

REAL TIGERS

Books by Mick Herron

Down Cemetery Road

The Last Voice You Hear

Why We Die

Smoke & Whispers

Reconstruction

Nobody Walks

The Slough House Series

Slow Horses

Dead Lions

The List (a novella)

Real Tigers

REAL TIGERS

Mick Herron



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To Eleanor

Like most forms of corruption, it began with men in suits.

A weekday morning on the edge of the City; damp, dark, foggy, not yet five. In the nearby towers, some of which reached upwards of twenty storeys, random windows were lit, making haphazard patterns in the glass-and-steel grids, and some of those lights meant early-bird bankers were at their desks, getting a jump on the markets, but most were a sign that the other City workers were on the job, the ones who wore overalls, and whose pre-dawn tasks involved vacuuming, polishing, emptying bins. Paul Lowell's sympathies were with the latter. You either cleaned up other people's messes or you didn't—and that was the class system for you, right there.

He glanced at the road below. Eighteen metres was a fair distance, viewed vertically. Dropping to his haunches he felt the relevant muscles crunch, and cheap fabric strain unpleasantly across his thighs. His suit was too small. Lowell had figured it was stretchy enough that this wouldn't matter, but in the event he felt constricted by it, and graced with none of the power he might have imagined it bestowing.

Or maybe he was just getting fat.

Lowell was on a platform, which probably wasn't the correct architectural term for it, above an arch through which ran London

Wall, the dual-lane thoroughfare reaching from St. Martin's-le-Grand to Moorgate. Above him was another tower block, part of a pair set at an angle to each other, and housing one of the world's leading investment banks as well as one of its most famous pizza chains. A hundred yards away, on a grassy knoll by the side of the road to which it had lent its name, ran a chunk of the Roman wall which had once encircled the City, still standing centuries after its builders had given up their ghosts. A symbol, it occurred to Lowell now. Some things endured, survived changing attitudes, and it was worth fighting to preserve what remained of them. Why he was here, in a nutshell.

Shrugging his rucksack free he placed it between his knees, drew a zip and unpacked its contents. In an hour or so traffic would build, heading into the City or points east, a quantity of it passing through the arch on which he perched, and all those cars, taxis, buses and bikes would have no choice but to bear witness. And in their wake would come the inevitable: the news crews, the cameras, carrying his message to the nation.

... All he wanted was his voice to be heard. After years of being denied his rights he was ready to fight, and like others before him, had chosen a particular mode in which to do so. This was how traditions were born. He didn't for a moment think anything he achieved today would make a major difference, but others in his position would see, and learn, and maybe act. Someday, that difference would be made.

There was movement, and he turned to see a figure hoisting itself onto the far end of the platform, having scaled the building from the street below as Lowell had ten minutes earlier. It took a second for recognition to sink in, but as soon as it did he felt a thump of excitement, as if he were twelve again. Because this was what every twelve-year-old wanted to see, he thought, as he watched the newcomer approach. This was the stuff young boys' dreams were made of.

Tall, broad and purposeful, Batman strode towards him through damp ribbons of fog.

“Hey,” Lowell called. “Nice one.”

He looked down at his own costume. Spider-Man was hardly age-appropriate, but it wasn't like anyone would be offering style points: making the evening news was the aim, and superhero suits ticked the right media boxes. It had worked before and would work again. So he was the Amazing Spider-Man, and the comrade he was meeting for the first time now, with whom all arrangements had been made anonymously through a message board, was Batman, and the pair would be a dynamic duo for one morning only, and blaze through newscasts for the rest of the week. One hand on the roll of canvas he'd unpacked, Lowell levered himself to his feet and extended the other, because this too was part of an ancient narrative: men meeting and greeting, and bonding in a common cause.

Ignoring Spider-Man's outstretched hand, Batman punched him in the face.

Lowell fell backwards as the world span out of control: lit-up office windows spiralled like stars, and all the air left his body as it hit damp brickwork. But already his mind had slipped into work-gear, and he rolled sideways, away from the edge, as Batman's foot stamped down hard, just missing his elbow. He needed to be upright, because nobody ever won a fight from a prone position, and he concentrated on this for the next two seconds instead of wondering why Batman was kicking the shit out of him, and his focus almost paid off because he'd made it to his knees before he was punched in the head again. Blood soaked through Lowell's Spider-Man mask. He tried to speak. A formless gargle was all he could manage.

And then he was being dragged towards the edge of the platform.

He shrieked, because it was clear what would happen next.

Batman was hauling him by the shoulders, and he couldn't break free—the man's hands felt moulded from steel. He kicked out and hit the canvas lump, which rolled towards the edge, unravelling as it went. He swung an arm for Batman's crotch, but hit muscle-hard thigh instead. And then he was hanging in space, the only thing keeping him aloft the caped crusader's grip.

For a moment they were locked in near-embrace, Batman rigidly upright, Spider-Man dangling, as if posing for a cover illustration.

"For pity's sake," Spider-Man whispered.

Batman dropped him.

The canvas roll had hit the road before Paul Lowell did but wasn't a roll by then, having unwound itself along the tarmac to become a strip of carpet instead of the banner he'd intended it to be. In foot-high letters, its hand-painted battle cry, A FAIR DEAL FOR FATHERS, blurred as the wet ground soaked into the fabric, along with a certain quantity of Lowell's blood, but remained a gratifyingly newsworthy image, and would feature in many a broadcast before the day was out.

Paul Lowell didn't see any of them, though.

As for Batman, he was long gone.

PART ONE

FALSE FRIENDS

On a night hot as hell in the borough of Finsbury a door opens and a woman steps into a yard. Not the front street—this is Slough House, and the front door of Slough House famously never opens, never closes—but a yard that sees little natural light, and whose walls are consequently fuzzy with mildew. The odour is of neglect, whose constituent humours, with a little effort, can be made out to be food and fats from the takeaway, and stale cigarettes, and long-dried puddles, and something rising from the drain that gurgles in a corner and is best not investigated closely. It is not yet dark—it’s the violet hour—but already the yard is shadowy with night. The woman doesn’t pause there. There’s nothing to see.

But supposing she were herself observed—supposing the slight draught that brushes past as she closes the door were not a longed-for breeze of the type that August seems to have abjured, but a wandering spirit in search of a resting place—then the moment before the door is firmly closed might be one in which an opportunity is briefly open. Quick as a sunbeam in it slips, and because spirits, especially wandering spirits, are no slouches, what follows would happen in the time it takes a bat to blink; a lightning survey of this half-forgotten and wholly ignored annex; this “administrative oubliette,” as it was once dubbed, of the intelligence service.

Our spirit flies up the stairs, no other option presenting itself,

and as it ascends notes the contours marked on the staircase walls; a ragged brown scurf-mark, like the outline of an unfinished continent, indicating the height to which damp has risen; a wavy scribble that might almost be taken, in the gloom, for the licking of flames. A fanciful notion, but one reinforced by the heat and the general air of oppression that smothers the house, as if someone—something—were exerting a malign influence over those in his, its, thrall.

On the first landing, two office doors. Choosing at random, our spirit finds itself in an untidy, shabby office; one with a pair of desks on which sit a pair of computers, their monitors' stand-by lights quietly blinking in the dark. Spillages here have gone so long unmopped they've evolved into stains, and stains so long ignored they've been absorbed into the colour scheme. Everything is yellow or grey, and either broken or mended. A printer, jammed into a space not quite large enough, boasts a jagged crack across its lid, and the paper lantern masking one of the overhead bulbs—the other has no shade—is torn, and hangs at an angle. The dirty mug on one desk is missing its handle. The dirty glass on the other is chipped. The lip-ring on its rim is a Goth's kiss; a sneer in grease.

No place then, this, for a wandering spirit: ours sniffs, but not audibly, before disappearing then reappearing in this floor's companion office, and then in the pair on the next floor up, and then on the landing of the floor above that, the better to contrive a view of the building as a whole . . . Which is not, it turns out, a favourable one. These rooms which seem empty are in fact teeming; they froth with frustration, and not a little bile; they roil with the agony of enforced inertia. Only one among them—the one with the classiest computer kit—seems relatively unscathed by the torment of eternal boredom; and only one other—the smaller of the pair on this top landing—shows any sign of efficient industry. The rest hum with the repetitive churning of meaningless tasks; of work that's been found for idle hands, and seemingly consists of the

processing of reams of information, raw data barely distinguishable from a mess of scattered alphabets, seasoned with random numbers. As if the admin tasks of some recording demon had been upsourced and visited upon the occupants here; converted into mundane chores they are expected, endlessly, ceaselessly, to perform, failing which they will be cast into even remoter darknesses—damned if they do and damned if they don't. The only reason for the absence of a sign requiring entrants to abandon all hope is that, as every office worker knows, it's not the hope that kills you.

It's knowing it's the hope that kills you that kills you.

... *These rooms*, our wandering spirit has said, but there remains one still unvisited—the larger of the pair on this top floor, which, while shrouded in darkness, is not in fact empty. If our spirit had ears, it would hardly need press one to the door to ascertain this, for the noise emanating from within isn't shy: it is loud and rumbly and might plausibly come from a barnyard animal. And our spirit trembles slightly, in an almost-perfect imitation of a human experiencing distress, and before that noise, part snore part belch part growl, quite fades away, has descended through Slough House again; past the abysmal offices on the second and first floors; down the final stretch of stairs which is all the property boasts of ground level, wedged as it is between Chinese restaurant and jack-of-all-trades newsagent's; and out into the mildewed airless yard just as time reasserts itself, erasing our wandering spirit like a windscreen wiper sweeps away an insect, and so suddenly that it leaves a little *pop* behind it, but of such a small, polite nature that the woman doesn't notice. Instead, she tugs on the door—making sure it's closed, though she's half-convinced she's performed this action already—and then, with that same efficient industry she lends to her top-floor office, makes her way from the yard into the lane and round onto Aldersgate Street, where she turns left, and has barely walked five yards before a sound startles her: not a *pop*, not a bang, nor even an explosive belch of the sort Jackson Lamb specialises

in, but her very own name, wrapped in a voice from another lifetime, *Cath*—

“—erine?”

Who goes there? she thought. Friend or foe?

As if such distinctions mattered.

“Catherine Standish?”

And this time came the tremor of recognition, and for a moment she was mentally squinting, though her face remained unlined. She was trying to locate a memory that shimmered behind frosted glass. And then it cleared, and the glass she was looking through was the bottom of a tumbler, empty now, but filmy with residue.

“Sean Donovan,” she said.

“You remember.”

“Yes. Of course I do.”

Because he was not a forgettable man, being tall and broad shouldered, with a nose that had been broken a time or two—an even number, he’d once joked, else it would look even more crooked—and if his hair, streaked with iron now, was longer than she recalled, it was still barely more than a bullet-cut. As for his eyes, they remained blue, because how could they not, but even in this fading evening she could see that tonight they were the stormy blue of his darker moments, and not the shade of a September sky. And tall and broad, which she’d already marked off, twice her size easily, and they must look a pair standing here in the violet hour; him with warrior written all over him, and her in a dress buttoned to the neck, with lace at the sleeves, and buckles on her shoes.

Since it had to be addressed, she said, “I hadn’t realised you were . . .”

“Out?”

She nodded.

“A year ago. Thirteen months.” The voice, too, was not one to

be forgotten: its touch of the Irish. She had never been to Ireland, but sometimes, listening to him, her head would fill with soft green images.

Being a drunk had helped, of course.

"I could give you the figure in days," he added.

"It must have been hard."

"Oh, you have no idea," he said. "You literally have no idea."

For that, she had no reply.

They were standing still, and this was not good tradecraft. Even Catherine Standish, never a joe, knew that much.

He read this in her posture. "You were heading that direction?"

Pointing towards the Old Street junction.

"Yes."

"I'll walk with you if I may."

Which is what he did, exactly as if this were what it appeared to be; a chance encounter on a summer's evening, as light began to fade at the edges; one old friend (if that was what they had been) stumbling upon another, and wanting to prolong the moment. In another age, thought Catherine, and perhaps even in some corners of this one, he would have taken her arm as they walked, which would have been sweet, and a little corny, but mostly would have been a lie. Because Catherine Standish—never a joe—knew this much too: that chance encounters might happen in some places, to some people, but they never happened here, to spooks.

In a bar near Slough House, Roderick Ho was contemplating romance.

He'd been doing this a lot lately, with good reason. The simple truth was, everyone thought Roddy and Louisa Guy should have coupled off by now. Her thing with Min Harper was history, and if the internet had taught Ho anything, it was that women had needs. It had also revealed that there was no scam so risibly transparent that someone wouldn't fall for it, and that if you wanted to

cause a shitstorm on a message board, you simply had to post something mildly controversial about 9/11, Michael Jackson or cats—yep: one way or the other, the internet had made Ho the man he was. Roddy was a self-taught citizen of twenty-first-century GB, and all clued up on how to conduct himself therein.

Bitch was ripe was how he read it.

Bitch was *ready*.

All he had to do was reach out and pluck it.

But while theory was nine tenths of the game, he was having trouble with the remaining fraction. He saw Louisa most days, and had taken to appearing in the kitchen whenever she was making coffee, but she kept misreading his signals. He'd actually commented, and this was over a week ago, that since they were driven by the same caffeine needs it made excellent sense for her to make enough for two, but this had gone whistling over her head and she was still carrying the pot back to her office. You had to laugh at her feeble grasp of mating rituals, but in the meantime he was stumped for ways to get down to her level.

Ho didn't even like coffee. These were the lengths he was prepared to go.

There were strategies he'd come across, heard about: be kind, be attentive, listen. Jesus—did these people still live in wooden houses? That crap took ages, and it wasn't like Louisa was getting any younger. As for Ho himself, frankly, he had his own needs, and while the internet catered for most of them, he was starting to feel a little tense. Louisa Guy was a vulnerable woman. There were men might seek to take advantage. He wouldn't put it past River Cartwright, for a start, to try it on. And while Cartwright was an idiot, there was no second-guessing what a vulnerable woman might do, especially one misreading the signals.

So Ho figured he needed a little practical assistance. Which was why he was in this bar with Marcus Longridge and Shirley Dander, who shared the office next door.

“Spoken to Louisa lately?” he asked.

Marcus Longridge grunted.

They were the newest of the slow horses, this pair, which accounted for their not saying much. Slough House had no rigid hierarchical structure, but it was pretty clear that once you’d ticked off Lamb at the top, you were looking at Roddy Ho—the place ran on brains, not muscle. So these two must regard him as their natural superior, hence their being overawed. Ho’d have felt the same in their shoes. He took a sip of his alcohol-free lager and tried again.

“At all? In the kitchen or anywhere?”

Again, Marcus grunted.

Marcus was into his forties, Ho knew, but that didn’t mean you could rule him out entirely. He was tall, black, married, and had definitely killed at least one person, but none of that stopped Ho figuring Marcus probably looked on him, Ho, as a younger version of himself. There must be practical stuff he’d be happy to pass on, which was the reason he’d elected Marcus to join him for a guys’ night out. A few jars, a few laughs, and then some opening up. But reaching that stage was an uphill struggle with Shirley Dander sitting the other side of him, like a malevolent fire hydrant. He had no clue why she’d tagged along, but she was cramping both their styles.

She had a packet of crisps in front of her, opened up like a picnic blanket, except when he’d reached to take one she’d slapped his hand. “Get your own.” She was levering about 15 percent of the total quantity into her mouth now, and once she’d done that she chewed briefly and said, “What about?”

Ho gave her a look that meant *men talking*.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “Lemonade go down the wrong way?”

“It’s not lemonade.”

“Yeah, right.” She used some of her own, definitely non-alcohol-free lager to sluice the crisps down her throat, then returned to topic. “Talk to Louisa about what?”

“Just, you know. Anything.”

Shirley said, “You’re kidding.”

Marcus stared into his pint. He was drinking Guinness, and Ho had spent a few minutes working up something to say about this, about Marcus and his drink being the same colour—observational comedy—but had shelved it until the moment was right. Which might be soon if Shirley shut up.

She didn’t.

“You have got to be kidding.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

“Louisa. You think you’ve got a chance with *Louisa*?”

“Who said anything about—”

“Ha! That is fantastic. You seriously think you’ve got a chance with Louisa?”

Marcus said, “Oh God. Shoot me now,” but didn’t seem to be addressing either of his companions.

Not for the first time, Roderick Ho wondered if he’d made a tactical error in his social life.

Sean Donovan said, “You’re not at the Park any more.”

As this wasn’t a question Catherine didn’t answer it, instead saying, “I’m glad you’re out, Sean. I hope life’s treating you better.”

“Water under the bridge.”

But he said this with the air of one who spent a lot of time on bridges, waiting for the bodies of his enemies to float past.

They were approaching the junction, where small queues of cars, mostly taxis, waited. Through the windows of the pub opposite she could see heads bobbing in conversation and laughter. It wasn’t a pub for serious drinkers; was strictly for casuals. She was very conscious of Sean Donovan at her side; of his thick soldier’s body. Still a physical presence, well into his fifties. Behind bars, he’d have haunted the gym. In his cell he’d have done push-ups, sit-ups, all those crunching exercises which kept the muscles strong.

A row of buses trundled past. She waited until their noise abated before saying, "I have to be going, Sean."

"I can't tempt you to a drink?"

"I don't do that any more."

He gave a low whistle. "Now we're really talking hard time . . ."

"I get by."

But she did and she didn't. Most days she did. But there were difficult passages, in the early summer evenings—or the late winter nights—when she felt drunk already, as if she'd slipped without noticing and woken enmeshed in her old ways, doing *that* some more. Drinking. Which would start an unravelling that might never end.

Taking another drink was not about lapsing. It was about becoming someone she planned never to be again.

"A cup of coffee then."

"I can't."

"Jesus, Catherine. It's been how long? And we were . . . close."

She didn't want to think about that.

"Sean, I'm still with the Service. I can't be seen with you. I can't take that risk."

She regretted the phrase as soon as it escaped her.

"Risk, is it? Touching pitch and all?"

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded. But the truth is, I just can't be with you. Spend time with you. Not because of . . . your troubles. Because of who I am. What I am."

"Your troubles." He laughed and shook his head. "You sound like my mother, rest her soul. 'Your troubles.' A phrase she'd trot out to a grieving widow or a fussing child. She was never one for making fine distinctions."

That phrase again. Making distinctions.

"I'm glad to see you're well, Sean."

"You're looking grand yourself, Catherine."

It was perhaps indicative of their respective conditions that each left it to the other to affirm their essential roadworthiness.

“Goodbye, then.”

The lights were in her favour, so she was able to cross immediately. On the other side she didn't look back, but knew that if she did she'd see him watching her, the colour of his eyes unknowable at this distance, but still that shade of stormy blue they became in his darker moments.

“**You look** like you could use company.”

Louisa didn't reply.

Undeterred, the man slid onto the stool next to her. A glance in the mirror told her he was passable—maybe mid-thirties and wearing it well; wearing, too, a made-to-measure charcoal suit, with an intricately patterned tie, blues and golds, loosened enough to indicate the free spirit blooming within. His spectacles had a thin black frame, and Louisa would have bet her next vodka and lime their lenses would be plain glass. Nerd-chic. But she didn't bother turning to check this out.

“Only you've been here thirty-seven minutes now, and you haven't once checked the door.”

He paused, the better for her to appreciate the cuteness of that specific amount of time, the sharpness of his observation. Sitting here thirty-seven minutes, and not expecting anyone. He'd doubtless counted her drinks, and knew she was on her third.

And now a chuckle.

“So you're the quiet type. Don't get many of them round here.”

Round here being south of the river, though not far enough south to be free of made-to-measure suits and classy ties. It was a bus-ride from her studio flat, which, since the weather had turned and the streets become heavy with smells of tar and fried dust, felt smaller than ever, as if shrinking in the heat. Everything in it seemed to pulse. Arriving there was a constant reminder she'd rather be anywhere else.

“But you know what? Beautiful woman, all mysterious and quiet,

that's an invitation to a guy like me. Gives me a chance to shine. So tell you what, any time you want to chip in, feel free. Or smile and nod, whatever. I'm happy just admiring the view."

So she'd showered and changed, and now wore a denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and skinny black jeans over gold sandals. The blonde streaks in her hair were recent, as was the blood-red toenail polish. He wasn't entirely wrong. She was sure she wasn't a beautiful woman. But she was certain she looked like one.

Besides, a hot August evening, and chilled drinks on the bar. Anyone could look beautiful when the context allowed.

She raised her glass and its ice whispered musical promises.

"So I work in solutions? Clients mostly import-export, and a real bastard landed on my desk this morning, two-and-a-half mill of high-spec tablets chugging out of Manila and the paperwork's only been bollocksed . . ."

He chuntered on. He hadn't offered her a drink—he'd time it so he'd finish his own a beat ahead of her then raise a finger for the girl behind the bar, *vodka lime, plenty of ice*, then carry on with his story so as not to draw attention to the minor miracle he'd performed.

This, or something like it, was how it always went.

Louisa placed a finger on the rim of her glass and traced round it before tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. The man was still talking, and she knew, without looking round, that his companions were at a table by the door, alert for signs of success or failure, and prepared to have a laugh either way. Probably they worked in 'solutions' too. It seemed a job title that could stretch pretty far in any direction, provided you weren't fussy about the range of problems it encompassed.

Her own problems—the day she'd had, like every other working day of the past two months—involved comparing two sets of census figures, 2001 and 2011. Her target city was Leeds, her age-group

18–24, and what she was looking for were people who had dropped out of sight or appeared from nowhere.

“Any particular language group?” she remembered asking.

“Ethnic profiling is morally obscene,” Lamb had admonished. “I thought everyone knew that. But yeah, it’s the sand-jockeys you want to focus on.”

People who’d vanished and others who’d materialised. There were hundreds of them, of course, and rock-solid reasons for most, and potentially rock-solid reasons for most of the rest, though tracking those reasons down was a pain in the neck. She couldn’t approach the targets themselves, so had to come in at a tangent: social security, vehicle licensing, utilities, NHS records, internet use: anything that left a paper trail, or indicated a footprint. And blah blah blah—it wasn’t so much looking for a needle in a haystack as rearranging the haystack, stalk by stalk; grading each by length and width, and making them point the same way . . . She wished she worked in solutions. The current project seemed mostly a matter of contriving unnecessary problems.

Which was the point. Nobody left Slough House at the end of a working day feeling like they’d contributed to the security of the nation. They left it feeling like their brains had been fed through a juicer. Louisa had dreams of being trapped in a telephone directory. The fuck-up that had put her with the slow horses had been bad—a messed-up surveillance job resulting in a large quantity of guns being dumped on the street—but she’d surely been punished enough. Except the point was, no amount of punishment was enough. She could set her own terms, serve her own sentence, and walk away whenever she felt like it. That was what she was supposed to do: give it up and walk away. So, like all the rest of them, it was the last thing she’d ever do. Something Min had said—no, don’t think about Min. Anyway, without discussing it, she knew they all felt the same way. Except for Roderick Ho, who was too much of an asshole to realise he was

being punished, which, given he was being punished for being an asshole, seemed apt.

And meanwhile, her brain felt like it had been fed through a juicer.

The man was still talking, might even be reaching the climax of his anecdote, and Louisa was more certain than she was of anything else that whatever this turned out to be, she didn't want to hear it. Without turning to face him, she placed a hand on his wrist. It was like using a remote: his story ended, mid-air.

"I'm going to have two more of these," she said. "If you're still here when I'm done, I'll go home with you. But in the meantime, shut the fuck up, okay? Not a word. That's a deal-breaker."

He was smarter than he'd so far suggested. Without a sound, he waved for the bartender, pointed at Louisa's glass, and raised two fingers.

Louisa faded him out, and got to work on her drink.

Shoot me now, thought Marcus again, this time not out loud.

Shirley was having fun with the idea Ho fancied his chances with Louisa. "That is brilliant. Have we got a noticeboard? We are so going to need one." She made a crosshatch sign with her fingers. "Hashtag deludedmale."

The bar was the far side of the Barbican Centre, and Ho thought he'd suggested it because it was a favourite dive of his, somewhere he hung with his friends, but the truth was Marcus had never set foot in it before, and had picked it for precisely that reason. It was exactly the kind of place he'd wager money no actual friend of his would ever set foot, so the chances of running into any of them while in company with Roderick Ho were minimal.

On the other hand, wagering money was what had got him here in the first place, so placing further bets wasn't his wisest course.

A giant TV screen fixed to a wall was tuned to rolling news. The breaking-headline ribbon was unspooling too quickly to follow, but

the picture would have been difficult not to identify: blue suit, yellow tie, artfully tousled haystack of hair and a plummy grin you'd have to be a moron or a voter not to notice concealed a degree of self-interest that would alienate a shark. The brand-new Home Secretary, meaning Marcus's new boss, and Shirley's, and Ho's, not that the relationship would bother Peter Judd—to attract his attention, you had to have royal connections, a TV show or enhanced breasts (“allegedly”). Straddling the gap between media-whore and political beast, he'd long since made the leap from star-fucker to star-fucked, stealing the public affection with shows of buffoonery, and gaining political ascendancy by way of the Hollywood-sanctioned dictum that you keep your enemies close. It was one way of dealing with him, but old Westminster hands agreed that he couldn't have been more of a threat to the PM if he'd been on the opposition benches. Which, if the opposition had looked likely to win an election soon, he doubtless would have been.

To borrow an assessment, *Dreadful piece of work*.

To coin another, “Honky twerp,” muttered Marcus.

“Hate speech,” warned Shirley.

“Of course it's hate speech. I fucking hate him.”

Shirley glanced at the TV, shrugged, and said, “Thought you were one of the party faithful.”

“I am. He's not.”

Ho was looking from one to the other, as if he'd entirely lost his place.

Shirley returned her attention to him. “So when did it start, this insane notion you might be in with a chance with Louisa?”

Ho said, “I can read the signs.”

“You couldn't read welcome on a doormat. You seriously think you can read a woman?”

Ho shrugged. “Bitch is ripe,” he said. “Bitch is *ready*.”

Shirley backhanded him. His spectacles went flying.

Marcus said, “That'll be my round, then.”