

Mick Herron is a novelist and short story writer whose books include the Jackson Lamb thrillers, the first of which – the Steel-Dagger nominated *Slow Horses* – has been described as the ‘most enjoyable British spy novel in years’. The second novel in the series, *Dead Lions*, won the 2013 CWA Goldsboro Gold Dagger, and was picked by the *Sunday Times* as one of the best 25 crime novels of the past five years. Mick was born in Newcastle upon Tyne, and now lives in Oxford.

Praise for Mick Herron’s Jackson Lamb thrillers

‘Mick Herron is shaping up to be the great spy novelist of our age’

Daily Telegraph *****

‘Close to the class of Graham Greene’

Daily Mail

‘Satire, verbal sparring and gunfights are deftly combined . . . permeated by Herron’s sly, dry and very English sense of humour’

Sunday Times

‘Surely among the finest British spy fiction of the past 20 years . . . a narrative of breath-taking ingenuity. Brilliant’

Metro

‘The finest new crime series this millennium’

Mail on Sunday



Praise for

SLOW HORSES

**Shortlisted for the CWA Ian Fleming
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'The most enjoyable spy novel in years'

Mail on Sunday

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'Stylish and engaging'

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coupled with Herron's breezy writing style,
results in superior entertainment that makes
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Praise for

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Praise for

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'Mick Herron is shaping up to be the great spy novelist of our age'

Daily Telegraph

'A pulsating spy thriller'

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RECONSTRUCTION
NOBODY WALKS

SPOOK STREET

MICK
HERRON

JOHN MURRAY

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I

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To Juliet and Paul
(in lieu of a wedding present)

I

SO THIS WAS WHAT springtime in London was like: the women in knee-length dresses of blue-and-white hoops; the men with dark jackets over sweaters in pastel shades. Both sexes carried shoulder bags with more flaps and fastenings than necessary, the females' either red or black, the males' a healthy, masculine buff colour, and caps made an occasional appearance too, alongside headbands – let's not forget the headbands. Headbands, in rainbow stripes, lent the women an overeager look, as if they grasped too keenly at a fashion of their youth, though the genuinely youthful sported the same accessory with apparent unconcern. Feet wore sandals or flip-flops, faces wore wide-eyed content, and body language was at once mute and expressive, capturing a single moment of well-being and beaming it everywhere. They were both uplit and downlit, these plastic springtime celebrants, and a piano tinkled melodious background nonsense for their pleasure, and a miniature waterfall drummed an unwavering beat, and Samit Chatterjee watched all of it through narrowed eyes, his thin features alert and suspicious.

Outside, the first working day of the year ground miserably on, heaving its bloated, hungover weight towards mid-afternoon, but inside Westacres – a cavernous retail pleasure dome on London's western fringe – the theme was of the spring

to come, though by the time it arrived the window displays would be redolent of lazy summer outings instead. In its almanac of images, on a page already turned, the New Year had been represented by sledges and scarves and friendly robins, but reality made few compromises, and life this side of the windows bore little resemblance to that enjoyed by the mannequins. Here, jaded shoppers trudged from one outlet to the next, their passage made hazardous by the slick wet floor; here, the exhausted paused to rest on the concrete ledge surrounding the water feature, in which a styrofoam cup bobbed, froth scumming its rim. This fountain was the centre-piece of a hub at which corridors from each point of the compass met, and sooner or later everyone using Westacres passed by it. So naturally it was here Samit mostly lingered, the better to scrutinise the punters.

For whom he had little fondness. If Westacres was a temple, as he'd heard it described, its worshippers were lax in their observations. None of the truly faithful would dump takeaway litter in their cathedral's font, and no one who genuinely sought to uphold their religion's tenets consumed a six-pack of Strongbow by 9.30 a.m., then upchucked on their church's floor. As a devout Muslim, Samit abhorred the practices he daily bore witness to, but as one of Westacres' dedicated team of Community Regulation Officers – or Security Guards, as they called themselves – he forbore from calling down divine retribution on the ungodly, and contented himself with issuing stern warnings to litterbugs and escorting the inebriated from the premises. The rest of the time he offered directions, helped locate wandering infants, and once – he still thought about this, often – chased and apprehended a shoplifter.

There was no such excitement this afternoon. The air was damp and miserable, a tickle at the back of Samit's throat suggested an oncoming cold, and he was wondering where

he might cadge a cup of tea when they appeared: three youths approaching along the eastern corridor, one carrying a large black holdall. Samit forgot his throat. It was one of the great paradoxes of the shopping centre experience that it was imperative for profit and prosperity to get the youngsters in, but for the sake of harmony and a peaceful life, you really didn't want them hanging around. Ideally, they should turn up, hand over their money, and bugger off. So when youth turned up in threes, carrying a black holdall, it was wise to suspect foul motives. Or at the very least, be prepared for high jinks.

So Samit did a 360-degree scan, to discover two more groups coming down the northern avenue, one of young women who appeared to find the world a source of unending hilarity; the other a mixed bunch, all saggy-crotched jeans and unlaced trainers, broadcasting the usual Jamaican patois of the London-born teenager. And towards the west was the same story, oncoming teens, any number of them, and suddenly the groups didn't appear to be separate but a mass gathering, governed by a single intelligence. And yes, it was still the holidays, and you had to expect a high youth turnout, but . . . In case of doubt, call it in, Samit had been told. And this was a case of doubt: not just the kids, the sheer number of kids – more appearing all the time – but the way they were heading towards him; as if Samit Chatterjee were about to witness the first flowering of a new movement; the overthrow, perhaps, of this colossal temple he was here to guard.

Colleagues were arriving now, dragged along by the undertow. Samit waved urgently, and unclipped his radio just as the original trio came to a halt mid-arena and placed their holdall on the floor. While he was pressing his transmit button they were unzipping the bag and revealing its contents. And as he spoke, it started – at the same precise moment the whole crowd, dozens upon dozens of kids, milling by the fountain,

blocking the entrances to shops, climbing onto the water feature's surround; every single one of them, it seemed, stripped off their jackets and coats to reveal bright happy shirts beneath, all lurid primaries and swirls of colour, and that was when the boys hit buttons on the retro ghetto-blaster they'd unpacked, and the whole shopping centre was swamped by loud loud noise, a deep bass beat.

Living for the sunshine, woah-oh

And they were dancing, all of them, arms thrown over heads, and legs kicking high, hips swaying, feet going every which way – nobody had taken dance lessons, that was for sure, but these kids knew how to have fun, and fun was what they were having.

I'm living for the summer

And didn't it feel good? A flash mob, Samit realised. A major craze eight or ten years ago, rediscovered by a new generation. Samit had seen one before, at Liverpool Street: he'd been on the outskirts, longing to join in, but something – something? Teenage embarrassment – had held him back, and he could only watch as a crowd unfurled in joyous, planned spontaneity. This one, of course, was happening on his watch, so ought to be stopped, but for the moment there was nothing he could do – only dogs and megaphones could break this up now. And even adults were letting their hair down, tapping away to a summertime beat; one of them, right in the middle, unbuttoning his overcoat. And for one blind moment Samit too was washed away in the swelling joy of being alive, despite the cold, despite the damp, and he found his lips twitching – whether to smile or sing along with the chorus, *living for the sunshine woah-oh*, even Samit himself wasn't sure, and he had to raise a hand to his mouth to disguise his reaction. This gesture helped shield his teeth, by which he was later identified.

For the blast, when it came, left little intact. It shattered bone and pulverised mortality, and reduced all nearby life to charred stubble. Windows became shrapnel and the fountain hissed as flaming chunks of masonry, brick, plastic and flesh rained into it. An angry fireball swallowed the music and the dancers both, and sent a wave of heat and air pulsing down all four avenues, while the springtime dummies in their pristine clothing were blown away behind a memory of glass. It lasted seconds, but never stopped, and those it left behind – parents and families, lovers and friends – would ever after mark the date as one of unanswered phone calls and uncollected cars; a day when something like the sun bloomed in all the wrong places, searing its indelible image into the lives of those it found there.

Part One

Something Like the Sun

HEAT RISES, AS IS commonly known, but not always without effort. In Slough House, its ascent is marked by a series of bangs and gurgles, an audible diary of a forced and painful passage through cranky piping, and if you could magic the plumbing out of the structure and view it as a free-standing exoskeleton, it would be all leaks and dribbles: an arthritic dinosaur, its joints angled awkwardly where fractures have messily healed; its limbs a mismatched muddle; its extremities stained and rusting, and weakly pumping out warmth. And the boiler, the heart of this beast, wouldn't so much beat as flutter in a trip-hop rhythm, its occasional bursts of enthusiasm producing explosions of heat in unlikely places; its irregular palpitations a result of pockets of air straining for escape. From doors away you can hear its knocking, this antiquated heating system, and it sounds like a monkey-wrench tapping on an iron railing; like a coded message transmitted from one locked cell to another.

It's a wasteful, unworkable mess, but then this shabby set of offices – hard by Barbican underground station, on Aldersgate Street, in the borough of Finsbury – isn't exactly noted for its efficiency, of equipment or personnel. Indeed, its inhabitants might as well be banging on pipes with spanners themselves for all their communication skills are worth,

though on this cold January morning, two days after an appalling act at Westacres shopping centre claimed upwards of forty lives, other noises can be heard in Slough House. Not in Jackson Lamb's room, for once: of all the building's occupants, he may be the one most obviously in tune with its rackety plumbing, being no stranger to internal gurglings and sudden warm belches himself, but for the moment his office is empty, and his radiator its sole source of clamour. In the room opposite, though – until a few months back, Catherine Standish's; now Moira Tregorian's – there is at least some conversation taking place, though of a necessarily one-sided nature, Moira Tregorian currently being the room's sole occupant: her monologue consists of single, emphatic syllables – a *tchah* here, a *duh* there – interspersed with the odd unfractured phrase – *never thought I'd see the day* and *what on earth's this when it's at home?* A younger listener might assume Moira to be delivering these fragments down a telephone, but in fact they are directed at the papers on her desk, papers which have accumulated in the absence of Catherine Standish, and have done so in a manner uncontaminated by organisational principle, whether chronological, alphabetical or commonsensical, since they were deposited there by Lamb, whose mania for order has some way to go before it might be classed as neurotic, or even observable. There are many sheets of paper, and each of them has to be somewhere, and discovering which of the many possible somewheres that might be is Moira's job today, as it was yesterday, and will be tomorrow. Had he done so deliberately, Lamb could hardly have come up with a more apt introduction to life under his command, here in this administrative oubliette of the Intelligence Service, but the truth is, Lamb hasn't so much consigned the documents to Moira's care as banished them from his own, out of sight/out of mind being his solution to unwanted paperwork. Moira,

whose second day in Slough House this is, and who has yet to meet Jackson Lamb, has already decided she'll be having a few sharp words with him when that event comes to pass. And while she is nodding vigorously at this thought the radiator growls like a demented cat, startling her so she drops the papers she is holding, and has to scramble to retrieve them before they disarrange themselves again.

Meanwhile, from the landing below, other noise floats up: a murmur from the kitchen, where a kettle has lately boiled, and a recently opened fridge is humming. In the kitchen are River Cartwright and Louisa Guy, both with warm mugs in their hands, and Louisa is maintaining a nearly unbroken commentary on the trials and tribulations accompanying the purchase of her new flat. This is quite some distance away, as London flats tend to be if they're affordable, but the picture she paints of its size, its comfort, its uncluttered surfaces, is evidence of a new contentment that River would be genuinely glad to witness, were he not brooding about something else. And all the while, behind him, the door to his office creaks on a squeaky hinge, not because anyone is currently using it, but in general protest at the draughts that haunt Slough House, and in a more particular complaint directed at the commotion arising from the next floor down.

But while his door remains unused, River's office is not empty, for his new colleague – a slow horse for some two months now – sits within, slumped in his chair, the hood of his hoodie pulled over his head. Apart from his fingers he is still, but these move unceasingly, his keyboard pushed aside the better to accommodate this, and while an observer would see nothing more than an advanced case of the fidgets, what J. K. Coe is describing on the scuffed surface of his desk is a silent replica of what's coursing through his head via his iPod: Keith Jarrett's improvised piano recital from Osaka, 8 November

1976, one of the Sun Bear concerts; Coe's fingers miming the melodies Jarrett discovered on the night, all those miles and all those years away. It's a soundless echo of another man's genius, and it serves a dual purpose: of tamping down Coe's thoughts, which are dismal, and of drowning out the noises his mind would otherwise entertain: the sound of wet meat dropping to the floor, for instance, or the buzz of an electric carving knife wielded by a naked intruder. But all this he keeps to himself, and as far as River and the other denizens of Slough House are concerned, J. K. Coe is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, the whole package then refashioned in the shape of a surly, uncommunicative twat.

Though even if he were yodelling, he'd not be heard over the commotion from the floor below. Not that this racket is emanating from Roderick Ho's room, or no more of it than usual (the humming of computers; the tinnitus-rattle of Ho's own iPod, loaded with more aggressive music than Coe's; his nasal whistling, of which he is unaware; the rubbery squeak his swivel-chair emits when he shifts his buttocks); no, what's surprising about the atmosphere in Ho's room – or what would surprise anyone who chose to hang out there, which no one does, because it's Ho's room – is that it's upbeat. Cheerful, even. As if something other than his own sense of superiority is warming Roddy Ho's cockles these days, which would be handy, given the inability of his radiator to warm anything much, cockles or otherwise: it coughs now, and spits fizzily from its valve, spurting water onto the carpet. Ho doesn't notice, and nor does he register the following gurgle from deep within the system's pipes – a noise that would disturb any number of serious beasts: horses, lions, tigers – but this is not so much because Ho is a preternaturally cool character, whatever his own views on that subject, and more because he simply can't hear it. And the reason for this is that the lapping

and gurgling of the radiator's innards, the banging and clicking of pipes, the splashy rattling of the system's exoskeleton, are all drowned out by the noise from next door, where Marcus Longridge is waterboarding Shirley Dander.

'Blurgh—bleurgh—off—coff—blargh!'

'Yeah, I didn't follow any of that.'

'Blearrgh!'

'Sorry, does that mean—'

'BLARGH!'

'—uncle?'

The chair to which Shirley was tied with belts and scarves was angled against her desk, and nearly crashed to the floor when she arched her back. A loud crack suggested structural damage, at the same moment as the flannel that had covered her face slapped the carpet like a dead sea creature hitting a rock. Shirley herself made similar noises for a while; if you were asked to guess, you might hazard that someone was trying to turn themselves inside out, without using tools.

Marcus, whistling softly, replaced the jug on a filing cabinet. Some water had splashed his sweater, a pale-blue merino V-neck, and he tried to brush it away, with as much success as that usually has. Then he sat and stared at his monitor, which had long defaulted to its screensaver: a black background around which an orange ball careened, bumping against its borders, never getting anywhere. Yeah: Marcus knew how *that* felt.

After a few minutes Shirley stopped coughing.

After a few minutes more, she said, 'It wasn't as bad as you said.'

'You lasted less than seven seconds.'

'Bollocks. That was about half an hour, and—'

'Seven seconds, first drops to whatever it was you said.'

Blurgh? Blargh? He banged his hand on his keyboard, and the screensaver vanished. ‘Not our agreed safety word, by the way.’

‘But you stopped anyway.’

‘What can I tell you? Getting soft.’

A spreadsheet opened into view. Marcus couldn’t immediately recall what it represented. Not a lot of work had happened in this office lately.

Shirley freed herself from scarves and belts. ‘You didn’t time it properly.’

‘I timed it immaculately,’ he said, drawing the word out: *im-mac-u-late-ly*. ‘It’s like I said, no one can cope with that shit. That’s why it’s so popular with the vampires.’

The vampires being those whose job it was to draw blood from stones.

Shirley lobbed the wet flannel at him. Without taking his eyes from the screen he caught it one-handed, and scowled as water scattered everywhere: ‘*Thank* you.’

‘You’re welcome.’ She towelled her head dry: a five-second pummel. ‘Gonna let me do you now?’

‘In. Your. Dreams.’

She stuck her tongue out. Then said, ‘So. You’d be prepared to do that?’

‘Just did, didn’t I?’

‘For real, I mean. And keep doing it.’

Marcus looked up. ‘If it’d stop another Westacres, hell, yes. I’d keep doing it until the bastard told me everything. And drown him doing it, wouldn’t bother me none.’

‘It would be murder.’

‘Blowing up forty-two kids in a shopping centre is murder. Waterboarding a suspected terrorist to death, that’s house-keeping.’

‘The philosophy of Marcus Longridge, volume one.’

‘Pretty much sums it up. Someone’s got to do this shit. Or

would you rather let the terrorist walk, for fear of violating his human rights?’

‘He was only a suspect a moment ago.’

‘And we both know what being a suspect means.’

‘He’s still got rights.’

‘Like those kids had? Tell their parents.’

He was getting loud now, which they’d both got into the habit of not worrying about, Lamb not having been around lately. This didn’t mean he couldn’t show up any moment, of course – his large frame creepily silent on the stairs, so the first you knew of his presence was his nicotine breath and sour outlook: *Having fun, are we?* – but until that happened, Shirley’s view was, they might as well keep on skiving.

She said, ‘Maybe. I just don’t think it’s that simple.’

‘Yeah, things get simple real quick at the sharp end. I thought you’d have worked that out by now. Anyway,’ and he indicated the chair she’d been sitting on, ‘better shift that into Ho’s office.’

‘Why?’

‘It broke.’

‘Oh. Yeah. Think he’ll snitch?’

‘Not if he values that bum-fluff he calls a beard,’ said Marcus, briefly stroking his own. ‘He rats us out to Lamb, I’ll rip it from his chin.’

Probably a figure of speech, thought Shirley, but possibly a treat in store.

Marcus being Marcus, it could go either way.

Had he been aware that he was the subject of his colleagues’ violent fantasies, Roderick Ho would have put it down to jealousy.

Fact was, he looked *fantastic*.

Don’t just take his word for it, either.

He'd arrived, as usual, in a terrific mood: swanned in wearing a brand-new jacket (waist-length black leather – when you've got it, flaunt it!) and popped the tab on a Red Bull which he chug-a-lugged while his kit warmed up. Seriously, seriously, this was starting to harsh his mellow: his gear at the Rod-pad ran to higher specs than the Service provided, but what are you gonna do – explain to Jackson Lamb that some heavy-duty cap-ex was required if Slough House was to come crawling out of the nineties? . . . He paused for a moment, allowing that scenario to take shape: 'Jackson, Jackson, trust me – the suits, man, they've got to get this sorted. Asking me to work with that crap is like, well, put it this way. Would you ask Paul Pogba to kick a tin can around?' And Lamb chuckling, throwing his hands up in mock-surrender: 'You win, you win. I'll get the pointy-heads at the Park to loosen the purse-strings . . .'

That struck the right note, he decided.

If Lamb ever showed up, definitely the way to play it.

Meanwhile, he cracked his knuckles, clicked on Amazon, wrote a one-star review of a random book, then checked his beard in the mirror he'd fixed to the anglepoise. Devilishly stylish. The odd red strand among the black, but nothing a little tweezer-work couldn't handle, and if it wasn't entirely symmetrical, five minutes with the old kitchen scissors soon had things on track. Looking this good took effort. Not rocket science, but it managed to evade some of the lamebrains round here – naming no River Cartwrights, of course.

Heh heh heh.

Cartwright was upstairs in the kitchen, chatting to Louisa. There'd been a time, not long back, when Roddy had had to play it cool with Louisa. It had been clear she'd taken a shine to him: embarrassing, but there it was – it wasn't like she was a total dog; in the right light, she cast a nice shadow, but she was *old*, mid-thirties, and when women got to that

age, a taint of desperation clung to them. Weaken for a moment, and they'd be picking out curtains and suggesting quiet nights in. Which was not how Roderick Ho played the game: so sayonara, babes. Being a tactful kind of guy, he'd managed to convey to her without having to put it into actual words that the Rod was off-limits – that Rod's rod was not in her future – and give her her due, she'd managed to accept that without too much fuss, the odd wistful, what-might-have-been glance excepted. In other circumstances, he thought, there'd have been no harm in it – throwing a single woman the occasional boner was an act of charity – but a regular ram-Rodding was not on the agenda, and it would have been cruel to get her hopes up.

Besides, if the chick caught him providing consolation to another woman, he'd be in serious trouble.

Dig that singular.

Chick, not 'chicks'.

Roddy Ho has got himself a girlfriend.

Still humming, still in a terrific mood, and still looking fantastic, Ho returned to his screen, metaphorically rolled his sleeves up, and splash-dived into the Dark Web, deaf to the continual gurgling of his radiator, and the sloshing in the pipes connecting his room to everyone else's.

What *was* that blessed noise?

Only she didn't need telling what it was, thank you very much, because it was the radiator again, sounding like a sick cat doing its business. Putting the most recently sorted stack of papers down – not that 'sorted' was the right word, their category being 'documents without a date' – Moira Tregorian paused in her efforts and surveyed her new domain.

Her office was on the top floor; it was the one vacated by her predecessor, and nearest Mr Lamb's. The personal

possessions Catherine Standish had left behind (her departure had been abrupt) were in a cardboard box, sealed with packing tape: her non-official-issue pens, a glass paperweight; a full bottle of whisky, wrapped in tissue paper – the woman had had a drink problem, but then, that was Slough House. Everyone here had problems, or what you now had to call ‘issues’. Moira supposed that was why she’d been assigned here, to provide overdue backbone.

Dust everywhere, of course. The whole building felt neglected; seemed to revel in the condition, as if the appearance of a duster might cause structural conniptions. And condensation fogged the windows, and had pooled in puddles on the frame, where it was blossoming into mould, and much more of this and the whole place would be falling around your ears . . . Well. Someone needed to take a firm hand. This had clearly been beyond poor Catherine Standish, but once you let the bottle be your friend, you were letting yourself in for sorry times indeed.

It had not escaped her that among the forms awaiting attention were Standish’s discharge papers, needing only Jackson Lamb’s signature.

And it had long been Moira Tregorian’s credo that paperwork was what kept battleships afloat: you could have all your admirals out on deck in their fancy get-up, but without the right paperwork, you’d never get out of the harbour. She had always been a force for order, and didn’t care who knew it. In Regent’s Park, she’d kept the Queens of the Database in trim, ensuring that their timekeeping was precise and their equipment regularly serviced; that the plants they insisted on were disposed of once they died; that the stationery they got through at a rate of knots was replenished weekly, and a log kept of who was taking what, because Moira Tregorian wasn’t born blind and she wasn’t born stupid. Post-it notes might be

made of paper, but they didn't grow on trees. And every so often, just to show there wasn't much she couldn't turn her hand to, she'd taken a shift as duty officer: fielding emergency calls and whatnot. None of it terribly complicated, if you asked her – but then, she was an office manager, and proud of it. Things needed managing. You only had to cast an eye around to get an inkling of what happened otherwise. And chaos was a breeding ground for evil.

Another thump from downstairs suggested that chaos was winning the battle for Slough House. In the absence of any other champion, Moira gave a long-suffering sigh, and headed down to investigate.

'How old would you say she was?'

'Fifties, mid,' Louisa said. 'So . . .'

''Bout the same as Catherine,' River said.

'Uh-huh.'

'Almost like a replacement,' River said. 'You know. One in, one out.'

' . . . You been talking to Shirley?'

'Why? What did she say?'

'Doesn't matter,' Louisa said. She shook her head, not in self-contradiction but to remove her hair from her eyes; it was longer now, and she had to pin it back when actually doing anything: reading, working, driving. She'd let the highlights grow out and it had reverted to its natural brown, a little darker during these winter months. It would fade up once the spring arrived, if the spring brought sunshine; and if it didn't, hell, she could always cheat, and squeeze a little sunlight from a bottle.

Right now, spring felt a long way distant.

River said, 'Ought to get some work done, I suppose,' but sounded like he had things on his mind, tiptoeing around a different conversation entirely.

Louisa wondered if he was going to ask her for a date, and what she'd say if he did.

Almost certainly no. She'd got to know him this past half-year, and his virtues stacked up well against the other locals: he wasn't married like Marcus, a creep like Ho, or a possible psychopath like his new room-mate. On the other hand, he wasn't Min Harper, either. Min had been dead now for longer than they'd been a couple, and there was no sense in which she was seeking a replacement for him, but still: date a colleague, and comparisons would be made. That could only get ugly. So the occasional drink after work was fine, but anything more serious was out of bounds.

That was almost certainly what she thought, she thought. But she also thought it might be best to head him off if it looked like he was going to say anything.

'Doing anything later?' he asked.

'Yeah, no, what? Later?'

'Cause there's something I want to talk to you about, only here's maybe not the best place.'

Oh fuck, she thought. Here we go.

'I'm sorry, is this a private conversation?'

And here was Moira Tregorian, a name Louisa had spent much of yesterday trying to get her head round. Tregorian kept splitting into separate syllables, and rearranging itself: what was it, Cornish? She didn't want to ask in case the answer bored her rigid. People could get funny about their ancestry.

'No, we were just talking,' River said.

'Hmmm,' said Moira Tregorian, and the younger pair exchanged a glance. Neither had spoken much to Moira yet, and *Hmmm* wasn't a promising start.

She was in her fifties, sure, but that was where her resemblance to Catherine Standish ended. Catherine had had

something of the spectral about her, and a resilience too, an inner strength that had allowed her to conquer her alcoholism, or at any rate, enabled her to continue the daily struggle. Neither River nor Louisa could remember her complaining about anything, which, given her daily exposure to Jackson Lamb, indicated Mandela-like patience. Moira Tregorian might turn out to be many things, but spectral wasn't going to be one of them, and patient didn't look promising. Her lips were pursed, and her jowls trembled slightly with pent-up something or other. All that aside, she was five-three or so, with dusty-coloured hair arranged like a mop, and wore a red cardigan Lamb would have something to say about, if he ever showed up. Lamb wasn't a fan of bright colours, and claimed they made him nauseous, and also violent.

'Because it seems to me,' Moira said, 'that two days after a major terrorist incident on British soil, there might be more useful things you could be doing. This is still an arm of the Intelligence Service, isn't it?'

Well, it was and it wasn't.

Slough House was a branch of the Service, certainly, but 'arm' was pitching it strong. As was 'finger', come to that; fingers could be on the button or on the pulse. Fingernails, now: those, you clipped, discarded, and never wanted to see again. So Slough House was a fingernail of the Service: a fair step from Regent's Park geographically, and on another planet in most other ways. Slough House was where you ended up when all the bright avenues were closed to you. It was where they sent you when they wanted you to go away, but didn't want to sack you in case you got litigious about it.

And while it was true that national security had been stepped up to the highest notch, things hadn't yet reached the pass where anyone was screaming down a telephone: 'Get me the slow horses!'

Louisa said, 'If there was something we could do, we'd be doing it. But we don't have the resources or the information to do anything useful here in the office. And in case you haven't noticed yet, they don't put us out on the streets.'

'No, well. That's as may be.'

'Which is why Marcus and Shirley are blowing off steam. I can't speak for Coe, but my guess is he's zoning out at his desk. And Ho'll be grooming his beard. I think that's all of us accounted for.'

'Is Mr Lamb not expected?' Moira asked.

'Lamb?'

'Mr Lamb, yes.'

River and Louisa exchanged a glance. 'He's not been around much lately,' Louisa said.

'Hence,' said River, and waved a vague hand. Hence people talking in kitchens and torturing each other in offices. When the cat was away, Lamb had been known to remark, the mice started farting about with notions of democratic freedom. Then the cat returned in a tank.

('Remind me,' River had once asked him, 'back in the Cold War – whose side were you on?')

'Only he's invited me to lunch.'

In the silence that followed, the radiator on the landing belched in an oddly familiar way, as if it were working up an impression.

'I think I may have just had a small stroke,' Louisa said at last. 'You can't possibly have said what I thought I just heard.'

River said, 'Have you met Jackson?'

'He sent me an email.'

'Is that a no?'

'We haven't met in person.'

'Have you heard about him?'

Moira Tregorian said, 'I'm told he's a bit of a character.'

'Did nobody tell you which bit?'

'There's no need for—'

Louisa said, 'Seriously, you haven't met him, but he sent you an email asking you to lunch? When?'

'He just said "soon".'

'Which might mean today.'

'Well . . . Yes, I thought it might.'

'Action stations,' murmured River.

They escaped, but before they disappeared into their separate rooms River said, 'So, you okay for later?'

'Yeah, no, what? Later?'

'Quick drink,' said River. 'Thing is . . .'

Here it comes, thought Louisa.

' . . . I'm worried about my grandfather.'

Though the rain had stopped, it still shook from the trees when the wind blew, spattering the windows, and still dripped from the guttering over the porch, which was thick with leaves. A lagoon had appeared in the lane, drowning the grassy verge, and in the village a burst main had closed the road for a day and a half, water pumping through the tarmac in its familiar, implacable way. Fire you could fight, and even halfway tame; water went where it chose, taking a hundred years to wear away a rock, or a minute and a half to pick the same rock up and carry it two miles distant. It altered the landscape too, so that when he looked from his window at first light he might have been transported elsewhere in his sleep; the whole house shipped off to a realm where trees groped upwards from the depths, and a tracery of hedgework scraped the surfaces of lakes. Bewildered by difference, you could lose your bearings. Which was the last thing you wanted to happen to you, because one day it would be the last thing that did.

It was important to keep track of where you were.

Knowing when you were was equally critical.

A good job, thought David Cartwright – River’s grandfather; the O.B. – that he had a head for dates.

4 January. The year, as ever, the current one.

His house was in Kent; old house, big garden, not that he did as much of that since Rose had died. Winter provided an alibi: *Can’t wait to be back out there, my boy. Life’s better with a trowel in your hand.* Gardening, come to that, was what he’d been doing the first time he’d laid eyes on River. Funny way to meet your grandson, already seven years old. River’s mother’s fault, he’d thought then, but such straightforward judgements seemed less clear now. He was tying his tie as he had these thoughts; watching his hands in the mirror as they made complicated movements beyond the reach of his conscious brain. Some things were best done without thinking. Raising a daughter, it had turned out, not one of them.

Tie seemed straight enough, though. Important to maintain standards. You read about these old chaps in their pee-stained corduroys, with their vests on backwards, and dribble on their chins.

‘That ever happens to me,’ he’d instructed River more than once, ‘shoot me like a horse.’

‘Exactly like a horse,’ River would reply drily.

Dammit, that was the name they gave them, there at Slough House. The slow horses. Treading on a young man’s toes, that was; reminding him of the balls-up he’d made of things.

Not that his own copybook was free of blot. If they’d had a Slough House in his day, who knew? He might have whiled his own career away in terminal frustration; forced to sit it out on the bench, watching others carried shoulder-high round the boundary. Laps of honour and whatnot. That was

what the boy thought, of course; that it was all about guts and glory – truth was, it was all about flesh and blood. Medals weren't won in the sunshine. Backs were stabbed in the dark. It was a messy business, and maybe the boy was better off out of it, though there was no telling him that, of course. Wouldn't be a Cartwright otherwise. Just like his mother, whom David Cartwright had missed acutely for years, without admitting it to anyone, even Rose.

. . . All these thoughts and he was still here in the hallway. What was it he'd been going to do? A blank moment came and went so smoothly it left barely a ripple. He was going to walk to the village. He needed to stock up on bread and bacon and whatever. His grandson might call round later, and he wanted to have some food in.

His grandson was called River.

Before he left, though, he needed to check his tie was straight.

In the same way a tongue keeps probing a sore tooth, the conversation in Marcus and Shirley's office kept returning to Roderick Ho – specifically, the wholly improbable, end-of-days-indicating, suggestion that he no longer flew solo.

'You think he's really found a woman?'

'He might have. It's surprising what some people leave lying around.'

'Because it could easily turn out to be a chick with a dick or whatever. And he'd be the last to know.'

'Even Ho—'

Shirley said, 'Seriously, trust me. Last to know.'

'Yeah, okay,' Marcus said. 'But he seems convinced.' He directed a sour look towards the doorway, and Ho's office beyond. 'Says he's a one-woman man now.'

'He probably meant cumulatively.'

Marcus, who hadn't been laid since his wife's car was repo'ed, grunted.

Louisa had peered round the door three minutes back to give them a heads-up on a possible Lamb appearance: as a result, the pair were staring at their screens; a reasonable facsimile of work, except that Shirley was still wet. Marcus's monitor throbbed in front of him. Even after all this time in Slough House he found it hard to adjust to its routines; switch mind and body off, become an automaton, processing random information sets. Burnt-out vehicles, that was his spreadsheet: burnt-out cars and vans – hardly an unusual sight in British cities. He'd seen one himself last week, in a supermarket car park; a black husk squatting in a pool of sooty residue. It would have been joy-ridden there then set alight, as the simplest way of eradicating evidence – the kids who'd taken it convinced that the forces of law and order were itching to go CSI on their gangsta asses; ready to swab DNA from seats, prints from the steering wheel. Safer just to torch that baby, and watch it crack and buckle in the heat.

But what if it wasn't as simple as that, Lamb wanted to know? (Important corollary: Lamb didn't want to know – Lamb couldn't care less. Lamb had just hit on another way of wasting a slow horse's time.) What if these torch-happy kids weren't just lighting up their stolen rides; what if they were experimenting with ways of blowing cars up – calculating blast radiuses; measuring the potential damage varying payloads could deliver? So here was Marcus, whose role in life had been kicking down doors, retooling himself as an analyst; staring at a screen which broke down five years' worth of vehicular arson by make, location, accelerant used, and a dozen other variables . . . There was always the possibility Lamb had a point – anyone who found the notion too high-concept just had to turn the TV on and watch footage of the onesie-clad

forensics crew picking through Westacres' ashes. But either way, this wasn't the part of the process Marcus should have been involved in. He should be the one they called when they had a suspect holed up in a tower block with hostages. The one they decked out in Kevlar and dropped down a chimney: *Merry Christmas, assholes.*

Control, alt, delete.

The radiator gurgled noisily, interrupting his chain of thought, but at least it meant heat was moving around the building, which meant someone was paying bills. Marcus wasn't. Marcus was accumulating a drawerful of red letters: final demands for electricity and gas. Cassie was talking about taking the kids, going to her mother's 'for a bit', and that was even without knowing about the unpaid bills – her repossessed car had been the final straw.

'You said you'd got it under control.'

His gambling, she meant.

'You said you'd drawn a line, walked away. No more money down the drain. You *promised*, Marcus.'

And he'd meant it, too, but how did you stop money disappearing once it had decided to go? It was even less responsive to persuasion than Cassie.

He thought: I've turned into one of those men worth more dead than alive. More of us than you'd think. It's not just the Jihadi Johns out there in the scrublands, living off camel meat and sleeping in holes but with a million-dollar price tag on their heads: it's the rest of us too. Us poor working saps in debt to our eyeballs, a never-ending mortgage, and bills papering the walls; barely enough spare cash for a cup of coffee, but shouldering game-changing amounts of life insurance. I could keel over right here right now, and the death-in-service payout would solve all my problems. The house would be free and clear; money left over to see the kids through university.

Best thing all round, except for being dead. But that's going to happen sooner or later, so why not here at my desk? . . . He should raise that as a joke with Cassie, except she might not laugh. And no amount of Kevlar offered protection from a woman's disappointment.

The slamming of a keyboard roused him from his reverie. Shirley was having hardware issues, and resolving them in her traditional manner.

' . . . You got an AFM later?' he asked.

'Who needs to know?' she snarled.

'Nobody at all,' said Marcus, and tapped at his own keyboard randomly for a moment, as if by altering the rows of figures on his screen, he might also change the facts he was confronted with: not simply the half-a-decade's worth of destroyed cars, but his own dwindling net worth; the sums snapping at his heels growing ever larger, ever more vicious, and his ability to outpace them weakening by the day.

If he was going to walk to the village he'd need his wellingtons. Yesterday, he'd had to return home before he'd got fifty yards – a soft-shoe shuffle back down the drive; slippers jettisoned into the bin, soaked and useless. Well, a moment of absent-mindedness, and there'd been no witnesses. This was one of the advantages of living in semi-isolation, though you could never be certain there were no stoats watching.

'Know what I mean by stoats?'

River rarely forgot anything. David Cartwright had taught him well.

'You see a stoat, you pretend you haven't,' River said.

'Except you never see a stoat.'

'You never see them,' River agreed. 'But you know they're there.'

Because the signs they left were legion. The bent grasses

where they'd knelt; the lopped-off branch that had obscured their view. Cigarette ends in a tidy heap. *Don't have the boy picking up old fag ends*, Rose had scolded. But it was best the boy was taught to be on his guard, because once the stoats had you in their sights it was the devil's own job shaking them off.

A good morning for training, then. Besides, all boys like splashing in puddles so – one welly on; the other angled for entry – he bellowed for River to come join him for a walk. But even as his words went crashing through the empty house, he noticed their falsity: that was not the voice he'd had when River had been a boy. And River's boyhood was over; the days of teaching him about stoats and bogeymen, the myths and legends of Spook Street, had been gone longer than Rose . . .

David Cartwright shook his head. An old man's fancy – a memory rising to the surface, like a bubble from a frog. He lowered his foot into the second welly, chuckling. The boy ever learned he had these moments of inattention, he'd never hear the end of it. Besides, stoats weren't what they used to be. These days they used drones and satellite imagery; they planted tiny cameras in your house. Your every movement charted.

Wellington on, he stood up straight. Little bit of exercise, that was the ticket. It was true, there'd been times lately when he'd worried he'd come adrift. He'd doze off of an afternoon, forgivable lapse in an old codger, and come to in a panic: the fire seething in the grate, lamplight softly glowing; everything as it ought to be, but still that knocking in his chest: what had happened while he'd slept? Walls had been known to fall. Things had emerged from under bridges. It was a relief when the world he woke to was the same as the one he'd left.

But that wasn't always the case, was it? Sometimes the world

did shift on its axis. Just two days ago, there'd been a suicide bomber in a British shopping centre – what did they call it? A flash mob . . . The blackest of black jokes; a flash mob ignited, and all those young lives destroyed. For a moment, standing by his own front door, David Cartwright felt it as a personal loss, something he could have prevented. And then that loss shifted shape, and Rose was telling him to be sure to wear his Barbour, not that dreadful old raincoat. And to carry his umbrella, just in case.

Keys in pocket. Wellingtons on feet. What was it he'd been thinking about, some dreadful thing or other? It slid past him like smoke, nothing he could get a grip on. Tucking himself into his raincoat – the Barbour made him feel he was pretending to be country folk – and leaving his umbrella hanging like a bat on its hook, he let himself out the door.

In the office above Marcus and Shirley's heads, other fingers tapped away: their movements fluid, the keyboard imaginary, the notes they followed apparently random but always searching for the melody beneath; a tune that would echo, build and repeat itself for thirty minutes or so, its themes at first withheld, sometimes stumbling, but ultimately laid bare. And while this happened, nothing else did. That was its lure for Jason Kevin Coe; the clean white page it opened in his mind, temporarily erasing the nightmares scribbled there.

We feel that you're not . . . happy in your work.

He could not remember how he had answered this question, which, anyway, was not a question. He had the feeling he'd simply sat, fingers twitching in his lap. Reaching for a tune that swirled around his head.

Coe wasn't sure when this had begun. It hadn't been a conscious decision, to mime his way through a series of improvised piano recitals; it was simply something he'd discovered

himself doing, or rather, had discovered somebody else discovering him doing – he'd been on a bus, moving in fits and starts along a crowded Regent Street, when he noticed that the young woman next to him was edging away, casting worried glances at him, at his fingers, which were thrumming a non-existent keyboard. He hadn't until that moment connected the music in his head with the movement of his hands. At the time, he hadn't even been wearing his iPod. The music was simply inside him, something he relied on in moments of anxiety, which now included, he was barely surprised to learn, travelling in fits and starts in a crowded bus on Regent Street.

We were wondering if a transfer might not be in your best interests.

Always that *we*, underlining the plurality of the forces lined against him. Not that it was the Service's HR department that gave him sleepless nights.

Today, beneath his grey hoodie, J. K. Coe wore a T-shirt and jeans ripped at the knee. It had been a while since he'd worn anything else. He was three-days unshaven, and while unarguably clean – he showered twice daily; more often when time allowed – there always followed him a whiff of something that seemed to float at the outer edge of his ability to smell it. Sometimes, he worried it was the smell of shit. But really he knew it was fear; the odour of his own worst memory, when he'd been tied naked to a chair while another man, also naked, threatened him with an electric carving knife. In his dreams, in his insomniac nightmares, he relived what might have happened; the ripping of steel through his flesh; the wet slap of his innards as they hit the plastic sheets spread on the floor. When his fingers weren't searching for music they crept to his stomach, interlocked across his belly, struggled to hold inside what might have been carved out.

All of this had taken place at home, in his fifth-floor flat. He'd bought when he'd been earning well in banking, before he'd sickened of that career, shortly before everybody else had sickened of it too, and people began to look on bankers like there ought to be bags to collect them in. A narrow escape, he'd thought at the time, having fallen back on his degree subject and taken a post with the Service's Psych Eval section, where he hoped to prove useful. A modest ambition, and no longer a career target.

Slough House might be a better fit, we think. Fewer . . . alarms.

In the weeks and months following his ordeal, Coe had tired of most things. Food lost flavour, and alcohol served to make him throw up long before he'd achieved any kind of anaesthetised state. If he'd had ready access to weed or stronger he'd have given it a shot, but acquiring illegal substances demanded social interaction; interaction with people he could imagine providing . . . 'alarms'. He couldn't read for long without becoming furious. Music was all that was left. Coe had never played the piano in his life, and it was a toss-up as to whether his fingers were going in the right direction when the notes in his head climbed the scale; nevertheless, here he was, exiled to Slough House with the other catastrophes of the intelligence world; sentenced to plough away at a series of unpromising projects with no end in sight, instead of which he was making unheard music on an unplayable instrument, and finding in the process, if not peace, then at least a certain amount of white space.

From across the room, River Cartwright watched him dispassionately. If he'd learned anything as a slow horse, it was that there was no helping some people – sometimes, you had to let them drown. Which was what it looked like J.K. Coe was doing: not waving but drowning, scrabbling for purchase on a desk that was never going to keep him afloat. Whichever

shore he was poling for, he'd either make it or he wouldn't. Until that happened, River planned on leaving him be.

Besides, he had troubles of his own.

At the junction where the driveway met the lane lay the Great Lake, an annual event caused by poor drainage. David Cartwright skirted it unsteadily, one careful footstep after another along what remained of the kerb: little more than a series of narrow stepping-stones. The hedgerow shivered at his passage, and tipped a pint of water straight into his boot, blast it! But now he was over, and back on firm ground. He waved a greeting at his neighbours' house, though its windows were dark, and squelched past the bus shelter, where a newspaper lay plastered to the floor. Torn images of parental grief screamed up. A streetlamp flickered uncertainly, unsure whether it should be on or off.

The lane led to the village in meandering fashion, literally going round the houses, but the footpath through the wood was direct. A wooden kissing-gate, semi-obsured by hedge, offered entrance. *You watch your step now*, Rose admonished. The way was carpeted with leaves, thickly sludged with them in places, but he'd always been mindful of treacherous ground, something he'd learned when plotting a course through history. You lived your life day by day, the O.B. thought, but days were mere splinters of time, no useful measure. The sudden events that blind us with their light had roots in the slowly turning decades. Even now, he could make out shapes from the past behind the headlines, like predators glimpsed through murky waters. Twenty years retired, and he still knew when there were stoats on his trail. His neighbours' house shouldn't be empty at this hour: the cleaning woman should be there, unlikely to be vacuuming in the dark. And that flickering streetlamp: no doubt its innards had been tampered with, the better to insert some surveillance device.

He waited. Of all the sounds in the wood, all the damp rustlings and furtive scratchings, none paused, to allow him to focus on their absence. Everything continued as it had been. But then, he would expect no different. These were not amateurs.

‘But if you know it’s a trap,’ the boy said, ‘shouldn’t you avoid it?’

‘No. You want them to think you’re oblivious to their presence. And then, first time they blink – *pouf!* You’re gone.’

He blinked – *pouf!* – and River was gone too.

The trees grumbled rustily. Someone whistled in imitation of a bird, and someone whistled back. The O.B. waited, but that was it for the time being. Carefully, eyes alert for snares among the leaves, he headed towards the village.

‘Think he’s an issue or a fuck-up?’

‘Who are we talking about now?’

‘Mr Air Piano.’

Marcus pretended to consider the matter. Sometimes it was easiest to go with Shirley’s flow. When Lamb wasn’t around she grew restless, as if his absence required celebration; and since Shirley’s definition of celebration was wide, anything that didn’t involve controlled substances was, on the whole, to be encouraged.

‘You want to offer a little context?’ he asked.

‘Well, you and me, we’re issues. You’ve got your gambling addiction—’

‘It’s not an addiction—’

‘And me, apparently I’m “irritable”.’

‘You broke a dude’s nose, Shirl.’

‘He was asking for it.’

‘He was asking for a couple of quid.’

‘Same thing.’

‘For Children in Need.’

‘He was dressed as a fucking rabbit. I assumed he was dangerous.’

‘That’s probably the only reason you’re not in prison,’ Marcus conceded.

‘Yeah, well. They wouldn’t have got me at all if it wasn’t for those pesky kids.’

Who had caught it on camera, and stuck it on YouTube. The whole dressed-as-a-rabbit thing was mitigation, of course, and the arresting officer had been charity-mugged herself three times that morning, and in the end the assault charges had been sidestepped on condition Shirley sign up for AFM.

Anger Fucking Management. Twice a week, in Shoreditch.

‘Don’t set off any new trends,’ Marcus warned her when he found out. ‘I took an idiot round Shoreditch once. That’s how hipsters started.’

‘And I’m assuming River and Louisa are fuck-ups,’ he said now.

‘Well, *duh*.’

‘Catherine was an issue. Min was a fuck-up.’

‘And Ho’s a dickhead, but you always get outliers. So what’s Jasper Konrad, that’s what I want to know. And what is it with the air piano?’ She mimicked his action, trilling up and down a non-existent instrument. ‘Who’s he think he is, Elton John?’

‘You want to know what he’s hearing in his head, go ask him. But don’t blame me if the voices tell him to carve you up.’

‘Yeah, ’cause he looks like he could be dangerous. Probably takes two of him to scramble an egg.’ She stopped pretending to play the piano. ‘Tell you what, though,’ she said. ‘If I was River, I’d be worried.’

‘How so?’

‘Youngish white guy, fucked up and seething. We’ve already got one of those. It’s like River’s being replaced.’

Marcus said, 'You have a weird way of looking at things.'
'You wait and see. Then tell me I'm wrong.'

She started banging at her keyboard again, her actual one, and Marcus couldn't tell if she was working out aggression, or writing an email.

Suppressing a sigh, he returned to work.

When he emerged from the footpath a car was heading down the lane, and it slowed at the sight of him, seemed about to halt, then sped up. He resolutely did not turn to watch it – they wanted him to react. Best keep his powder dry. And he was not quite defenceless, as they would discover to their cost.

No, he would make straight for the shop; in/out, back to camp. It might not be a simple exfiltration – the woman behind the counter was a chatty one; you could barely prise yourself loose with a crowbar – but lately, it occurred to him, she had been chatting less, listening more; coaxing out details it might have been wiser to preserve. He'd been explaining to her how history was never a closed book. Look at Russia: complete basket case. That hadn't been the plan, but that was the thing about history: push it down in one place, it springs up in another, like ill-laid lino.

He'd said, 'And there's always a price to pay. You make decisions, and people die, and that's what you live with, day and night, ever after. But I wouldn't have done things any differently.'

She'd said, 'David, you worked at the Ministry of Transport. I'm sure people were inconvenienced, but I don't suppose many of them died.'

Of course he had. The Ministry of Transport was his cover story; the alibi that papered over forty-something years of working life. So in the village, that's what he'd been: a

pen-pusher with a brief for trains or roads or airports – you couldn't expect him to remember. It was hard enough keeping track of what he'd actually done, without recalling everything he'd merely pretended to do.

So he'd laughed it off, 'Figure of speech, dear lady,' but she'd have been on the phone as soon as he'd left, letting them know his cover was springing leaks. These were the lengths to which they were going. They were replacing members of his community, so that those he'd lived among for years were no longer to be trusted.

('The best of us are thieves and scoundrels,' he'd told River more than once. 'As for the worst . . .')

'Slough House,' River would say. 'Jackson Lamb. Remember?')

And River was his most obvious asset, his most trusted fellow human. What if they replaced him too? He could open the door to his only grandson and find a viper slithering inside.

If that happened, measures would have to be taken. Because he was not quite defenceless, as they would discover to their cost.

He crossed the lane, glad of his wellingtons, and entered the shop, setting the bell above the door jangling. What was it he'd wanted? Basic supplies: bread and bacon, milk and teabags. But already there was the sense of entering enemy territory, of having wandered into the path of stoats, because the lady of the shop was staring at him in something like horror, something like pity; was coming round the counter with one hand washing the other, her mouth stretching ever wider.

'Oh, David,' she said. 'David, your trousers . . .')

And when the O.B. looked down it took him a moment to understand what she was getting at, because he was certainly wearing trousers, tucked into his wellingtons, and the lady of the shop had reached him and taken his hand before it dawned

on him that what he was looking at was not the thick dark tweed of everyday use, but the dark-red paisley-patterned cotton of his pyjamas.

And morning gives way to afternoon, and evening falls, as it usually does. In Kent, daylight slinks away across the fields as streetlights wink on one by one, each casting a tight umbrella over its own little stage, while in the heart of London darkness loiters in corners, and peeps from behind curtains. In Slough House, the heating has died with as much effort as it took to come to life, the death rattle of its pipes sounding a knell over the afternoon's activities, such as they were. In the end, Lamb has shown neither his face nor any other part of his anatomy, but the expectation of a dismal event can be as draining as its occurrence, and the atmosphere retains an edge of disquiet, despite the horses' departure. First to go was Roderick Ho, followed closely by Marcus Longridge and Shirley Dander. J. K. Coe may have been next – he was simply there one moment and then not, like the shine on an apple – but what's certain is that Louisa Guy and River Cartwright left together, their destination the nearest pub in which they might expect to encounter no one they know. Moira Tregorian is last to leave, but before doing so yields to the temptation of entering Lamb's office, which has overcome its top-floor location to assert a natural inclination towards cellardom. Dankness is its signature odour, with notes of stale flatulence and mouldy bread. A suspicious mind might even conjecture that smoking has taken place here. The blinds, as ever, are drawn, and the overhead bulbs have blown, so for illumination Moira is forced to rely on the lamp atop a pile of telephone directories to one side of the desk. The light this casts is yellow and sickly, and mostly serves to rearrange shadows. On Lamb's desk, the piles of paper have an unread look and are curling at the edges; on his shelves,

the clutter is a challenge to the tidy-minded intruder. Tidy-minded Moira Tregorian certainly is, but simple-minded she isn't, quite, and she overcomes the urge to begin instilling order. Instead, she hovers a moment, wondering about this man into whose orbit she has been cast, whom she has yet to encounter, and who seems to collect empty bottles. It is clear that her predecessor has let things slide to the extent that bringing Mr Lamb to heel might prove a wearisome business. Moira Tregorian sighs to punctuate this thought, then turns the lamp off and makes her way down the stairs and into the damp and gloomy air of Aldersgate Street.

Behind her Slough House creaks and bangs, and surrenders to the chill.

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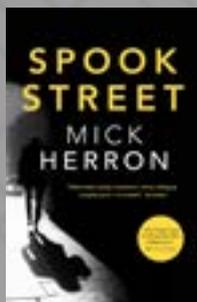
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