'

4.20 a.m.

The instant that Joshua Yares woke, he got straight out of a bed that looked as if it had barely been slept in. He nevertheless pulled tight the light-blue sheets, smartening up corners that were already well tucked in, before fetching the neatly folded counterpane from the chair and smoothing it over the top.

He stepped back to survey the result, approaching the bed again to flatten a faint wrinkle on the top left-hand corner. Once it was all perfectly smooth and flat, he took hold of the sweat pants and a T-shirt he had laid out the night before and, having dressed, laced up his running trainers.

Taking the narrow stairs two at a time, he was soon out on the street. A few paces jogged before he began to run in earnest.

He liked running, especially when nobody was about. And although he'd slowed considerably since his record-breaking days, he still ran with the strength and agility of a much younger man.

He pushed his torso forward as if in a race, and then, feet pounding the pavement and sweat beading his forehead (no one being about), he vaulted the gate to the park and set off across the high grass, hearing it crackle as he mowed it down.

4.22 a.m.

Peter was sweating as he stepped into the shower.

He closed his eyes, tilted back his head and let the water wash over him. Might as well enjoy it now, because if this awful drought persisted

showers would soon be replaced by queuing at standpipes and water trucks for rationed water.

But this was England: the drought could surely not persist. As a matter of fact, he'd yesterday heard a weatherman predicting an imminent reversion to the grey disappointment of an average summer. That would please the PM: one less crisis to fend off in these dismal times.

He dried himself vigorously before tossing down the towel.

Thirty years married and Frances was still offended by this habit. But he couldn't rid himself of the superstition that the ritual brought him luck, and luck in great quantities is what he needed now. Courage, he told himself, and made to leave. In turning away, however, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. I look washed out, he thought, despite the sun. He sucked in his stomach and flashed himself a smile. He smoothed down hair that was only beginning to grey. Better.

Now for the finishing touches.

He pulled open the cedar doors of his dressing-room wardrobes and surveyed the rows of suits and shirts and ties. Not the fawn linen. Too flash for the House. Same for the beige. Not the dark blue either – he'd overused it recently – and certainly not the grey, which always seemed too lightweight. Black then, with a white shirt, and the mauve tie for a dash of colour.

It was an ensemble that, even as he put it on, felt heavy for a day that was going to break all records. But when it was this hot in the House, permission to remove outer garments was frequently granted and, having learnt the hard way how badly the thick dark hair of his forearms played on television, he knew better than to give in to the temptation of a short-sleeved shirt.

He sucked in his paunch before taking another glance, this time in the full-length mirror. Shoelaces tied; shirt tucked; trousers pulled up; flies zipped; socks smooth. Frances had trained him to carry out this check first thing and sporadically throughout the day. It was part of the game that politicians, even serious ones, had to play: cutting their cloth in obeisance to a world that judged them by standards they themselves would balk at. Another smile – looking good – before he went back downstairs.

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There was a mug of thick dark tea waiting for him. He took a sip and grimaced. Nobody in sight, so he spooned in a couple of sugars. A few more gulps before he set the cup aside. He stretched up for Patsy's lead while simultaneously holding out his other arm to ward her off: stray pieces of her brown and blonde hair on his suit would give the wrong impression.

'Round the block,' he said to her and to the policeman who, hearing him moving about the kitchen, had reappeared.

4.25 a.m.

Cathy's galley kitchen was a wreck despite last night's dinner having only been a takeaway. She managed to throw the cartons away, pile up the dirty dishes and pass a cloth over the melamine surfaces before the kettle boiled. She'd do the rest later; now she was desperate for a cuppa.

She opened the cupboard, gazing for a moment at the cluster of teapots before closing the cupboard and grabbing a mug that she rinsed out before making tea from a bag.

She took the mug down the narrow corridor. She went quietly so as not to wake Lyndall, but as she drew abreast of her daughter's bedroom she was seized by an impulse to go in.

Don't, she told herself. And then she did.

It was sweltering in there and Lyndall, who still slept with a night light on, had pushed off her top sheet to lie uncovered in her shortie-pyjamas. In the faint yellow glow from the floor, she looked uncharacteristically pale and deathly still. Cathy couldn't even see if she was breathing.

She tiptoed across the room. Still no sign of life. Knowing that she shouldn't, she lowered her hand to Lyndall's forehead.

'Geroff, Mum.' Lyndall pulled up her sheet and turned with it to face the wall.

Embarrassed, Cathy went back to bed.

4.35 a.m.

When Peter came out of the house, one of the two waiting officers spoke softly into his radio while the other moved aside to let him pass. He opened the gate at the end of the path and let Patsy bounce through,

even though this was against the rules, Patsy's therapist having apparently decided that Patsy took Charles's absences at school to mean that he was a discard and she the favoured child, which was why she kept trying to bite Charles when he came home. So now, apparently, they had to re-educate the dog into knowing her place in the family hierarchy, which meant never letting her lead the way.

'Dog therapist!' He might have said the words out loud, although the officers did not react.

They were good, this current team of SO1, the specialist protection branch, adept at keeping a low profile. He could hear them, a few steps back, their regular padding a companionable sound in this soft, dark night while Patsy sniffed the ground.

There was no light from any of the houses that stood back behind front gardens, just the shadows of the trees that lined this gracious street. Walking here he felt a sense of belonging and, yes, he was not ashamed to admit it, of comfort, especially when compared to the streets on which he had been dragged up.

Despite his irritation about this enforced walk, he did enjoy the quiet of the empty mornings. To move for once unbothered by what other people saw and thought and said – this was insomnia's reward. Not that it was the smoothest of walks. The dog, having been fed, reverted to her usual irritating habit of setting off at such a brisk pace that she pulled him along (lucky there was nobody about to see or, worse, sneak a picture of him) until he grew accustomed to her pace, at which point she slowed right down so she could sniff at each and every tree they passed. She must have sensed that he was in a hurry because now she really took her time; they were halfway down the next block before she made her choice.

She stopped and squatted. He looked away (another of the bloody psychologist's instructions) while she did her business and then, feeling a tug on the lead, reached into his pocket.

Damn – he'd forgotten to bring a bag. He couldn't leave the pavement fouled; he'd have to go back. He glanced in irritation at his watch.

'Here you are, sir.'

'Thank you.' He took the outstretched bag, wondering as he did what Joshua Yares, such a stickler for the rules, would think of that.

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He scooped up the dog mess and, holding it at arm's length, turned. 'Your Commissioner's first day.'

The officers nodded, all three of them simultaneously, although none of them smiled. They didn't like Yares any more than Peter did.

5.15 a.m.

Forty-five minutes to the second and the new Metropolitan Police Commissioner Joshua Yares was back at his front door. He was sweating hard and, better still, had run out of his mind the worries that beset him before the start of any task.

No matter that he had landed the big one – chief of the Met – he was not going to expend energy worrying about the way they'd got rid of his predecessor or about the extent of the mess they were expecting him to clear up. Far better to begin with a clear head and an expectation that things would go right. And if they didn't? Well, then he would deal with each problem strictly in the order in which it arose.

He buffed his trainers against the doormat, watching the dust rise, and then he took them off and strode upstairs to shower, fast, as he did everything, while still taking care to systematically wash and dry himself.

And now the moment that had been so long in its anticipation.

He put on a gleaming pair of white briefs that he had removed from their packaging the night before. Then the socks, black and new as well, and a crisp white shirt – he'd ironed it twice to make sure – and after that the black trousers that he'd had specially fitted to suit his athletic frame. He knotted the black tie but, seeing it marginally off kilter, redid the knot before fitting it snugly, but not too tightly, under his collar. And finally two items that set the seal on his newfound status: his tunic and his cap.

The black tunic – also especially fitted – with its gorget patches and ceremonial aiguillettes that passed from the pocket to the top button sat nicely across his broad shoulders. He fastened the buttons, starting from the bottom and ending at the point parallel with his jacket where the black and grey striped bar of his Queen's Medal and the red, blue and white bars of the two Jubilees were lined up. Such a pleasure to see them there, especially since he had every

expectation that, come the new year, they would be trumped by the yellow and brown of a K.

He smoothed his jacket down. It looked clean and pressed and right.

And finally, not that he needed it just then, his cap. This, with a crown above the Bath Star and its wreath-enclosed tipstaves, and the oak leaves that ran along both the inner and outer edges of the peak, would tell even the most casual onlooker that he was the most senior policeman in the land. He placed it carefully, using the mirror to ensure that the peak sat along the line of his forehead. He closed his eyes and felt along the cap, and then, with eyes still closed, took it off, breathed in and out, before replacing the cap. Eyes open. It was perfectly aligned. Now he'd be able to do it like this every time, even in a hurry.

He took off the cap and was about to make his way downstairs when something else occurred. Yes, why not? He went over to the wall behind his bed and, leaning across, lifted off the framed photograph that, taken on the occasion of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, had him beside the Queen. It would go nicely in his new office. With photograph and cap in hand, he made his way downstairs.

5.25: he clicked on the radio and remained standing as he ate his usual breakfast of two slices of wholemeal toast (both with marmalade) and a percolated coffee to which he added just the tiniest dash of milk.

He was just putting his plate in the dishwasher when the item he'd been half expecting came on.

'Today,' he heard, 'is the new Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Joshua Yares's first day.'

He straightened up and smiled.

'To give the background to the appointment which saw the Prime Minister and Home Secretary involved in a public spat, we go to our home affairs correspondent . . .'

5.35 a.m.

As his Jaguar drifted through the deserted streets, in the wake of an unmarked Rover, Peter sat back and listened to the news.

'Following reports of corruption at the heart of the Met,' he heard, 'and the unexpected resignation of the last Commissioner, the new man, Joshua

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Yares, whose nickname of "The Wall" is said to derive from his refusal to accept lower standards, was the Prime Minister's choice.'

Now the test of whether they were going to fall into the trap that he had set for them.

'In a recent interview,' he heard, 'the Home Secretary, Peter Whiteley, suggested that Yares's well-documented friendship with the Prime Minister might put the independence of the Met at risk. In expressing his disgruntlement, and in such a forthright manner, the Home Secretary gave grist to the rumours that there has been a rift between the two politicians and that he is about to launch a leadership challenge – something that many in the Party have long anticipated.'

Yes – he smiled – they'd taken the bait.

Clever Frances: it had been her idea for Peter to go public with his defeat over the new appointment. That the Prime Minister had overruled his Home Secretary had increased the Party faithful's dissatisfaction with their leader's rising control-freakery, which, according to the latest poll, was also beginning to annoy the electorate.

'That's the news this morning. Now let's see what the weather has in store for us.'

No prizes for guessing that what the weather had in store was hot, even hotter or the hottest day since records began. 'Switch it off,' he said.

When his driver obeyed, he settled himself into the silence, ignoring the pile of red boxes and early editions beside him and blurring his vision so that the flashing past of dim street lights and the night buses carrying a cargo of workers on their way to wake the city did not intrude. He yawned.

He was able to function on little sleep, and pretty well, but on the rare occasions when it was possible just to be, and not to act, this same weariness would wash over him. He could feel it in his bones, as if he had just run the marathon, although the truth was he couldn't remember the last time he'd done any exercise. The swimming pool at Chequers two weekends ago might have been his chance – especially in the heat – but the hosepipe ban and the resulting surface of green slime that no amount of straining seemed to shift had put him off. Another yawn. The strain of preparing to launch a leadership challenge – even though

he was convinced that it had to be done – was telling on him.

‘Tired, sir?’

Although he pretended he hadn’t heard the question, it did break his reverie.

He glanced at the boxes, thinking of the heap of briefing and official papers they contained. He’d gone through the lot the previous evening: glancing at the ‘to see’; reading more carefully through the summaries of the ‘to decide’ papers and then deciding; and after that he had spent some considerable time pondering the ones that had been specially marked as having potential presentational problems. These – the problems that the press might seize on – he couldn’t risk. Not now when the stakes were about to go sky high.

This thought carried him back to Yares, whose appointment the Prime Minister had bludgeoned through. Why had such an adept politician, whose deviousness included giving his ministers their heads (along with rope to hang themselves), interfered in Peter’s choice? Sure, Yares looked good on paper, but the other candidate, Anil Chahda, was already Deputy Commissioner. Having served under the last bod, Chahda knew the ropes, and given he was also Britain’s highest-ranking ethnic officer his promotion would have been a coup not only for Peter but also for the whole government. Never mind that Chahda was the kind of policeman that a Home Secretary could do business with.

Yet the PM had been so intent on seeing Yares in the job he’d left Peter with no choice other than to concede. It was all too odd. The Prime Minister was far too ruthless to do anything for the sake of friendship, so his actions could not be explained by his connection to Yares.

Something else was going on, although Peter couldn’t figure out what. He must set somebody to solving the mystery, somebody he could trust, which thought sunk him into the soup of wondering, at this, the most decisive moment of his career, who he could and couldn’t trust. This led him in turn on to the things he knew and the things he didn’t know, and then to facts and figures and questions he hadn’t answered, and questions he might be asked at the dispatch box, all of them piling up one against the other, so that it was as if he were being sucked under a particularly boggy marsh, the gluey waters closing over his head about to suffocate him and . . .

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'In the marsh,' he heard.

He came to with a start. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Your offices in Marsham Street? Is that where you want to go?'

He glanced at his watch: 5.53.

He could picture the fuss that would ensue if he pitched up at Marsham Street at such an early hour. Private secretaries, diary secretaries, and their secretaries, researchers and the tea makers who lubricated them all would be roused from their beds and made to taxi in, and all because their Secretary of State was having trouble sleeping. Not the kind of reputation he wanted and, anyway, he needed time to think and calm to do it in. Where better than in his office behind the Speaker's Chair? 'If you wouldn't mind dropping me at the House.'

'Of course, sir.'

'St Stephen's entrance.'

He caught the surprised flicker of the driver's eyes.

'I like to, every now and then,' he said. Because it reminded him, although he didn't say this, of his first time walking in as an MP. And of the time before as well, the very first in his life, when he was the boy on a school trip who'd said out loud what he was thinking – that one day he would belong to this place – and then had to endure the mocking hilarity of his peers. 'Is that a problem?'

'I'm fond of St Stephen's myself,' the driver said. 'We all are. But it only opens at eight.'

'Drop me by Carriage Gates, then. I'll walk the rest of the way.'

5.57 a.m.

The car carrying Met Commissioner Joshua Yares swept round Parliament Square and before it turned into Bridge Street Joshua's gaze was snagged by the sight of a Jaguar that had stopped by Carriage Gates. That any car had been allowed to stop there rather than being waved away or through was what first attracted his attention, but what kept him looking was the sight of the door of the Jaguar being opened by a waiting policeman to allow the disgorgement of the portly figure of Home Secretary Peter Whiteley.

'Strange.'

'It's early,' the driver said. 'And he is the Home Secretary. They wouldn't normally stop there.'

'Hmm.' No point in telling his driver that the oddity Joshua had been pondering was not this random act of hubris but the sight of Peter Whiteley choosing to walk anywhere and so early. Wonder what he's up to, he thought, as his car rounded the corner and Big Ben began to toll the hour.

6 a.m.

'It's 6 o'clock, and, as the countdown for next year's election begins, the heat-wave continues.'

As if anybody needed to be told that the temperature and humidity were breaking all records and had been for weeks. Cathy flung herself across the bed, banging on the radio to cut it off.

She was boiling. Picking up the sheet she had thrown to the floor, she wrapped it round herself and went over to the window.

Just as she thought: the bloody radiator was on. Those bastards in the housing department. They'd promised they'd solve the problem – the way they'd talked had led her to believe they had already solved the problem – but for the fifth day in a row the central boiler, which barely functioned in winter, had switched the whole estate on at five. The crazy logic of a council: too mean to hire a proper engineer to fix the glitch but prepared to pay the enormous electricity bills that would fall to them when the Lovelace came down.

It's like a microcosm for the world, she thought: burning before final destruction.

A shower. Cold. That's what was required.

She prolonged the shower's beneficial effects by letting the water evaporate as she moved into the lounge.

With its heaters blaring, this room was also unbearably hot. If they don't fix it soon, she thought, I'll pull the radiators off the wall: that'd force their hands.

Catching the fury behind that intention, she thought maybe Lyndall was right: maybe they should cut their losses and move before the estate breathed its last.

The bedroom had to be cooler than this. She made her way back

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and, having opened the curtains, settled herself on top of the bed. And there she lay, letting her thoughts drift as she watched the night edged out by a bloodied dawn that washed the dirty white walls with pink. Soon after, bands of crimson and purple and deep dark red began to streak the sky in defiance of the rising sun.

Such a ferocious sight. Red sky in the morning: an omen.

For days now she'd had a feeling of something not being right. It wasn't just Banji's recent reappearance, or the impending closure of the estate; it was a feeling that something awful was about to happen. To her. To Lyndall. Or to somebody they knew. Banji perhaps.

She seemed to see again that vision of him, dwarfed by the helicopter, and then the lonely slope of his back as he had walked away.

She should have kept him with her, should not have let him go.

A crazy thought. She couldn't have stopped him. Never could.

It's the heat, she thought, it's playing with my mind. Except this was not the first time that a similar foreboding had gripped her. She'd felt it just before her father had died, for example, or when . . .

No, she would not think of it. She reached out and switched on the radio.

'It's 6. 15,' she heard, 'and the temperature in London continues to climb.'

1.45 p.m.

All Joshua had to do was ask for coffee and it would be instantly supplied. But hours of speed-reading through seemingly unending piles of urgent for-his-eyes-only documents made him want a short break, and, as well, it would be good for him to be sighted by some of the thousands who worked in the building, especially on his first day.

He made his way down the corridor, reaching the lift just as the door began to glide shut. The policeman inside the lift jabbed at a button and the door slid open.

‘That’s all right, officer. I’ll take the stairs.’ As Joshua turned away, he took with him a frozen image of the man’s rictus grin.

He pushed through the swing doors and made his way down, two steps at a time, to the senior canteen on the third floor.

It was a quiet room, and luxurious, its windows lining the whole of one wall to look out on the Thames, and with plush tables and chairs that wouldn’t have been out of place in a five-star restaurant. Another of his predecessor’s extravagances, although, from what he’d read that morning, a comparatively small one. Even so, given the dire state of the Met’s finances, it would have to go.

No need, anyway, for silver service, especially when all you were after was a coffee. ‘No, thanks,’ he told the waiter who was bent on ushering him to the Commissioner’s special table, ‘I’ll get it myself.’

There was a queue by the takeaway counter, which evaporated at his approach. ‘Go ahead,’ he said to an officer who should have been in front of him, but she smiled and slunk away.

‘Coffee,’ he said. ‘Strong and black,’ and when the woman behind the counter reached for a cup from above the coffee machine, he added, ‘Takeaway.’

‘We can easily fetch the cup, sir. When you’re done.’

‘I’ve no doubt that you can. But why should you have to? A paper cup will do.’

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Although she had a state-of-the-art espresso machine, the coffee she poured into the Styrofoam cup smelt stale. Still, she made it strong to suit his taste.

'Thanks. How much is that?'

'Oh no, sir, you don't need to pay.'

'Yes,' he said, thinking that this was another thing he was going to have to change, 'yes, I do.'

Turning to leave, he saw his deputy, Anil Chahda, sitting at a corner table with what looked to be half of the senior management team. They were clearly well settled in, the table littered with empty plates.

By the way they were sitting and not talking, he knew they must have been watching him. Probably thought he should have lunched with them. And also bought them lunch.

Well, they needed to start thinking differently.

He nodded in response to Chahda's dipped head.

One of the group, a man he didn't recognise, perhaps someone on secondment, lifted up his cup and called, 'Why not come and join us, sir?'

It was a friendly gesture, especially from a group who must have expected him to have them in first thing – something that he had decided against doing.

He knew he should go over now. But his pile of reading beckoned, and he could do without the discomfort of sitting amongst them and not giving away his plan to prune the team.

'I must get back,' he said.

Silence – although he could feel all eyes on him – as he made his way across the room. He pushed the door.

'Stuck-up twat,' he heard as he went out.

If that was the best they could come up with, they wouldn't be giving him any trouble. Smiling, he held his cup aloft as he climbed the stairs, two at a time again, and soon was back in the cool solitude of his grand domain.

2 p.m.

After Cathy got off the bus, she felt the sun so hot she knew it would soon burn through the white cheesecloth of her loose shirt. She pulled

up her collar to protect the back of her neck and walked down Rockham High Street, feeling the hem of her long skirt fluttering against her ankles and hearing her sandals slapping against the pavement.

Every door on the High Street was open and every shopkeeper out on the pavement on boxes or fold-out chairs, and although they were normally a garrulous bunch they now sat silently, as if the humidity and the traffic fumes had drained them of all life.

Her route took her past Rockham police station, a fortified brick one-storey in the midst of run-down shops. They'd tried to pretty it up by grassing the front and then ruined the effect by planting an oversize 'Welcome to Rockham Police Station' noticeboard on the lawn. Now a couple of workmen were levering out this board while a third was up a ladder manoeuvring a CCTV camera. The sight perplexed her. Were they shutting the police station, as it was rumoured they planned eventually to do, even before the Lovelace had come down?

'That's it.' The men prised the sign from its chained surrounds. They dropped it in the midst of glass that, once a protection against the elements, was now littering the lawn. That's when Cathy saw that someone had graffitied on the sign, so that it now read: 'Welcome to Wreck'em Police Station'.

'Witty,' Cathy said.

'Think so, do you?' One of the men shot her a dirty look.

There was a new sign on the edge of the lawn near Cathy, which the men went to fetch. It was clearly very heavy. As they turned, one of them stumbled. The sign teetered. Without thinking, Cathy put out a hand to stop it falling.

'Keep off,' one of the men yelled. Seeing how she jumped, he lowered his voice. 'Didn't mean to frighten you. It's this paint, you see. It's AI – Anti Interference. Dyes your hand.' He used a forearm to wipe away the perspiration that, having collected on his forehead, was beginning to drip down. 'Not that you'd know you'd been marked, not until they flash you with an infrared gun and your hand lights up like it's Christmas. Sticks to your skin for a week – fuck knows what chemicals have ate into you in the meantime. No washing it off neither. That's why we're wearing gloves in this fucking heat.'

'What happens if somebody touches it by mistake?'

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'No chance of that. We're gonna glass it in and then embed the post in concrete – the lawn is history. And after that we'll fence the lot in.'

'That's overkill, isn't it?'

'You think so? It's the badlands around here, and from what we've heard it's only going to get badder.' He grimaced. 'Now, if you don't mind, we have to get on.'

She left them to it, walking along the High Street until she turned off to go down the market. There the ice was melting almost as fast as the fishmongers could lay it down, so that water was dripping off the trays onto the pavement and into the gutters, flavouring the air with the stink of fish. Careful to hold her skirt up, she stepped onto the pavement and kept going, passing a pound shop, one of three along the parade. She stopped by a display of plastic boxes of various sizes, and mops and brooms that had spilt out onto the pavement and almost into the road.

'Jayden?'

Jayden, who had been picking up the fallen brooms, looked up. A taciturn boy, he nodded to her.

'You were out early this morning.'

He shrugged and said something that sounded like 'I dunno.'

'Not at school?'

He shook his head and didn't speak, but whether this was because he was truanting and didn't want to say so, or because he couldn't summon up the energy for an explanation, she couldn't tell.

'Come and have some cake with us after your tea.'

'Okay,' he said. And gave a little smile. Which she knew was the best she was going to get out of him.

She moved on only to stop again at the last shop in the run. It wasn't her favourite, but it was the cheapest. She reached over the display of peppers and okra and tomatoes to the plantain at the back. She had just picked up a piece when a voice sounded in her ear: 'That plantain's tired.'

She looked up and straight into the sun, so that all she first saw against the dazzle was a dark shape. She took a step back, blinked and her vision cleared: 'Banji. You scared me.'

He smiled and his eyes crinkled. Which she'd always liked. She smiled back.

He took the plantain she'd been reaching for, turning it over to expose a bruised underside. 'If you have to shop here, you've got to shop clever.' He put the piece back and picked through the pile. 'This one's fresher.'

As she took it from him, his other hand touched and held hers.

'You're so cool,' she said.

'I was born cool.' He smiled again.

They stood for a moment not speaking, and she thought how mismatched they – a stout white woman and a tall black man, standing close – must look, and then she thought that she should take back her hand.

She didn't want to.

'How was Lindi this morning?' he said.

'Disappointed you weren't there. And stroppy as hell.'

'Can't imagine where she gets that from.' Another smile as he increased his pressure on her hand.

She looked down at his long brown fingers with their broad square-cut nails and the back of his hand with its raised veins. She saw her own hand in his, plump and white, as he continued, gently, to squeeze it.

It was fifteen years since he'd left, and his going had been so brutal and so final she'd neither expected to see him again nor hoped that she might. But now she found herself in the grip of some of the feelings she had thought long gone. He's playing me, she told herself. And said, 'Where did you go this morning?', although she knew he wouldn't like the question.

He took his hand away so abruptly that she was pulled forwards.

'What the hell?' She backed away from him. 'Why do you always have to be so difficult?'

Not often that she shouted at him, and now she saw, in his rapid blinking, how she had taken him by surprise. Good, she thought.

'Hey.' He reached out to tap her, gently, on the nose. 'I didn't mean to unbalance you.'

If he thought he could win her over so easily, he better think again. She turned her wrist to look at her watch and, although she had nowhere to be, said, 'I'm late.' Plantain in hand, she went into the shop.

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There was a queue by the till. She wandered through the narrow aisles, giving herself space in which to cool down and Banji time to make good his escape. But when at last she re-emerged, she found that he had waited for her.

'I'm sorry.' He was looking down at her, twitching his nose in that other way she had also always found appealing. 'I was out of line.'

She couldn't remember him ever apologising. Despite herself, she softened. Said, 'And I overreacted. The heat's doing me in.' She even thought of stretching up to kiss him.

But his attention had already moved off. 'Trouble,' he said.

She followed his gaze and saw Ruben, who, six feet three and broad with it, his head covered even in this extreme heat by a hoodie, was cutting a swathe down the middle of the market as only Ruben ever did. He walked as if he was completely alone in an empty space, wind-milling his arms to accompany words that seemed to burst from him. 'Option,' Cathy heard. 'Action. Traction. Mischief.' To punctuate the last, he slapped open palms against his chest so hard it sounded like a gun going off.

'He must be off his meds,' Banji said.

'He won't hurt anybody. Not unless he feels threatened.'

'No, but he might hurt himself. And . . . Oh shit.'

Banji had already seen what Cathy only now noticed – two uniformed policemen making straight for Ruben. She knew most of Rockham's bobbies, but she had not seen these two before. And Ruben did not take to strangers.

'If they try and stop him . . .' Banji began.

She didn't stick around to hear what he was going to say. 'Come on,' she called as she began to run.

By the time she reached Ruben, a group of onlookers, mostly young men who, for want of something better to do, hung around the market, had also been drawn to the scene. She could feel the heat coming off them, and she knew this wasn't just down to the weather.

As a member of the police community liaison committee, she'd clocked the recent rise in confrontations between the police and Rockham's youth, a result of the Clean-Up-Rockham campaign that the new borough commander had set in motion. It was a grand-sounding

initiative that so far seemed to consist primarily of an escalation in stop and searches, with a corresponding rise in allegations of harassment. With the imminent closure of the estate upping the tension, the last thing they needed was another incident, especially one involving Ruben, who was a kind of Lovelace mascot. She pushed her way to the front.

'I'm asking you nicely, sir,' the older of the two policeman, a sergeant, was saying to Ruben. 'Lift your hood away.'

'Action,' Ruben said. 'Mischief.' He windmilled his arms close to the policeman's face.

'Careful,' the policeman said. 'Hit me and there'll be trouble.'

'Action.' Ruben sped up the agitation of his arms.

The policeman held his ground. 'Under Section 60 of the Public Order Act, I am authorised to request that you remove your face covering. All you have to do, sir, is take it down and then, all things being well, we can go on our way.'

'Mischief,' Ruben said, and again, 'mischief.'

'Let him alone,' came a shout from inside the crowd, and from someone else, 'He's not doing any harm,' while the crowd moved closer.

'Do what you've been trained to do,' the sergeant told his junior.

'Assistance required,' the constable said into his radio as he turned to face the gathering. He was young, and new, and the hand that held the radio was trembling.

Not so his sergeant. A big man, and sure of his authority, he stepped close enough to Ruben for their noses to be almost touching.

'Action,' Ruben said. 'Traction.' He flicked both hands at the policeman as if trying to shoo away an insect.

'No need to take the piss.' The sergeant moved closer.

'Don't touch me.' Ruben backed off until he ended up jammed against a stall.

'Leave him alone!' The cry was taken up by other members of the now growing crowd.

'Sarge.' This from the young constable.

But the sergeant was not prepared to listen either to his junior's appeal or to the rumblings of the crowd. 'Your choice,' he said, and might have laid hands on Ruben had not someone darted from the crowd to interpose himself between the two.

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‘Hold on, officer.’ It was Reverend Pius Batcher of the local Methodists and a fellow member of the liaison committee. Normally a soft-spoken man, Pius now used a voice built up by years in the pulpit: ‘You’re new to the area, so allow me to introduce you to Ruben, a member of my congregation. Ruben wouldn’t hurt a fly. Not unless you invade his personal space.’

‘I wouldn’t care if he was the Archbishop himself,’ the policeman said, ‘I would still ask him to remove his hood.’

‘Which he will do, officer. In good time.’ Pius smiled as he saw the policeman taking in his dog collar. ‘I’ll stand here,’ he said, ‘while Marcus there,’ he nodded his head at the dreadlocked third member of their small committee, who must have arrived with him, ‘asks these concerned members of our community to back away. Meanwhile, Cathy here,’ he inclined his head in her direction, ‘will help Ruben.’

What the crowd would not do for the rookie they did for Marcus, stepping back when he asked them to. Not far, though. They kept pressure on the policeman, who called out, ‘Sarge.’

The sergeant looked towards his young constable. He frowned and seemed about to turn away when the young policeman said softly, ‘There’s a lot of them.’

In that moment, before the sergeant could do anything worse, Cathy said to Ruben, ‘You know me, Ruben, don’t you?’

Ruben had lowered his head and was looking at his shoes. He did not look up.

‘And you know I’d never do anything to hurt you?’

At least this time he nodded.

‘What they need you to do is pull back your hood. Only for a moment. They want to see your face. Do you understand?’

Another, reluctant, nod.

‘OK, then. I’m going to help you.’ She moved just one step closer. ‘The first thing I’m going to do is to put my hand on your arm.’ She reached out her arm: ‘Here goes.’

He jerked away, his head shaking wildly while his arms, which he’d crossed and folded around himself so that each hand was holding on to the opposite forearm, were likewise shaking. She knew that he was holding on to himself, not so much as protection from her but to stop

himself from hurting her. Seeing the effort this was costing him, she took a step back. As she did, she saw, out of the corner of her eye, how the sergeant mirrored her movement by coming closer. If she didn't manage to get Ruben's cooperation, and soon, the sergeant would take over, with unpredictable consequences.

She said, 'Ruben.' Commanding him but without raising her voice. He lifted his head.

'I know you don't want to hurt me,' she said. 'And,' hoping it was true, 'I know you won't. I'm going to try again.'

She reached out, and to her relief this time he let her rest it on his velveteen sleeve. His arm was shaking, and his eyes had filled with tears. He was clearly struggling with himself, but he did, at least, let her hand be.

'I'm going to leave my hand there and come closer.' She moved in on him, keeping her voice low, making sure to clearly enunciate her intentions. 'And now, what I'm going to do, is stand in front of you, and reach up, and move your hood back. Because I'm standing here, only me and the policeman will be able to see your face. Will you let me do that?'

He looked at her. Blankly.

'Will you?'

His shook himself, as if coming back to himself. And nodded. Almost imperceptibly, but it was consent.

'Okay, then.' Without taking her eyes off him, Cathy called, 'Officer, please join us.'

She had been so concentrated on making the small space they occupied safe for Ruben that all thoughts and all sounds had faded. Now she felt rather than heard the sergeant closing in.

'I'm going to take down his hood,' she said. 'Please don't touch him.'

She took the policeman's silence as consent. She stretched up her arm, 'No one but us can see,' and nudged the hood off Ruben's bald head.

He let out a strangled cry, and both his hands shot up to cover his face.

'I'm sorry, ma'am, I have to have a proper look.'

She almost had to stand on tiptoes to take hold of Ruben's hands and pry them away.

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'Reaction,' Ruben whispered. He was still trembling.

'Satisfied?' Cathy didn't wait for the policeman's reply. 'You did great,' she said, letting go of Ruben's hands. 'You can put back your hood.'

He pulled his hood over his head so roughly that it covered his eyes. 'Action,' he said. His voice was louder now than it had been before. 'Traction.' And his arms wilder.

'It's okay.' Out of the corner of her eye she saw the sergeant's confirming nod. 'You can go.'

Ruben took a step forward and seemed to stumble. It happened sometimes – his legs just gave out on him.

She resisted the impulse to help. She got out of his way so he could stretch both arms out as if the air would support them. Then at last, with his head hung low, he shambled away, a wounded bear in search of his cave. 'Option,' he muttered. 'Action.' His face was crumpled in distress. 'Traction. Mischief.'

'Show's over.' The younger policeman now tried to exert an authority that had so far eluded him.

The onlookers did not move on. They looked at him and his colleague. And did not speak.

'Move along.' His quivering Adam's apple indicated that he had a lot to learn before he could exert authority over such a disaffected bunch. Which was probably fortunate, Cathy thought: a more experienced officer might have gone in harder, with unpredictable consequences.

'If there's trouble,' Marcus told the crowd, 'it'll be us that suffers for it. Ruben is safe. Let's go back to our lives.' At which the crowd did begin to disperse.

'Well then,' this from the young policeman.

'Break it up,' the sergeant told the air.

As Pius began to tell the sergeant what he should have done, their voices faded from Cathy's consciousness. Her first sensation had been relief that Ruben was safe. But now something else was bothering her. Something out of kilter. Something missing.

Someone.

Banji.

Where had he got to? Out of the corner of her eye she saw the sergeant stalk off. 'Have you seen Banji?'

'He's over there.' Marcus pointed to the far end of the market where Banji was still standing.

He didn't notice her looking. He was too busy watching Ruben.

'How come he didn't help?'

She must have spoken the thought aloud, because Marcus came back with, 'That coconut. He thinks only of his own skin.'

Knowing that there was little love lost between the two men, she didn't reply. Besides, she couldn't help thinking that Marcus was right: Banji had been the first to spot trouble looming, and yet when she had gone to help, he had abandoned her.

Again.

As he had done early this morning.

And fifteen years ago.

She sighed.

'Something troubling you?' This from Pius.

'Nothing I can't handle,' she said, hoping it was the truth.

8.30 p.m.

Mr Hashi had asked Jayden to come early, which meant he'd had to skip school, and then Mr Hashi had also asked him to stay on late. Okay by Jayden. He needed to earn enough to see them through until his mother's next disability payment.

He carried the last of the plastic bins inside, stacking them below the left side shelf as Mr Hashi had taught him to do. He stretched up on tiptoes, removing the long hook from where it hung and, taking it outside, used it to pull the shutter down. He left just enough space for him to duck under and then, once inside, closed the gap and bolted the shutter. He put the hook back, pulled up the counter, walked through, slammed the till drawer as he passed and opened the door behind the counter to call, 'Mr Hashi.'

No answer. He tried again: 'Mr Hashi.'

'Come up, Jay Don.' This was the way Mr Hashi always pronounced his name. 'We have *lahoh* for you.'

He glanced back at the wall clock: 8.40. Lyndall's mum would be wondering where he'd got to. So would his mum if, that is, she knew what the time was. But he was hungry, and Mr Hashi always acted hurt if Jayden said no to his invitations. 'I'm coming.' He pulled the door shut behind him.

Darkness and something wrong with the wiring, which meant there was no point trying to find the light switch. As he made his way up the steep stairs, he took care to steer dead centre so he wouldn't bang into any of the goods that lined both edges. As he neared the flat that Mr Hashi shared with his mother, the smell of cardamom and cinnamon and the incense that they always had burning grew more pungent.

The door he knocked on was immediately opened. 'Come in, Jay Don.' As hot as it was, Mr Hashi was wearing that same dark-blue jumper he never seemed to take off. He stepped aside to let Jayden into

a small room whose piles of cushions and thick carpeting made everything much hotter than it already was outside.

Mr Hashi's mother was sitting on her usual cushion in a corner. Jayden went over to stand in front of her and bow, as Mr Hashi had taught him to do. When she said, 'Salaam Alaikum,' he answered, 'Wa-Alaikum-Salaam,' as he'd also been taught, although it always felt a bit strange having to twist his tongue around the words.

'Are you feeling better?' he asked, at which she, who didn't have a word of English but who could tell his question was kindly meant, stretched her grin even wider so he got a glimpse of her few remaining teeth where they stuck out of her gums.

'Sit, sit,' Mr Hashi urged him. 'You are our guest.'

One half of the room was the women's section. Crossing into the other half, Jayden lowered himself down. When first he'd been invited in, he'd thought the lack of furniture strange; now he liked the cushions. They were much more comfortable than anything they had at home.

'Is your mum okay?' Mr Hashi had needed him early so he could take his mother to the hospital.

'She is old.' Mr Hashi gave a resigned shrug. He turned to the stove, picked up the silver teapot and poured from it into a glass cup. He added milk and a spoon of sugar, and then he put the cup on a silver tray on which was already laid a plate piled high with the flat pancake bread that Jayden had learnt to love and, beside it, a bowl of honey.

'The till drawer was open, Mr Hashi,' Jayden said. 'You got to get it fixed.'

'True. I got to.' Mr Hashi put the tray down on the small metallic side table beside Jayden. 'Now worry about yourself, growing boy, Jay Don. And eat. My mother baked the biscuits you like. She will be most disappointed if you don't have at least five.'

9 p.m.

Cathy and Lyndall had opened every door and every window and still the place was too hot, so they had moved out onto the landing. As had most of the estate. Conversation, laughter and the sounds of quarrelling rose up into the sticky air to the accompaniment of the heavy base beat blasting out of one of the flats. Arthur from next door had fallen asleep

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in his rickety deckchair, his mouth slack, his snores beating out their own rhythm against the general racket, and nothing, not even the giggling kids who were running up and jumping over his outstretched legs, occasionally delivering a mistaken backward kick, disturbed him.

'Shift up.' Cathy used a foot to nudge Lyndall, who was sprawled out on sofa cushions. 'And take this, will you?' She passed down the plate she'd just fetched from the kitchen.

'Mmm.' The cake was a soggy mess surrounded by a sticky puddle of icing. 'That looks . . . umm . . . good?'

'No need to lie.' Cathy lowered herself down 'It's my worst ever. Chocolate wasn't the best choice in this weather, especially with the fridge on the blink. But it's Jayden's favourite, and it may taste better than it looks.'

'And Jayden is where exactly?'

'He's never been the most punctual of boys. Give him a knock, will you?'

Lyndall, who was in one of her more cooperative moods, sprung up, her gazelle legs making short shrift of the distance between their front door and Jayden's. She beat a tattoo against the board that had been nailed in over a broken pane. No answer. She knocked again, and harder. A long pause before the door opened a crack. Lyndall spoke into it, and whoever was behind the crack said something before banging the door shut.

Lyndall shrugged and came back. Standing in front of Cathy, she lowered her head and raised her shoulders in a perfect imitation of Jayden's mother's slump: 'She doesn't know.' She also had Jayden's mother's monotone pitch perfect. 'Never sees him. Doesn't know what he's up to,' and now an escalation in pitch, 'doesn't care. He should be protecting her, but he's a bastard. Like his father. End of.' Lyndall smiled. Having ditched Jayden's mother's sour expression, she now looked so pretty, especially given that the lowering sun added a golden lustre to her coffee-coloured skin. 'Who's Jayden meant to be protecting her from?'

'Her enemies, I guess.' Cathy sighed. 'Of which she makes many. She's going to be at the bottom of every list when they close the Lovelace.' She sighed again. 'Poor Jayden.'

‘At least he knows who his bastard of a father is.’

‘Lyndall!’ Cathy had to shield her eyes against the lowering sun in order to see her daughter. ‘You promised.’

‘Yeah, okay.’ Lyndall’s hands raised high in mock surrender. ‘I won’t ask for another week.’ She dropped her hands, slapping them for emphasis against her bare legs. She gave a quick smile, her way of showing that she didn’t bear a grudge, before she walked the few paces to the low wall that overlooked the estate.

The sun was just now dipping behind the furthest building, and the black of the intertwining walkways had taken on a silver sheen. ‘There’s another meeting at the centre,’ Lyndall said.

‘I didn’t hear of any meeting.’ Cathy went over to stand next to Lyndall. She saw the doors to the community centre open and a handful of people filing in. ‘I wonder what it’s about.’

‘Scouts against the Bomb? Mothers for Rap?’ Lyndall smiled. ‘Oh no, if that had been it, you’d be there, wouldn’t you, Mum? How about Rastafarians for a Better Quality of Puff?’

Next to the community centre was another low-brick building that had started out life as a launderette. After it closed, a series of deluded optimists had tried and failed to turn it variously into a functioning chippie, a newsagent and, for a few mad months, a soft furnishings shop. Each reinvention had failed more spectacularly than the previous one. Now, with the Lovelace coming down, the council had given up trying to rent the space and had, instead, boarded up the building, but badly, so someone soon prised open a hole big enough for a person to get in and out. As they stood looking down, a woman climbed through this hole.

‘Hold on to your wallets,’ Lyndall said. The woman straightened up, tugged down her tiny skirt, put the sunglasses that had been embedded in her straw-coloured hair on her nose and then, teetering on high heels, sashayed in a generally forward direction. ‘The pop-up brothel’s on the move.’

‘Just because she uses,’ Cathy said, ‘doesn’t make her a prostitute.’

‘Oh, Mum,’ Lyndall said. ‘You’re such an innocent.’

‘Well, it doesn’t.’

‘Yeah, yeah, and you’re the one who landed us in an estate named after a porn star and didn’t even realise it.’

'I keep telling you, Richard Lovelace was a seventeenth-century poet.'

'So you do,' Lyndall said, 'and I bet you also think the mistresses he writes about are all allegories.' But she said it without much emphasis, because her attention had been caught by something else. 'Looks like Ruben's off on one,' she said.

As the tottering woman neared the edge of a building, Ruben had rounded the corner. He was holding something that, when Cathy looked harder, turned out to be a long stick. Coming abreast of the woman, he lifted the stick. She held up two fingers and flicked them, then kept on going. It was a gesture that, if Ruben saw it, he ignored. He thwacked the stick down against his palm. His lips were moving, although he was too far away for Cathy to hear what he was saying, as he continued, rhythmically, to hit his palm.

'I better go down,' she said.

'No need.' This from Lyndall, whose eyes were keener than her mother's. 'Banji's on the case.'

Cathy saw that Lyndall was right and that Banji had also rounded the corner. As Ruben made slow progress, Banji made no effort to catch up with him, instead matching his pace to the other man's so he wouldn't be seen. At one point Ruben wheeled round to stand stock-still, peering into the rapidly descending dark as if he knew someone was following him. But by then Banji had melted back against a wall so Ruben didn't spot him.

Banji's such a contradiction, Cathy thought: first he steers clear of any involvement, and then, just as I decide he's a complete waste of space, here he is, quite clearly following Ruben to make sure he stays safe.

The door to the community centre was still open. When Ruben came abreast of it he stopped. Banji stopped behind him. Someone must have been standing near the door because, although Cathy couldn't make out who it was, they came to the threshold and spoke to Ruben, who raised his stick arm. The someone must have talked some more because although Ruben kept the arm up he neither stepped away nor raised it further.

'Must be somebody who knows him.' Cathy felt herself relax.

The door was opened wider, and Ruben stepped in.

‘They’ll talk him down,’ Cathy said. ‘They’ll keep him safe. I’m going to make some tea.’

9.10 p.m.

There was so much to catch up with and so much to put right that Joshua Yares would have stayed on if Downing Street hadn’t called. It was for the best: if he’d kept going, others in the senior management team might have felt obliged to do the same. Probably wiser not to stretch their patience so early on.

The secretary who’d called had made it clear that this was a private visit, so Joshua circled round to Horse Guards Parade in order to go in through the back.

‘The Prime Minister’s expecting you, sir.’ A man led him up the narrow service stairs to the third-floor flat and rapped smartly on the door. Without waiting for a response, he opened the door, saying, ‘Please do go in. And help yourself to a drink. The PM will be with you in a jiffy,’ before he went away.

Joshua hadn’t been in the living room for a while, and now he admired afresh how successful Marianne had been in her project to stamp out all the tasteful traces of the previous occupants. The room was in fact such a riot of colour the tabloids had nicknamed it *Dizzy Street*.

None of this was much to Joshua’s taste, but when Marianne was in residence there was a crazy logic that seemed to work. Now, however, everything looked to be out of place and clashing with everything else. Marianne must be in the country, leaving the room to the mercy of the whirlwind that was Teddy, who was bound to be the source of the loud rock music issuing from deeper in the flat.

Joshua was hot and thirsty from his walk. He poured himself a soda water.

‘That all you want?’

He turned. ‘Prime Minister.’

‘No need to stand on ceremony, Josh. Here we can still be friends. Fix me a malt, will you? No ice.’ The Prime Minister had always been a vigorous man and, although he looked exhausted, he strode rather than walked across the room, and when he opened the door to shout, ‘Turn

that racket down. And come and say hello to Joshua,' his voice was loud enough to penetrate the music, which was immediately cut off.

'That God for that.' Taking the glass from Joshua, the PM went over to one of the sofas, plopped himself down into its bright-cushioned embrace and took such a big swig that he almost downed the lot.

'Bad day?'

'Not much fun. Bit of a pattern at the moment. I wake, see the blue sky, remember the latest guestimate of how much water there is in our reservoirs and decide, yet again, that somebody up there has it in for me.' He drank what remained of his glass before putting it down with a bang.

'Another?'

'Better not.' He stretched out his long legs and sighed. 'It's frenetic at the moment. Marianne's right to have made good her escape. She sends her love by the way.'

'And mine to her.' With Marianne away, Joshua couldn't help wondering why this sudden summons to the private residence. And on his first day as Commissioner.

'You must have heard Whiteley using your appointment to attack me?'

Could this be the reason? But surely the Prime Minister knew that, now he was in post, there was no way that Joshua could get involved in a squabble between politicians, especially in the same party, even if it did seem to be about him. Joshua gave a noncommittal nod.

'The ungrateful bastard is after my job. Didn't think he'd dare. Frances, his Lady Macbeth of a wife, sweats politics – if, that is, she ever sweats. I can't help admiring her even though she's dangerous. She was born to it. But he had to fight hard to get where he is, and he got there with my help. I thought he was genuinely interested in public service. And loyal.'

There was a time when Joshua could have pointed out that a series of disastrous polls might have something to do with Whiteley's new-found disloyalty, but he must now be more circumspect. He was saved anyway from replying because the door was flung open to reveal the Prime Minister's son, Teddy, who was dressed in a pair of frayed cut-off shorts and no top, so that his sharp ribs seemed to stick out through his pale-white skin.