

**Fault/lines**

**Mark Lingane**

Tomorrow ...

The alarm screamed through the cockpit. The engine whine changed instantly from a low hum to an ear-piercing shriek before the turbines ceased spinning. The security door behind them slammed shut and locked automatically.

“Mayday, mayday. This is flight ML-10. We’ve lost all power.” The pilot flicked the microphone toggle. He looked over at his tense copilot. “Nothing,” he said.

The entire console was dark. “Try the auxiliary override,” the pilot said, “and see if you can maintain the horizon.”

“All controls are locked,” the copilot replied. “The override’s been overridden. We’re locked out of all electrical and electronic controls. We’re tipping.”

The pilot stood up and flicked open the emergency panel. He slipped a key from his pocket and jammed it into a small lock next to a large red button. “How many people on this flight?”

“Over two hundred and fifty.”

“I’m not having all those people on my conscience.”

“I argued with my wife this morning,” the copilot whispered. “I didn’t say goodbye.”

The pilot smacked the red button and the large panel swung down. An emergency yoke slipped out. He snapped the thin metal pole out of its holder and placed it in a small hole in front of the main yoke. He twisted the emergency yoke. Nothing happened. He kicked the stick until it bent. Nothing.

The plane stalled and an eerie silence filled the cockpit.

The copilot had tears in his eyes. “The speakers are dead. We can’t even say sorry to the passengers.” He bent over and put his hands on his head.

The pilot stared out the window and began to pray.

London’s docklands lay spread out beneath them. The plane began to fall, and the nose rolled down.

Cally looked out the passenger window of the family hatchback at the early-morning joggers and the occasional nicotine addict shunned from polite society. He’d been a teenager for a month and already he hated it, although the gifts had been great. As they crawled through the eternal road works, and men with yellow hats did little else than slow the traffic, he sighed. It wasn’t the worse day ever, because every day was equally bad.

His mother cried. She always seemed to be crying these days. She cried going to the clinic. She cried coming home from the clinic. She cried at the clinic. She cried over his new YouTube

videos. He found it interminably embarrassing. And he didn't know why he had to go to the clinic so often considering that nothing ever happened there, except that his mother cried.

There was a tiny click from beneath him. He felt the rush of untold power streaming through him. In the following seconds he saw the vision of something big and metallic kill his parents. The image was horrific and made him nauseous, but his body wouldn't react. Everything moved slowly, as if the whole world was on frame-by-frame advance.

He blinked and looked up. His head felt too heavy to move. There was a flash of dimmed silver, and the car roof buckled. His parents hadn't noticed.

He tried to cry out but his mouth failed to react. His body was locked into position. The roof was crushed down further, now hitting the heads of his parents. His father's head had turned fractionally, and there was a tremendous look of sadness in his eyes.

The roof caved in, and his parent's bodies were twisted into horrible shapes. Every molecule in his body wanted to scream. All he could see in front of him was a great sheet of steel, cold and twisted. He stared at it for what seemed an eternity as shocking visions flooded over him, visions of war, death, futility, and defeat.

London crawled to life in the early morning, with the sun punctuating the brittle, cold air. Randeep sat on the top deck of the bus, clutching the coffee poured freshly from his thermos flask, on his way to the Candle Fire research labs. He watched a large swarm of rose-necked parakeets lift off, thousands taking to the air. He whipped out his cell phone and pressed *Record*, capturing the spectacle.

To his right, he saw light reflecting off something in the sky over south London. He turned the cell phone slowly and blinked into the sun. It looked like a plane was falling out of the sky. He rubbed his eyes and looked again before zooming in on the action. The plane's nose dropped and the whole fuselage tumbled in mid-air. He videoed the rolling descent until the plane disappeared behind the buildings.

There was the distant sound of demolition. A moment of silence passed, and then he felt the impact under his feet.

Tracy checked her watch. Her heartbeat was bouncing along at sixty-eight, and the time was seven thirty-five. She flicked on the television to catch the BBC breakfast news. Susanna was reading the headlines; she had hardly changed since school. Tracy examined Susanna's outfit. This morning it was a business suit and Susanna's hair was tied back, meaning she was in serious-

business mode. The prime minister sat opposite Tracy, boiling over at the intense questioning about extremists in the Middle East. She smiled at his discomfort.

She sniffed her coffee, mainly to mask the smell of paint. The decorators had finished the redesign of the Maida Vale apartment a month ago, but the scent still lingered. Her eyes flicked over to the closed door of the small room, currently empty. Inside held high expectations and an empty cot. Her smile disappeared and her eyes filled with concern.

There was a mumble from the bedroom.

“Yes, I won’t forget the clinic.” She switched off the television just as a breaking story about yet another plane disaster scrolled across the bottom of the screen. She finished her coffee and scooped up her keys.

“I’ll see you there at two,” she shouted as she closed the front door to the flat. Her cell phone rang. It was HQ. They could wait until she was in the office. She pressed *Ignore*. She managed to take two paces before receiving her first text. The next sixty came in over the following minute.

Randeep swiped his access card and entered the Candle Fire offices. The security guards were staring at the breaking news on the foyer monitors. One guard had fainted, and was lying on the floor being attended to by the first-aid delegate.

The other guard turned to face him as the electronic lock disengaged. “Hello, Randy. Bag please.”

Randeep unzipped his backpack and handed it over.

The guard shifted around the various items: lunchbox, thermos, phone, physics book, and pulp novel. He pulled out the book. “*Tesla*. Is it any good?”

“Meh, mainly for kids. Is he all right?” Randeep said, indicating the man prostrate on the floor.

“His grandmother lived on the South Bank. They’d finally convinced her to go into a retirement place, and she was meant to move yesterday except she was sick. So Joe told her to stay in her home overnight. He was going to pick her up after his shift.”

“That’s terrible. We should set up a fund for everyone who’s been affected by the disaster.”

“Let’s leave it to the brass. They can afford it.” The guard smiled and handed the pack back to Randeep.

He nodded and made his way to the elevators. There was a burst of effervescent noise behind him. The uber-attractive marketing gang made their entrance, swaggering in with their grande coffees and itchy noses. One of the women giggled and flirted with the security guard. The guard indicated the monitors. She glanced over his shoulder and took in the report. She held her hand to her mouth and did her serious face. Then she laughed.

The group barged their way in through the security gate. They congregated noisily at the elevator, chatting vacuously about the reality television shows they were currently auditioning for. The alpha male of the pack, resplendent in his oversized suit, pressed the up button.

Randeep pressed the down button. The ascending elevator appeared first and Randeep was left in merciful silence after the group stumbled in. His elevator, arriving shortly after, squeaked open and he stepped onto the perforated metal flooring. As soon as the doors closed he heard the whir of the electrical field spark up. He checked his cell. No signal.

The five seconds passed for the elevator to descend the five floors. The doors opened and he stepped out into a dimly lit corridor. With the deep red lighting distorting distances, he lurched along the passageway until he reached the end. He pressed a large red button, which looked almost gray in the low light. The door slid open and he stepped through into Candle Fire’s main

research lab. It was illuminated by dim, blue florescent strips, and, as always, it made him feel like he had jumped to light speed.

The guard on the other side of the doorway coughed.

Randeep handed over his cell.

The guard rested his hands on his enlarged stomach and turned on the device. He examined the contents. “Anything to declare?”

“Uh, no.” Randeep shifted uneasily.

The guard looked at him suspiciously as he placed the phone in the small box. “You sure?”

“Do you know what’s happened?” Randeep could feel slight perspiration breaking out on his forehead.

The guard gave him a blank look.

“No one’s told you about the plane?”

The guard gave him a shrug, his face looking half-melted in the strange light.

“A plane crashed in south London.”

“Terrorists? I bet it was,” came the gruff reply. The guard picked up the phone and examined it. The memory was blank. He handed it back.

“They don’t know yet,” Randeep said.

“Bet it was. We need to launch a counterstrike.”

“Against who?”

“The terrorists. It’s those foreigners coming over here. They sponge off the welfare system, taking all our jobs, then attack us.”

Randeep gave him a respectful nod. He walked over to his desk and sat down. He looked around carefully. The other lab rats were all occupied. He plugged his cell phone into his workstation. It made the usual beep, which he tried to muffle. Josh, sitting to his right, gave him a glance, his dark eyes radiating suspicion. Randeep coughed and gave him a wave. Josh frowned and returned his attention to his monitor.

Randeep unscrewed the lid of his thermos and poured himself a cup of coffee. He stirred the drink with a pen and took a long sip. He looked around before removing the SD card from his mouth, drying it, and slipping it into his cell. He loaded it into a scrambled partition and re-encoded the video.

He watched the images of the plane stream from his cell to his monitor. Then he watched them again, and again, tracking them back and forth around one particular point where the plane seemed to hiccup. He went frame by frame. The plane moved pixel by pixel. Right. Right. Right. Left. Right.

He double-checked. There was no mistake. The plane had been hit by something. He overlapped the two frames and ran a delta-analysis. He blinked.

“Josh?”

“Hmm?”

“Have you finished the algorithm for the EM pulse cannon?”

“Hmm. Ah, yeah, sort of.”

“Can you tell me where it is?”

“Filed. Under 23984—slash—350 EMP beta two. From root. Have you got cert-three access?”

“Er, yes I ... do.”

Josh glanced over at him, lingering momentarily before returning his focus to his screen.

Randeep waited until he was sure Josh was engrossed in his calculation analysis before flicking down through the directory structure. The fearsome alert sign appeared on his screen, along with the flashing question mark demanding a password.

He gave Josh another quick glance and quickly typed in Josh’s password. It hadn’t been hard to guess. He dragged the script to his own desktop, duplicated his footage of the plane, and ran the copied video through the code. He overlaid the original and encoded copy, and ran a difference calculation.

And there it was, staring at him as clear as daylight: the familiar blue and red. He sat back and blinked in disbelief.

Inspector Hanson,” Chief Inspector Percy Booker said as Tracy bustled into the small office. “I’ll brief you later.”

Tracy’s fellow inspectors were huddled inside the room, which was crowded to an almost comical level. She ignored the few errant, barely audible comments about her bothering to turn up and sat down next to Dan Holloway. She took off her trainers and replaced them with her office shoes. Dan made gagging noises as she crowded his space to tie up her laces.

“Dan, and the rest of you, this is serious,” Tracy said. “We have to appear somber and dedicated. The commander will be appearing shortly on all media to give a statement. We have to be able to say that we’ve started investigating at least, even if we don’t have any results.”

“Is there anything we can tell families and friends?” asked one.

“We have procedures for this,” Tracy said to the questioner over her shoulder. “No one talks.”

Booker stood at the front of the room frowning at Tracy. “Last time I checked, Inspector Hanson, I was the chief here.”

There was a snicker from behind Tracy, and she looked down at her shoes.

“Official line is no comment,” the chief inspector told them. “The commander will do all the talking. No one here, and let me be very clear about this, *no one* is to speak to anyone outside of this office.”

Dan looked around. Several of the room’s inhabitants were glancing in his direction. “Do you mean me? Because IA’s cleared me.”

“I’m telling *everyone* to be tightlipped. The press hyenas will be ten times more crafty—”

“Deceitful.” Dan threw a screwed-up piece of paper into the waste-paper basket on the other side of the room.

“—and ten times more desperate.” Booker raised his hand, palm sideways and straight. “We’re the thin blue line, front and center, no more, no less.”

“Do we have to be in uniform?” someone asked.

“Yes. It’s protocol.”

There was a collective groan.

“Last time I was in uniform people kept abusing me for being a parking inspector,” Dan said.

“We’re the police, and never more than today. The uniform’s important.” The chief inspector looked down at the small chart on his desk and pointed to Dan. “Holloway, sort out the logistics for the emergency services, in and out. Brief the tech team. They’re going to be doing a lot of



number crunching today. Hanson, you'll be our man, er, person on site, ground zero, for the day. We'll need you in close."

"All day?"

"Yes."

Tracy folded her arms and looked out the window.

The chief inspector assigned roles to the remaining attendees. "You all have your roles, now go. Most important, be careful until we know what we're dealing with."

Tracy remained glued to her seat until the other inspectors had left. "Chief, I had an appointment at two with the ... at the ..."

"I'm sorry, Tracy. Planes don't fall out of the sky every day." He paused. "Over London, anyway."

"But Rod and I've been trying for ..." she looked away.

"Look, take support with you. If you've got the site under control then get them to cover while you're gone." The chief inspector's desk phone started to ring. He gave her a tired look.

It was a mess: a whole suburb decimated by the huge aircraft. The plummeting wreckage had destroyed a mile of high-density housing, throwing up a large dust cloud into the morning sky and casting a dark shadow over the southern housing estates. Flames erupted from broken gas lines. There was no human movement other than firefighters attending to streams of fire as quickly as the difficult access allowed. Search-and-rescue drones, painted in military colors, swooped in low over the site.

Tracy's heart sank. This put her two o'clock appointment in jeopardy.

Police and emergency vehicles were at the closest accessible point to the disaster zone. Yellow barriers had been erected and a major checkpoint had been set up. Fencing was rapidly being constructed. There was a prominent sign telling people to turn off their cell phones for safety reasons. As always in situations like this, Tracy believed the sign referred to other people.

The cockpit of the plane lay several dozen yards away, shiny but battered.

"Who are you?" Tracy said to the young detective approaching her.

"Detective Chambers," he replied.

"I'm Inspector Hansen. Can we requisition one of those drones?" She indicated the humming craft slowly hovering over the area.

"Er, no. They're military."

"Fine. Organize a chopper so we can scout the area from above."

He blinked at her abruptness. "I'll radio HQ with the request." He gave her a brittle smile and headed to a police vehicle.

A large crowd of onlookers had gathered outside the fence. She sighed. This meant petty theft could now be added to the list. As Chambers strode back toward her, she took out her phone and raised it to take a photograph of the scene.

A guard wearing a US military uniform ran toward her. "No phones," he shouted. He pointed threateningly at her, his other hand hovering over the pistol holstered on his belt.

“I’m police,” she shouted back, showing her warrant card.

“No phones,” he repeated. He stood staring at her, his hand remaining near his weapon.

She walked closer and raised her finger at him. “This is not Homeland Security, and you’re not on American soil. This is my jurisdiction, so back up, cowboy.”

“Ma’am, you’re about to step onto sovereign declaration, and I’ve been given full permission to redact any incursion into American freedom and liberty. These drones are US property and only operate in the fifty states, federal districts, and constitutional territorial acquisitions.”

“What?” She placed her hands on her hips. “Is this part of your Manifest Destiny? Listen, you moron, you see that great big building on the other side of the river? That’s Big Ben, and next to it is a little place called Westminster. And up the road is another little place called Buckingham Palace, home of the Queen, the supreme leader of two-point-five billion people making up the Commonwealth of Nations and this country in which your over-proportioned backside, accompanying legs and diminutive mind are standing.”

She took a step forward. The guard whipped out his pistol and leveled it at her. She slowly raised her badge.

“And the Queen gave me this badge to protect the people of this great city from the enemy, which at this particular point in time is ... you.”

With blinding speed she pulled out her so-new-it-was-still-shiny pistol and leveled it at him. A bullet was in the chamber and the hammer was cocked. The sunlight reflected off the gleaming chrome into his eyes.

“British police don’t carry guns,” he said. Sweat was forming on his brow. He hadn’t read the procedure covering this eventuality.

“We do now.”

Chambers ran up. “Whoa. Everyone calm down. What’s going on?” His eyes swiveled between the two confrontational people.

“He says I can’t use my phone,” Tracy said.

“And you want to shoot him over that?” Chambers raised his hands toward her.

“Not specifically. But he’s an American, so any excuse will do.” Still staring at the guard, she said, “Look at him, overpaid, overfed and now ov—”

“Phones can explode out here,” Chambers said.

“What? How?” Her eyes flicked over to Chambers.

“Aviation fumes are everywhere. Can’t you smell them? If you turn on your phone the battery could short and we’ll all become fried chicken.”

“What if the battery’s built in?”

“Your choice. But if you kill us all you’ll owe me more than a few drinks at the pub.”

Chambers gave her a smile. She sighed. “It’s just in the crash zone, and the wind’ll blow it away soon enough. But for now, let’s be safe rather than sorry.”

“Fine. I’d hate to cause a scene.” She raised her pistol, turning it sideways. She slid out her phone in the other hand, held it up, and said to the guard, “Which one do you want me to put away?”

“The phone.”

“Really? Most of the world would rather die than give up their phone ... but I’m not one of them.” She holstered her gun and slipped the phone into her back pocket. She turned away and focused her attention on Chambers.

The guard stood where he was with the barrel of his own weapon hovering between Tracy and Chambers.

“Don’t mind him.” She clicked her fingers in front of Chamber’s distracted face. “Have you heard of this before?”

“Eh? What?”

“This US soil and drones issue?”

“Er, no.” Chambers watched the guard as he slowly lowered his weapon. He let out a sigh of relief, realizing he had been holding his breath.

Tracy turned to the guard. “You, pudgy. What’s this rubbish about sovereign soil?”

“Drones are only used over soil that’s under the jurisdiction of the United States of America.”

“I see.” She turned to Chambers. “It’s bureaucracy gone mad. Call Central London, get the chief to call the commander, and get the idiot guard fired.”

Chambers gave her a quizzical stare. “Is something wrong with you? Have you got Asperger’s or something?”

“No, why would you say that? I’m perfectly normal.”

After a few moments of hesitation, he raised his eyebrows and let out a sigh. “No reason.”

She looked around and spotted a five-story building. She indicated for Chambers to follow.

“Although most people don’t go around feeling the need to declare how normal they are,” he muttered as he trailed behind her.

A few minutes later Tracy and Chambers stood on top of the building that overlooked the destruction zone. Tracy stared out at the devastation as Chambers struggled with the Central call center.

“Are you through yet?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I could be in Mombasa for all I know. Figuratively speaking.”

“Give me the phone.” She wrestled it out of his hand and punched in a sequence. “Who am I speaking to? ... Never heard of you. This is Inspector Hanson, connect me with the chief inspector, now!” She gave Chambers a brief smile. “Chief, guard’s being difficult. ... Don’t know the name. Fat idiot. That’s a technical and accurate description. Won’t let me into the site. Some rubbish about declaring it American soil so drones can fly over it. Call the commander. Thanks.”

She ended the call and threw the phone over her shoulder to Chambers, who scrambled to catch it. “Fixed,” she said.

“This is my cell, you know,” he said, “not a work one. And I’ve still got seventeen months left on the contract.” Chambers cleaned the glass on the front of his phone and slipped it into his pocket.

Tracy put her hands on her hips and looked out over the site. She took a couple of deep breaths. “Okay. Plane’s here ...” She pointed out at the fuselage. “How long would you say the crash zone is?”

“I’d guess about a mile.” Chambers cocked his head as he thought. “Maybe a bit less.”

“We’ll have to assume this was a terrorist hit. The plane was on descent into Heathrow and, what do you think? They launched a ground-to-air missile like in Ukraine?”

He shook his head. “Something’s bothering me. Have you noticed something odd about the crash?”

“Many things,” Tracy muttered, distracted. “Why?”

“The plane was flying at about two or three hundred miles an hour,” Chambers said. “The pilot would’ve tried to glide the plane down as gently as possible. The crash zone should be way longer than a mile.”

“Yeah, totes way.”

“It’s like it’s fallen out of the sky and bounced a couple of times. Mathematically, that isn’t right.”

“Interesting point,” Tracy said. “Get the tech guys, no, call Dan Holloway at Central to build a model. He’s our best. We might get some clues about where it hit.” She glanced at her watch.

“We crack on. I want you to be my secondary eyes and ears. Set up subgroups to scour the area. Snowflake it out so we get good coverage. Communicate at fifteen-minute intervals. Set up a database of observations. You’re giving me a strange look.”

“I’m thinking I should’ve let the guard shoot you.”

“This is London. You need to be good to make it here.”

“And a major pain?”

“Deal with it, Chambers. It’s called efficiency.”

He indicated that this was open to debate. Twice, when she turned her back.

“I don’t need to see you to know what you’re doing,” she said. He hid his hands behind his back. “Have you got the Citrix link into the HQ database?”

Chambers nodded. He pulled out his phone, swiped the screen and opened the application.

“Okay, give me the people stats.”

After a moment the figures started to flick onto the screen. “Home to about seventeen thousand people,” he said. “Three hundred thousand commute to work here. And about half a million pass through on their way over there.” He nodded toward the north side of the Thames River.

Smoke and dust drifted over the river, enveloping Westminster in a dense cloud. Big Ben had completely disappeared, leaving only a disconnected hourly chime,

“I bet the pollies are thanking their lucky stars,” Tracy said. “A mile to the north and no more government. But they’ll soon forget about their narrow escape and start bickering among themselves again.”

“Maybe next time, if we’re lucky,” Chambers muttered. “Normally something like this should galvanize them, common foes and all that. But self-preservation will have kicked in, and it’s more important in their eyes that all politicians survive. Then they can argue over the minutiae later.”

Tracy turned back to the rubble. “What’s the worst-case scenario?”

“Everyone’s dead.”

“That’s not the worst.” She checked her watch.

“You mean if they were all undead, like some zombie apocalypse that invades London?”

“No, like we suddenly have half a million survivors. Where would we put them?”

“That’s a bit heartless.”

“It’s being practical. Dead people are easier to deal with.”

“Not if you’re the one who has to tell their families. Or if there’s a zombie apocalypse.”

“Let’s get back to ground zero and start setting up the teams.”

Tracy glanced at her watch. Time: 1:40. Heart rate: 140. She let out a sigh of relief. Sweat lined her face, which was coated with grime. She wiped the back of her hand across her forehead, smearing a long, black trail of soot. From her vantage point on top of the collapsed main regional branch of B&Q, she mentally ticked off the various teams.

The mapping and coordinates team had made it all the way across to the other side of the crash zone. She wondered what they would be using if they hadn't had battery-powered equipment. Steam-powered theodolites? She smiled at the mental image of large brass telescopes being towed around by great steam vehicles, with men in top hats and tails working industriously. Well, supervised industriously anyway; she knew the real work would be done secretly by their wives. The wind had picked up, dispersing the fuel fumes and allowing the male workers to have a coffee break while their female coworkers toiled on.

"Chambers, you got it sorted?" she shouted. "I've got an important meeting to get to."

Chambers waved back, giving a thumbs-up. "Must be the most important meeting in the world."

Tracy slipped out her phone and called the number. "Yeah, it's me. I'm all clear. I'll see you at two, maybe a little aft—"

There was a shout, and Tracy's head snapped up. She hung up and ran.

Randeep sat back, thinking about the results of his scan, idly flicking the mouse between his fingers. He sent the findings to the printer.

“Josh,” he said, “I’m going down to the chamber to perform some tests on One.”

Josh mumbled a response without taking his eyes off his monitor.

Randeep picked up the printout and made his way over to a large and heavily secured iron grate. He swiped his card and the grate unlocked. He looked back over his shoulder as he stepped into the chamber beyond. He shut the grate, took out another card and swiped it. The light above the entrance changed from green to red.

There was a large round door in front of him that was two feet thick and five feet in diameter. He ducked as he stepped through it and swiped the second card again. The door closed slowly behind him, accompanied by the sound of repetitious beeping.

Lights flickered on, illuminating a massive metal spiral staircase. He made his way down, following the safety instructions. The beeping stopped when he reached the base of the staircase, and he heard the heavy clunk of the round door above him closing, then the grinding of metal on metal as security bolts slid into the walls.

Lights shone down on various Ministry of Defence insignia and security reminders. The stress had Randeep sweating. The tunnel ahead of him was a partitioned area of an abandoned underground train line that had been cleared of existing civil remains and filled with large pieces of military machinery.

Randeep made his way through the collection of oversized weapons. Great surface-to-air missile launchers pointed lifelessly toward the curved ceiling, towering over tanks from recent wars. He squeezed his way through the enormous ordnances to a silver box as large as a double-decker bus. His hand swept over the shiny metal. The letters *CF-1*, painted red, were embossed on the side of the huge box. He pressed a large green button on the side. A small panel slid open in the metal sheeting, revealing another swipe point and a numeric keypad. He swiped his card over the small plate and typed in a code.

The lights in the tunnel dimmed and a low hum emanated from the silver box, then began to build in intensity. Randeep made his way back through the weapons until he reached the far end of the tunnel. He unlocked the gate to a cage that enclosed a small control room and stepped in. Locking the gate behind him caused a small generator in the base of the control room to power up the room, making the floor vibrate gently.



The monitors flickered to life. He sat down and studied them. Someone had written *730 T* on a Post-it note and stuck it next to one of the monitors. Randeep wiped the sweat from his palms onto his trousers, and started to type.

The humming coming from the far CF-1 became louder. He watched the readouts. A number started to build.

*400*

*500*

*600*

He wiped his hand across his forehead.

*650*

*675*

He could feel his heartbeat.

*700*

A small light in the corner of the control room turned from blue to yellow.

*720*

The yellow light began to flash.

*725*

*740*

The light turned red. He typed in another code and flicked a switch behind him.

*720*

The red light began to flash. The metal bars enclosing the control room began to vibrate. He looked out into the tunnel. Some of the smaller weapons were shaking. He began to feel sick.

*795*

*799*

He threw up into a waste-paper basket.

*800*

The entire tunnel beyond the cage turned dark red. A siren erupted by his ear. He took off his sweater and shoved it into the alarm to muffle the sound.

*810*

*820*

*840*

*860*

He heard a loud bang. Rivets were beginning to shoot out of the CF-1. The cage began to shake violently. His head was spinning. He staggered over to the monitor and dumped the

readings. A rivet sailed across the tunnel and ricocheted off one of the bars. The readings were pushing well into the red. The equipment was on the verge of exploding, but somehow it was managing to hold together.

He slammed his fist down on a large red button. The siren stopped. The flashing stopped. The shaking stopped. The sickness stopped.

He checked the final reading.

Just below 890 teslas.

Nearly one kilotesla. He had thrown the strongest electromagnetic beam ever transmitted by a living person two yards. Until today, transmitting that kind of reading over that kind of distance, while somehow staying alive, would have guaranteed a Nobel Prize.

Randeep checked the printout. The spectrum analysis between the two readings was the same, but the strength had Randeep shaking his head. What could deliver a burst of two hundred and fifty kiloteslas? No one on the planet had this kind of technology. He was certain of it.

He sat back, thinking about the results of the scan, idly flicking the mouse between his fingers. He sent the findings to the printer, then looked at the calculation result on the paper: 250.

He sat in the cage waiting for the electrical storm raging through the tunnel to calm down, staring blankly ahead as he tried to grasp the magnitude of the findings. Eventually the light flickered green. He unlocked the cage and walked absentmindedly back through the tunnel and up the steps.

He sat down at his desk and his hands flicked idly over the keys. Josh gave him a surprised glance, followed by a deliberate cough. When that failed to get Randeep's attention, he kicked his ankle. Randeep turned and stared straight into the uniforms of two security guards.

“We’ve got a survivor,” Chambers shouted. He was half-running, half-stumbling over the rubble down the remains of Brunel Street.

Tracy quickly caught up to him, bouncing over the awkward debris. “In *this*?”

Chambers had clambered onto the top of the remains of a Tesco’s supermarket and was pointing down, listening intently on his phone. “It looks the building took out a communications tower when it toppled over,” he said.

In the center of the intersection ahead of them rested a small Honda hatchback. The front half the tiny car was destroyed, and one indicator was flashing forlornly in the crumpled wreckage. Steam hissed out of the broken radiator.

“Anderson found the car,” Chambers said. “Looks like a piece of the plane’s wing landed on it. Said the adults in the front are dead, but there’s a young boy in the back. He’s the only person we’ve found alive so far.”

“Great, I hate kids,” Tracy said.

“Is there anyone you do like?”

“Rod,” she replied. She nodded as if to confirm this.

“I’m assuming Rod is a person rather than part of your fishing gear. He wouldn’t be a saint, by any chance.”

“Can we keep personal comments out of this?” For a moment, sadness flickered across her face. “Come on, let’s get down there.”

They made their way across the rubble, taking sideways steps, sliding and stumbling, and grabbing onto each other for support. Bright yellow tape with black stripes went from corner to corner of the intersection, tied onto anything that had remained upright. Chambers lifted the tape for Tracy, but she moved further along and stepped under another section.

As they approached the vehicle they could sense a change in the air. The exploration team was standing back from the area around the car that they had roped off.

“We’re entering a danger zone inside a danger zone,” Chambers told her. “Is that like a double negative cancelling each other out, or does that make it exponentially worse?”

As they slowly approached the hatchback, Tracy indicated to Chambers to make his way around the other side of the vehicle. “You come in from the front side and keep the child’s attention on you. I’ll come in from the rear.”

“Why are you whispering? It’s not a voice-activated bomb.”

Smoke gently drifted over the intersection as they crept forward. The bent remains of the plethora of street signs arced over them. Tracy made her way around a large piece of wing spearing up from the ground, and approached the rear of the car. It was covered in dust but was intact. Chambers was already on the other side, staring intently through the rear passenger window. He had his hand up, shielding his eyes from the sun.

She waved at him to come around to her side. “Does something about the vehicle feel odd to you?” Tracy said. She waved her hand hesitantly near several pieces of twisted metal.

“Yeah, furry, like iron filings spread over a magnet,” Chambers replied. “Spikey.”

“Good analogy, good word. Everything is spikey.”

Chambers glanced down at her shoes. “Don’t touch the metal,” he said. “You need thick rubber soles. It sent Anderson flying about twenty yards.”

She stepped back a couple of paces, away from anything metallic, and looked around cautiously. “What did?”

“The charge. Something’s sending a huge electrical charge through the metal. It’s turned the vehicle into a faraday cage.”

“The tower?”

Chambers shook his head. “The tower’s dead.”

“So we can’t touch the car. How do we get the kid out?”

“Maybe he can crawl out.”

The young boy’s eyes were open and he was staring straight ahead. His breathing was barely noticeable, but other than the dust and debris covering him, he seemed unharmed.

“Hey, kid, are you all right?” Chambers called.

She pushed him out of the way. “That’s not how we do it. Read the procedure.” She approached the window, almost stepping too close to the metal. She leaned backward. Her balance seemed to be missing.

She knocked on the glass. “Can you hear me? I’m Inspector Tracy Hansen from the Central London Metropolitan Police and the senior officer in charge of the site. You’re trapped in a damaged vehicle. Please tell me if you’re aware of any injury.”

There was no response.

She knocked again, louder. “Please. Tell. Me. If. You. Can. Hear. Me.”

“He’s not a foreigner. There’s no need to talk like that,” said Chambers.

“We’re stuck. We can’t do anything until we get the door open.”

“So what do we do?”

“We need to get in some equipment to deal with this. We need entrance points to the zone, with lines of direct access. Visual understanding is key. Where’s the chopper?”

“It’s a busy day. The whole city’s in lockdown. Unless the pilot cycles to work it’ll take him hours to get to HQ.”

She looked around. “Do you know where we are exactly?”

“We’re on Brunel. And if that rubble’s the remains of the Adam and Eve pub, then this must be the intersection with Swan Road.” Chambers sat down on a pile of rubble. “I used to come down this way when I was a cadet. I’d look at everyone in the pub, hoping to be one of them one day.”

“Who?”

“The police that used to gather there. It was a coppers’ pub. About the only safe pub to go to in the vicinity, but at the time it wasn’t affordable for a young cadet from Peckham.”

Tracy looked at the hulking and athletic body of Chambers and marveled that he would find anywhere unsafe.

Chambers was looking thoughtfully at the vehicle. “We need to see if the current’s still as strong.”

He got up and stumbled over to the ordinance team. He reappeared a few moments later with a small metal box trailing two loose wires with insulated clamps on the ends. He clipped one clamp to the car and the second to a piece of metal half-buried in the ground. He sat down on the rubble and looked at the dial on the front of the small box.

“Whoa!” he said.

“What are you doing?” Tracy replied.

“There’s over a teravolt of electricity going through the car. That’s the same as lightning.”

“Why didn’t it kill Anderson? Why isn’t it earthing on us?”

“They say it’s the amps that kill you.”

“I thought there were about ten thousand amps in a lightning strike.”

“At least. Let’s see how many amps this wonderful box detects.” He flicked a switch then stared at the dials. He gave it a solid smack on the side. “Well, it’s either broken or there are negative amps.”

“Is that possible?”

“No.”

“So it’s broken,” Tracy said.

“Er ... no.” He sat back and ran his eyes over the car. “But from my basic physics studies at school, and a certain amount of over-ambitious naivety with regard to things like that, I do have an idea.”

He stood up, dusted himself down and looked over at Anderson. The medics were still tending to him, but he looked okay if badly shaken up. Chambers turned, walked back a few paces, sprinted forward and leaped onto the roof of the car.

“You idiot,” Tracy screamed. “What are you doing?”

His body twitched. “The current will only hurt if you touch the ground. Man, this feels weird.” He held up his hands, rotating them in front of his face.

“Get down off there this instant,” she said, feeling like his mother. “That’s an order,” she added.

He knelt and reached down for the back door handle. It was locked.

“Inspector Hansen, could you inquire, and quite quickly because I’m feeling very sick, if the ordinance people have a hammer or something to break the glass.”

“I’m going to have to report you for this.”

“Get a hammer!”

She gave him a dark look, but scooted over to the team outside the safety-perimeter zone.

Chambers stared at the swirling ground in front of him, fighting the urge to vomit all over the car.

Tracy returned with a sledgehammer. “They had nothing smaller.”

“And you believed them? Throw it to me. Please.”

She lobbed the heavy sledgehammer up to him. He caught it and hefted it over his shoulder.

“I am Thor, kneel before me, woman.”

“Just smash the window before I have to shoot you.”

“I can’t hit it too hard or the flying glass could hurt the kid. That’s why I asked for a hammer, something smaller than this.” He knelt down and lurched suddenly. He slammed his hand down on the roof to stabilize himself. He blinked furiously and shook his head.

“Are you all right? You’ve gone pale.”

“This current does weird things, I can tell you. The sheer power of it is making me feel sick and invincible at the same time.”

He grabbed the sledgehammer with both hands just beneath the head, reached down and tapped gently on the window. He repeated the action, each time increasing the force. Eventually the glass cracked and finally shattered. Chambers forced the sledgehammer handle through the shattered glass, making a small hole. He leaned in, clicked the lock and opened the door.

The boy was still gasping for air and staring straight ahead.

“Now would be a good time for the chopper to arrive so we can airlift him out without me being electrocuted,” Chambers said. He sighed and looked up at the empty sky.

He lowered himself into the passenger seat next to the boy, who was fastened in place with an overelaborate harness. Chambers could feel the electrical current coursing through everything—himself, the car, the boy—and it was burning.

“Hey, kid, I don’t know how you’re surviving, but this pain is pretty intense.”

For the first time the boy reacted. His eyes appeared to flick to one side without actually moving. His pupils were dilated and his eyes dark. He tried to move his hand, managing to lift it fractionally, trembling, before it collapsed. His lips parted, but no sound came out.

“Don’t sweat it, sport. I’ll have you out of here in no time. Once I figure out how to do it.” Chambers tapped his fingers on the seat and glanced at the boy. “You haven’t suddenly gained the powers of levitation, have you?”

There was no response.

“I admit it was a long shot,” he said.

Chambers looked out at Tracy, who was looking in at both of them with a concerned expression.

He placed a foot on the armrest on the door, grabbed the boy under the arms and manhandled him out of the car and up onto the roof. He gasped for air and lifted himself up behind him, managing to avoid touching the ground. They both lay on the roof looking up into the infinite blue sky.

Chambers’ mind started to drift and blackness crept over his vision. Tracy’s piercing shout brought him back to consciousness. His eyes snapped open and he sat up.

“Drop him down to me,” Tracy said. She was standing close to the hatchback with her arms extended.

“It’s vital we don’t touch,” Chambers said.

He slipped his hands under the boy’s shoulders, and lifted him out over the edge of the car. The boy rolled forward off his arms and fell the short distance into Tracy’s care.

“He must be discharging,” Chambers said. His head sagged, and his eyelids felt heavy.

“Oh, gross.” She pulled a face and held the boy away from her.

“No, discharging electrically. Your hair’s standing on end.”

Tracy turned with the boy in her arms and started making her way back to the perimeter zone.

“Hey, what about me?” Chambers shouted.

“You got yourself up there,” she shouted back.

He sighed and took a giant leap off the top of the hatchback, landing heavily on the ground. His legs gave way and he collapsed onto the rubble. His head cracked against the bricks. The world swirled around him; he was falling, but it all felt so slow.



A couple of medics rushed over to assist him. They touched him and leaped backward, then manhandled him back to the medical station. He collapsed into a small canvas chair and they wrapped a blanket around him. A medic dabbed at the blood trickling down his forehead with a piece of gauze.

“Chopper’s on its way,” an officer shouted.

“Typical,” said Chambers.

Tracy had her arms around the boy, and his head was resting on her shoulder. She found herself instinctively rocking from side to side.

“Go on,” Chambers said. “Admit I looked like a Norse god with the hammer and dust clouds behind me.”

She hesitated “You’re an idiot,” she said.

“Hah, so you did think I looked like Thor. I can see it in your eyes.”

She rolled her eyes and looked away. “Thick and shiny as it is, you don’t have the hair for it.”

“Hey, he’s got an orange wristband. What’s it say?” He reached over and twisted the band around. “Cally,” he read.

“Weird name.”

“It’s short for Calchas. It’s Greek.”

“How do you know Greek names?” Tracy said.

“When you live among the dreaded immigrants you tend to learn their names. Otherwise it’s rude.” He looked at the boy’s wristband. “I’m pretty sure orange means leukemia. And look at him, he’s so thin and pale.”

“Poor kid.”

“I thought you hated kids.”

“Not when they’re sick,” she replied. “I give generously to Red Nose day every year.”

There was a shout from one of the medics.

“Helicopter’s here. It’s coming in from the northeast.”

The *whop-whop-whop* of the rotary blades increased in volume. The sleek black craft was making a direct line from HQ to the landing zone.

The helicopter pilot radioed that he was going to take a pass over the crash zone. He tilted the joystick a few degrees and the chopper banked gently to one side. He could clearly see the massive destruction zone, from the point where the plane had crashed into the ground and the mile of devastation that followed. He lined up with the plane’s trajectory. Then the dashboard went blank.

There was a sudden whine. Tracy looked up. The helicopter was falling. Its blades were trying to reverse direction, but it was tumbling like a rock straight down toward them.

The head of security leaned forward on his desk, his heavy forearms with nautical tattoos resting on the old oak table. He looked down at the paper in front of him with Randeep's employee details. Two guards stood next to the doorway. People were crowded into the second-floor office.

"Randy, is it?"

"Randeep," Randeep replied.

"I'm Francis Johnston, head of security, and I have some concerns. Where were you prior to the guards picking you up?"

"I was on level six."

"And what were you doing there?"

"I'm limited in what I can say but it involved NDT of certain equipment."

"Why are you limited?"

"I've signed the Official Secrets Act."

Johnston sighed. "What does NDT stand for?"

"Non-destructive testing. We have some ... cutting-edge equipment."

"Knives?"

"No, highly advanced equipment. So advanced it breaks easily. We need to know what that breaking point is."

"So nothing to do with looking at pictures?"

"Er, pictures of what?"

"Ladies."

"... no. Nothing electronic can be taken down there."

"Someone said you took a piece of paper. Was it a photo?"

"No. It was EM readings."

"Is that the author of those women's romance books they keep hiding on their Kindles?"

"No, look." He took out the piece of paper and laid it on the table in front of Johnston.

Johnston examined the paper. He held it up to the light. Eventually he handed it over to a young guard standing by the door. "Make a note of this, Weston. Call it exhibit A. Open a file."

"What's this all about? I've done nothing wrong," said Randeep.

"As far as I understand, there's been a breach of protocol."

"A security breach? That's a disaster."

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. One of the ladies from marketing said you looked at her funny this morning. She says you’ve been looking at her and saying inappropriate things to her in recent months.”

“Like what?”

“That’s not for me to get involved with. I don’t care what’s been going on between you, I just need you to back off, understand? I don’t think you need to apologize, although it wouldn’t hurt.”

Randeep placed his head in his hands. “I don’t even know who you’re talking about.”

“I know what you boffins are like, so wrapped up in your work you never get a girlfr—”

“But I haven’t done anything.”

“Yes, I would recommend you push that line. We can put it down to misguided innocence, and I suggest you get some help for your issues. I’ll make a note that I’ve told you that so it’s official. Maybe address that attitude of yours as well.”

Johnston dragged his thick finger awkwardly over the tablet screen and, agonizingly slowly, entered some information. “I’m recommending you have the rest of the week off. Along with all the what have you,” he said, indicating the monitors displaying the unfolding story of the airplane crash, “this isn’t a headache I need today.”

Randeep picked up his backpack and made his way through the open-plan maze of cubicles. A trail of giggles followed as he passed through marketing.

He emerged into the midday light, blinking in the brittle sunlight. His ears were still ringing from the siren in the tunnel. His stomach felt sick from the vibrations and accusations. He kicked some rubbish on the sidewalk and watched it float onto the road. He made up his mind and strode off toward South London.

Tracy ran, cradling the boy in her arms. She heard, and felt, the impact behind her as the helicopter hit the ground. The surface of the street shook beneath her feet. She glanced over her shoulder. The helicopter had bounced and was tumbling after her. It crashed down again heavily, spraying rubble forward. A rotary blade bent, snapping free and searing through the air above her head.

She ducked instinctively. More metal flew past her. The helicopter bounced up again, twisting over in mid-air and crashing into the side of a building. The shock sent the tail boom spinning around, the rotary blades slicing through the air.

Tracy screeched to a halt and ducked under the circling boom. She timed it perfectly. The blades missed her and the boom crashed into the building beside the helicopter fuselage. Desperately she ran up a small incline as the boom bounced back from the building, and a rotary blade twisted and broke free of the boom. She risked another glance over her shoulder and saw the blade spinning toward her.

She tripped and fell, shielding the boy beneath her. She was panting, her lungs wheezing. She glanced at her watch. Heart rate: 198. She gripped the boy desperately, keeping her eyes squeezed shut. Her breathing began to settle.

She looked back. The remains of the rotary blade came to a stop and gently bumped against her head.

"I thought you didn't like kids," Chambers shouted as he ran up. "But it was very brave anyway, and somewhat epic."

Her arms were vice-like around the young boy. Chambers slipped an arm under her and lifted her to a standing position. He gently tried to pry the boy from her clutches.

"You can let go of Cally."

"Huh?" Her eyes were distant and her face was as pale as a full moon.

"The boy. You can hand him over. You don't need to keep your Vulcan death grip on him."

"Oh, sorry." She relaxed and Chambers eased the young boy out of her arms and into the arms of a waiting medic. The medic scooted away and laid the boy on a stretcher.

"You go home," Chambers said. "I think you've had enough for the day. I'll tidy things up here."

The shock eventually drained away, leaving Tracy exhausted. Her muscles were aching. Tomorrow was going to be a hamstrung nightmare. When the taxi dropped her off she struggled

up the stairs to her apartment. She fumbled through her pockets but couldn't sense her keys. Her fingers felt numb. She rubbed her hands together and patted her pockets. Her keys eluded her, so she knocked.

Rod opened the door. His face was full of thunder, but it was replaced by shock as soon as he saw her. She limped in, covered in dust and dirt, her clothes ripped.

"What happened to you?" said Rod, his face full of concern. He helped her over to the sofa, wincing involuntarily as her dirty clothes touched the white fabric.

"Bad day at the office." She collapsed onto the sofa, laid her head back and stared at the ceiling for a moment before closing her eyes.

"Was it anything to do with the plane?"

She nodded.

She knew he was speaking, but the words swirled around her head before drifting away, unencumbered by comprehension. Eventually she caught the word "clinic". She dreaded what was coming. She knew how disappointed he was that she had missed the appointment.

"I'm so sorry, Rod. If there'd been any way in the world I could've got there, I would have. When can we get another appointment?"

"They said it would be another month away. But don't think about that now. You're in no condition to do anything at the moment, and the stress would be too much."

"I'm sorry, I know how ..." she took a deep breath. "I know how keen you were to go."

And once again he was saying words but her eyes drifted away and she recalled the feelings of the day. She knew he was on one of his martyr talks where "everything is about you," although it wasn't really.

His face went dark when she interrupted him mid-sentence. "Funny thing is, when I had this young boy in my arms and I was running away from the exploding helicop—"

"The *what*?"

"Doesn't matter. I was holding him and it sort of felt ... nice, him being secure in my arms."

"I knew there were some mothering instincts inside of you, hiding."

She looked into his eyes. They looked happy for the first time in a long while. Her words gave him the kind of joint commitment he had always been looking for.

"We'll see. There's a big step between holding a child for a moment and going through the process."

"They say the process is fun."

"Parts of it. Some say that most of it is suffering, pain, heartache, and regret. And that's just the night after meeting the future father."

Tracy lay tucked tightly under the bed covers, staring at the ceiling. She absentmindedly tapped her fingers on the sheets. She checked the news on her phone. Still no survivors. Still no videos of the actual event. She placed the phone back on the side table. She found the lack of information odd. There was always someone lurking around doing nefarious deeds and capturing the event for YouTube. Maybe they were all waiting for the right price.

Her thoughts flicked back to Chambers. Reggie. She smiled. He had looked pretty good with the sledgehammer. He had tanned skin and twinkling eyes that you just knew were trouble. It all fitted together well in Chambers, if you were into that kind of thing, like those mindless secretaries in the pool. But underneath the smart talking and good looks he seemed like a nice person. It would have been good to spend more time with him.

Her phone buzzed twice. A message from HQ. Dan. She glanced at the subject. The flight model was complete. She looked over at her man snoring next to her, sighed then eased out of the bed.

She woke her workstation and opened the email. Dan had pushed the math whizzes, and they had calculated the plane's flight path from the last communication through to the crash corridor. She looked at the 3D model, rotating it around with the trackpad.

"It really did fall out of the sky," she muttered.

She tracked along the path and examined the nearly vertical line to the ground. She looked at the model from above and noted there was no yaw movement—it had fallen straight down. Something caught her eye. She zoomed onto the drop point, where the plane had begun its fall. Then she zoomed onto the London street map below it. The drop point was directly above the intersection of Brunel and Swan.

She sat staring at the monitor for fifteen minutes, not seeing anything other than the intersection. She pushed the chair away from the desk and the wheels clicked over the tile edges. She checked her watch. Time: 02:48. Heart rate: 97.

She grabbed the keys and quietly left the apartment.

Tracy signed the check-in sheet and made her way through the fencing. Security was now in the hands of private contractors. The G4SX guard gave her a flashlight, which she holstered. The crash zone was ablaze with floodlights on great poles. People dressed in various forms of non-contaminative clothing were sifting through the wreckage. The whole place put her on edge.

She skirted around the fuselage and made her way down Brunel. It took time and effort. She found herself catching her breath as she struggled over the difficult terrain. She looked ahead. She could barely make out the road in the dark and each step was hesitant.

There was a sudden movement to her right and several bricks slid down, startling her. She approached the intersection. There was the sound of metal being moved. She stopped dead. The sound repeated. She squinted into the darkness and waited. Her eyes had slowly accustomed to the darkness and she was able to make out the shape of the hatchback. Then she saw movement. Someone was down there.

The person was nearly impossible to see in the dark. She tried to step quietly but stumbled. The person turned. She shone the flashlight's beam into the face of a young Indian man, who froze. He was carrying a small metal box and a long metal bar.

"Hey, who are you?"

He turned and fled.

"Stop!" she shouted. "This is the police."

He was gone. She arrived at the semi-crushed hatchback and caught her breath. The power was still flowing in from somewhere; she could feel the buzz of electricity off the vehicle. Her foot kicked a small object that skipped off over the rubble, emitting light. She went over and picked it up. It was a phone. And it was on.

Terror gripped her as thoughts of explosions filled her mind. She closed her eyes and clicked it off. She didn't turn into fried chicken. She turned it over. *CF* was printed on the back.

Weariness overtook her and she stood still, closing her eyes, feeling the accumulated heaviness of the day. The sounds of excavation, and the occasional shout and reverse beeping drifted away into an echo-y distance. She knew that if she lay down, even on the sharp edges of the broken bricks, she would be asleep in moments.

At the edge of her hearing she caught a foreign sound. After all the warnings, after all the explanations, barely noticeable above the occasional snatches of silence she heard a sound that shouldn't be there. It was a very faint beep. And it came from under the car. Her eyes snapped open, weariness draining away.

She dropped down onto the rubble next to the car. Without thinking, she placed her hand on the tire. Her brain screamed as thoughts of Anderson being thrown twenty yards came slamming back. But nothing happened. There was no shock.

She glanced at her watch. Heart rate: 185. But the display was flashing irregularly.

She closed her eyes and gently tapped the tire. The car began to rock gently. She pushed heavily against the wheel and the car wobbled. She looked into the wheel wells and saw that the



shock absorbers were fully extended, almost as though the vehicle was trying to leap free of the ground.

There was another tiny beep, now obviously coming from beneath the car. She reached underneath and felt the electromagnetic waves grow in intensity as her hand moved closer to the beeping object. The thought occurred to her that this might not be the most intelligent thing she had done today, which, when she looked back on it, was full of unintelligent actions. What if it was a bomb? What if it was a rat's nest? Gross. It couldn't be a bomb. Didn't they tick? Or was that only in the cartoons?

Her fingers gently brushed against something smooth and metallic. Instantly the buzzing stopped and she felt the spikey-ness fall faster than a scare of the stock markets. The car also fell, the body crunching down over the tires. Tracy held her breath and felt the metal touch, but not crush, her arm. But she was trapped.

She took her fingers off the metal device, trying to wriggle her arm free. She heard a grinding sound. She reached out for the device again, and found it deeper in the ground. She took her fingers off it and the grinding sound returned. She dropped her fingers onto the metal again, and again it stopped. This time it had sunk even lower into the ground.

“Oh, great.” She looked around. There was no one nearby. “Er, help.” A few moments of silence drifted past. “Could someone help me? I’m stuck.”

Again there was no response. Her eyes became unbearably heavy and she rested her head on the ground. She inhaled deeply and prepared to shout. There was the sudden sound of rubble sliding, and she aimed the flashlight’s beam. A young man stuck his head out from behind a fallen sign.

“I’m an officer of the law and require assistance. The duty of citizens is to ...”

Her request for aid wasn’t being as well received as she hoped. The young man remained semi-concealed and unmoving.

“Okay, that didn’t come out right. I’m extremely tired. Can you help me, please?”

The young man edged out hesitantly.

“Would you stop acting like Gollum? You’re freaking me out,” Tracy said.

“What’s happened?”

“I don’t know, other than I’m stuck here. The vehicle’s got me trapped.”

He crouched down and looked under the car. “You’ve disarmed the EM source under the car. There was an electromagnetic bomb—”

“Bomb?” Tracy’s heart rate began to climb.

“Not as in exploding bomb.” Randeep tried to calm his own voice. “It explodes, but with EM waves—electromagnetic waves. Judging by the way the vehicle’s sitting low down on the ground, I’m guessing you’ve disarmed the source. How did you do that?”

“I don’t know. Do you mean that little metal thing? I just touched it and it turned off.”

“Interesting.”

“And when I untouch it, it burrows into the ground.”

“Self-disposing ordinances. That’s a clever idea. I wonder if it converts to a landmine.”

“Don’t say that!” Her sudden outburst startled Randeep and he began to hedge away. She softened her voice. “What’s your name?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Yes you can. I’m a police officer. You must assist me with my investigations.”

“If there’s been a crime, I’ll help where I can, but I’m limited in what I can say. I’ve signed the Official Secrets Act.”

“That sounds like something you say a lot.”

“I have little else in my life that makes me interesting. It’s been a lonely five years.”

“Yes, well, we could chat amiably like this until the sun rises, but I’m afraid I would lose my arm. Can you find some way of lifting the car?”

Randeep disappeared into the darkness, and returned with a long pole and a damaged trashcan. He lay the can down near the rear of the car, and slid the pole over it and under the chassis. He tested the pole, but it slipped straight out.

“I’m no expert at this,” Tracy said, “but I’m guessing the power that was coming out of whatever I’m touching would levitate this car if it wasn’t for the wing stapling it to the ground.”

“My calculations would agree with your hypothesis.”

“I saw a video on YouTube once about a frog being levitated using magnets. Is this similar?”

“Yes.” He repositioned the pole and tested the weight. This time it stayed in place.

“Who has this kind of technology?” Tracy asked. “Americans? Russians?”

“Yes, they’ll have something hypothetically similar. Everyone does.”

“So who’s attacking us?”

“Someone we don’t know.”

“A ... new enemy? Someone working in secret?”

“In this field, no one works in secret. There’s great rewards for those who achieve the most. So far, we in the UK the best.”

“How do you know so much?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Are you saying *we* planted this?”

“No, we’re nowhere near this level of technology. This is hyper-advanced. But we’re in the early stages of development.”

“But you said we’re the best.”

“Yes.”

She gave him a long stare as she absorbed what he was saying. “I don’t like what you’re saying, so I’ve decided you’re clinically insane.”

“Get ready. I’m about to lever the car up to get you out.”

Randeep heaved and the vehicle lifted up fractionally. There was just enough space for Tracy to strengthen her grip on the object and withdraw her arm.

“Okay, I’m clear,” she shouted.

Randeep released the pole and the hatchback collapsed onto the rubble.

Still sitting on the rubble, Tracy examined the device in her hand. It was shaped like a metal rugby ball—oval with pointy ends. On the side was printed *CF-555*. She put it down and released her grip. The ends started spinning, exposing sharp blades that began to dig into the ground. She placed her hand on the safe middle section; the ends stopped spinning and the blades disappeared.

Randeep had come around from the other side of the car. He stepped closer and Tracy moved the *CF-555* out of his line of sight. He came a little closer.

Tracy snatched out at Randeep's leg, grabbing his ankle. She shouted for help. He kicked out and his shoe grazed her temple. The shock went through her and overloaded her system. Her body shut down and unconsciousness claimed her. The *CF-555* rolled free of her hand. It spun into life and within moments had buried itself into the ground.

"Oh no, so sorry," Randeep said. "Oh dear."

Several people in white suits were approaching over the mountains of debris. Randeep's eyes flicked between Tracy and the approaching men, who were now pointing at him.

"Sorry," he said. He swooped down and grabbed his phone, then ran off in the opposite direction.

Consciousness came knocking and Tracy took bearing of her surroundings. She was on a stretcher in a small tent. It was still dark, although she could make out the multiple light sources of the floodlights through the tent material. There was no one around; all activity was obviously happening elsewhere. Shadows flickered against the sides of the tent as people continued to search.

She sat up and her head swam, forcing her to lie back down until the room stopped spinning. She took several deep breaths and made her way out. Her vision blurred and refocused over the scene. She could have been on the moon.

She made her way back to the entry point for the crash zone guard and demanded to see the register. She ran her finger down the list of names. There were dozens.

"Get someone to check this list against your authorized personnel," she told the guard. "Contact me if you find someone who doesn't belong." She handed him her card and staggered off back to her home.

Tracy's legs ached to the point where she was finding it hard to bend them without wincing. She had spent the morning writing up her notes. She wasn't sure, but once finished she could have trimmed it slightly. The *CF-555* printed on the device kept flashing through her mind, and the young man's phone with the initials *CF*.

When she had finally succumbed to a few hours of sleep, she was tormented by great, searing blades of death. In her dreams she was running, but never getting away. Eventually a great weight the size of a planet had fallen on her, which was the trigger for her to wake up. Any more of this and she would have to think about taking a holiday.

She swiped her security card and entered London Central HQ. She rounded the corridor and noticed a familiar set of boots sticking out of her cubicle.

"Chambers, what are you doing here?" she said.

"Yeah, good to see you, too, Inspector. I've been transferred."

"Who authorized that?"

"Does it matter?"

She sighed and sat down. She took a sip of her grande and looked at him with bleary eyes. Her gaze slipped sideways to a small stack of paper in her in-tray. She fanned them out over her desk and picked up one. She squinted at it.

"Where's the boy we rescued?"

"In the military hospital," Chambers replied.

"What military hospital?"

"They set one up next to the Secret Intelligence Service, you know, Vauxhall."

"MI6? I organized for him to be sent to Great Ormond Street."

"Military overrode you."

"No one overrides me." She stood up. "I'm speaking to the chief."

"Yeah, he's been overridden, too."

"Who can—"

"Inspector Hanson, please join me in my office." The official voice boomed out across the open-plan office. Several heads turned to see who was going to get into trouble.

"Why does he do that? We have an intercom system. He sounded cross. Did he sound cross to you?"

"How does he normally sound?" Chambers said. "I need a yardstick."

“I’ll be right back.” She strode over to the corner office with the impressive view and leather chair with her head held high.

Chief Inspector Booker was flicking through a thick sheaf of paper. As she entered the office, he indicated for her to close the door. “Tracy, I can see by the bruises and cuts that you’ve had a bad twenty-four hours. When exactly did you write this?”

“At about four-thirty this morning.”

Booker sagely nodded his head. He slid the paper to one side and pulled out another folder. “I have a report here that says you sustained a slight head injury.”

Tracy nodded. “It was very mild, sir. I was fatigued and stressed. More of a shock than any actual damage.”

“You say that, but when I look at this, and let’s be frank, voluminous report, the contents indicate a rather ... tenuous grip on reality.”

“But it’s all fact.”

“Ah, that’s what concerns me.” He looked up into her face.

“The facts?”

“No, that you think these are facts. Floating cars. Secret agents. Foreign technology.”

“Alien.”

“Foreign.” He raised his eyebrow at her.

“As you wish, chief.”

He sat back and swung his chair around looking out over east London. “We write reports here, not bad science fiction. To me, it looks like we’ve pushed you a little too hard of late. You’ve been stellar for so long, something had to give. You’ve done very well, especially with the boy. That’ll get you all over the papers and look good when it comes pay-review time. Let’s make yesterday the full stop. Come back in a week and start a new paragraph, one with a nice curly uppercase letter at the beginning.”

“You mean like a chapter.”

“That’s the one. Dismissed.”

“But sir, I demand a ...” Her head was spinning and illogical thoughts were bumping together.

“A what? This isn’t *The X Factor*. There’s no public vote. Look, we’ll put it down to fatigue. It’s out of your hands. It’s out of mine. For us the case is closed and we must move on.”

“But it’s my case,” she pleaded.

“I’m sorry, not anymore. The government sees the downing of the plane as an act of war. It’s been reclassified. It’s now the military’s responsibility.”

“Why?” She blinked disbelieving.

“They believe it was terrorists. They think they know who did it and want to use it as an excuse to attack. And good luck to them, I say. It’s going to be a nightmare. Dismissed.”

Tracy stood up and hovered momentarily before turning around and walking briskly out of the office. She went back to her desk. Chambers had gone. She sat staring blankly at the monitor, completely unsure about what to do next.

She had tried to engage her mind in something else. She had a stack of work inches high to complete, but she hadn't been able to focus. Her thoughts kept coming back to Cally. So, with a refilled grande, she made her way to the Vauxhall temporary hospital. She stood outside, thinking about Chambers. She wondered where he had gone, and why he hadn't said goodbye. She felt a little hurt.

The clouds were rolling in. Summer was over. The rain began to sprinkle down. She looked at her boots, dusty and beaten after the previous day's ordeal. She should clean them. She always cleaned them. But not today.

She thought about the boy. She thought about her work. It all seemed too hard. She walked over to the Thames and looked down into the flowing current, thick with mud and effluent. She watched it stream past as the sun appeared occasionally through the darkening clouds.

Her phone rang. The caller was blocked.

"Hello, Inspector Hanson?" came the voice down the line.

"Hmm?"

"I've been through the list."

"Who is this?"

"I'm Marlene from G4SX. You asked for someone to check through the access list for the South London devastation area."

"Look, I'm going to have to cut you off. I'm not on the—"

"We found the name of the person, the unauthorized one."

Her police senses kicked in, overriding all else.

"All names but one correspond to our records. Ronnie Petal was one. You'll like this. We checked with the swipe system. The pass used was military, but not straight military. It was R&D. You see anyone in a military uniform?"

The young Indian hadn't struck her as a "Ronnie," and she'd never met a petal. It had to be him.

Before the call was cold, and before she could think too much about why the research and development branch of the military would be involved, she was on her way back to the office. Within minutes she was logging onto the HQ system. She searched the public and police records. Nothing came up.

The young man had spoken with a clear and intelligent voice, and although he was clearly of Indian ethnicity he spoke without an accent, which meant he had been born here, well educated



here. She put him in his late twenties. He had detailed knowledge of electromagnetic theory. He was awkward. That probably meant he had a PhD in physics.

She typed into the search engine.

>>Top physics university <CR>

Cambridge

>>PhD graduates in last decade <CR>

748

She swore. He said he had signed the Official Secrets Act five years ago. That meant his PhD would have been awarded before that. She entered in the new dates for PhD graduates and the number of candidates in at 298.

>>PhD ethnicity <CR>

Caucasian: 176 Asian: 102 African: 15 Other: 3

>>Asian by gender <CR>

Male: 71 Female: 30 Other: 1

>>Asian male by location <CR>

Europe: 17 USA: 32 Asia: 15 Africa: 1 Unknown: 6

>>Print unknown <CR>

She had a list of six. One was deceased. One was in prison. A couple of phone calls pinpointed two who were avoiding paying their student loans. She typed one of the remaining two names: Mahesh. His field of study was planetary orbits and gravity. Maybe. But Mahesh was thirty-eight, which was too old. She typed in the remaining name.

>>Whois Randeep Patel <CR>

Age: 31

Thesis: Classified Lorentz research

Social Security: N/A

Address: N/A

Employer: N/A

>>Lorentz <CR>

In physics, the Lorentz force is the combination of field force on a point charge. Refer to tesla.

>>Tesla <CR>

The tesla (symbol T) is the SI derived unit of magnetic flux density ...

>>Magnetic flux density <CR>

A magnetic field is the magnetic influence of electrical currents and magnetic materials. Refer to electromagnetic theory.

“Gotcha! Now, who do you work for?” Tracy muttered. Randeep was military, but not. That meant he was a contractor.

>>Research contracts awarded by military <CR>

4,956

She let out a sigh, and rethought her approach. She pulled up the university-access databank and searched for photos of Randeep. The result was zero. She tapped her fingers and searched for graduation photographs from his year. He appeared unnamed in a photograph with five other students.

She tapped all the names into the social-media sites and scrolled back through the personal photos until she came to the after-graduation party. She searched through each person’s photos of the event. And there he was, in the back of one photograph talking to a man in military uniform. Another man stood next to him in a plain business suit.

He looked a decade younger, but it was the young man she had seen at the crash site.

She ran the picture through face-recognition software. It failed to detect Randeep, but she wouldn’t be forgetting his face. It returned the names of the two other men: Andrew S. Norton and Clive Poundriff.

>>Whois Andrew S. Norton <CR>

Sir Andrew S. Norton

Current position: Field marshal.

Norton's online CV showed that he had been a general with command of the Technical Advantage and Development Division at the time of the photograph. The stories showed him to be a decorated war hero; he was injured in the Iraq conflict in the early 1990s, then moved into operations where he had obviously excelled: *Clear new thinking revamps tired and out-of-date military arms*. Norton seemed to be another nameless member of the top brass.

>>Whois Clive Poundriff <CR>

Current position: Unknown.

Bribe allegations of Sentinel CEO on Middle East funding

Government and military ties to Sentinel R&D project cause concern at NATO summit

Sentinel CEO denies military link

Sentinel CEO retires amid allegations of political coercion

She pulled up Poundriff's leaving party and scrolled through the photographs. In one he was being handed a folder. She twisted the photo to read the contents. The background appeared to be made up of the letters *C* and *F*. She squinted at the words running across the two letters. They were blurry. She zoomed in and printed out the screen. She colored in the letters on the printout, giving them definition. She stood back and squinted at her result.

*Candle Fire.*

>>Military contracts awarded to Candle Fire <CR>

Awarded contract for advanced research and development

>>Candle Fire Contracts <CR>

Ongoing R&D: £1,850,000.00

>>Candle Fire CEO <CR>

zero results

>>Candle Fire employees <CR>

zero results

>>Candle Fire Randeep Patel <CR>

zero results

She hit her head on the desk. Dead end.

>>Candle Fire address <CR>

The North London address blinked at her. She sent it to the printer, then stuffed it in her pocket and raced out the door.

There was a small brass plaque by the door. No name, but the number matched. She pushed against the door. It was locked. She stepped back into the street and looked around. A CCTV camera faced the entrance. She examined the door, but couldn't find a buzzer. She waved up at the camera. Nothing happened. She flashed her warrant card. Nothing. She put her hands on her hips and looked around. There wasn't a person in sight.

She shielded her eyes and peered through the tinted windows. She could make out several vague people shapes, as well as the dim glow of monitors bolted to the walls. The place smacked of utilitarianism. Surely people would be dying to get outside to break the monotony.

She glanced at the coffee shop across the road, walked over and pushed her way inside. The only customers were a rowdy bunch of good-looking marketing types enjoying how fabulous they were. A bored girl sat behind the counter, messaging on her phone. Her eyes barely flicked up as Tracy entered.

"Any of you work across the road?" Tracy said to the group.

One man gave her a crooked and slimy smile. "Hey, babe, you want to join us? I got a seat for you just here." He leaned back and patted his knees.

"Eddie, don't be mean," purred one of two almost identical blonds.

Tracy glanced around the room with a bored expression on her face. She held her warrant folder under Eddie's nose. "I asked you a question."

"Answers cost money around here. Why don't you give me a little down payment, love?"

Tracy took out her cell phone, snapped a photo of him, and slid the phone across the table. Eddie's face was on the display, and photos of other faces were rapidly turning over beside it. A number was counting down above Eddie's face.

"This is facial-recognition software. I did some time in narcotics after joining the force." She looked down and pointed out the numbers on the screen: *Possible matches: 5000*. "If your face appears on this, I have full authority to do a spot check on you"—she looked at the others at the table—"and your friends."

He frowned. "You don't scare me."

"Oh, I think I do. You're in marketing, by my guess. This is London. I'd say by the clothes you're wearing, you're paid well. You've got a high disposal income, all the latest gadgets. No wedding ring, so you're living the single high life. You're probably a recreational user. If I find something, I'm going to arrest you."

She showed him the screen: *3000*.

“Maybe you have a free-thinking boss who isn’t about that kind of thing. Or maybe he is. Maybe I’ll just arrest you for perverting the course of justice.”

“I know cops I can call to sort you out,” Eddie said. He swallowed and looked down at the table.

“I didn’t know we were playing top trumps,” Tracy said. “But if you want to—“ Her phone beeped.

*1000*

“Give me their names. I know the commissioner well. I’m sure he’d like to know about any corrupt officers.”

*500*

“Even if I get you in through the front doors, there’s no way you can get past the guards,” Eddie said. His voice was quivering now.

*100*

“That’s a risk I’m prepared to take.” Tracy leaned over and stared into his eyes.

*25*

“Are you a risk taker, Eddie?”

*7*

“Look, single digits,” Tracy said. “Come on, Eddie, you only need answer one little question.”

*3*

*2*

Sweat formed on his brow as he focused on the number in front of him. “All right, stop it.” He looked around at his friends. “We all work there.” There were several groans.

Tracy put the phone away without looking at it again. “You’re doing the right thing, Eddie. That wasn’t too hard, was it? Now you’re going to do me favor, just a small one. All you need to do is get me in the building.”

“I can’t do that,” he said, emphasizing each word.

“I can begin the search again. The choice is yours. Nod if you understand.”

There was a barely perceptible movement of his head. “I can get you in the front door, but after that there are turnstiles, and each person has to pass through individually. There’s no way you’ll get through that.”

“Everyone up, let’s go,” Tracy said.

An overconfident man stood up next to Eddie. Fit. Strong. Bloodied knuckles. Boxercizer, she guessed. He was sweating, planning something. She stepped back as he rounded the table to pass her. She took another pace back and caught his punch easily. She was tired, and he was fast, but it

made no difference. His self-belief diminished his ability. She twisted his arm around, put him in an armlock and threw him onto the small table.

Silence descended over the group. They shifted uneasily. The girl at the counter glanced up then went back to her screen.

“Anyone else fancy a shot?” Tracy said.

They all piled out of the small café and crossed the road in a tightly clustered group with Tracy in the middle. Eddie swiped his card and they entered the brightly lit foyer. Monitors lining the metal walls showed views around the building and several news channels.

“You’re in,” Eddie said. “Now get away from me.”

He walked through the turnstile, followed by his colleagues. A security guard gave them a quick scan and waved them on.

Tracy turned away from the turnstiles and approached the security station. She banged on the desk. The guard looked up and gestured for two other guards to join him. They put their hands above their weapons.

“I’m looking for someone,” she said.

“Aren’t we all, love?” he replied. He gave her a thin-lipped smile. His hand disappeared under the desk and an alarm sounded. Protective shields slid over the windows and doors.

She sighed and displayed her warrant folder. “I’m looking for someone who can assist me with my inquiries.”

“I’m sorry, love, but you’re not allowed in here under any circumstances.”

“I’m a police officer in pursuit of a crime. You’re duty bound to assist me, especially as a member of a subset of the nation’s homeland security force.”

He sighed. “I’ve been in security—successfully—for over forty years. And now here I am in this highly paid job. Do you think there’s a chance I know what I’m doing? Play any games, flash any papers you want, I’ve seen it all before. Your warrant won’t work here.

Even if you dragged her Majesty herself here and she commanded me, I would still say no. ”

The guard smiled and gave her a wave goodbye as she left the building.

Defeated, Tracy found that her footsteps had taken her back to the Vauxhall temporary military hospital. The day had gone and the sun was setting.

The receptionist didn’t give her much hope, as she was clearly blocking everyone who came in, often relying on abusive language to do so.

“Are you family or relative?” she asked Tracy.

“No, but I was the one who found him in the car.”

The receptionist hesitated and glanced up at the monitors rotating the news. “Are you the one who rescued him? From the helicopter crash?”

She nodded. “People seem to be saying so.”

The receptionist looked around. “Okay, but you have to be quick. He’s in the south wing. Room C1.” She indicated a door to the side and pressed a button under her desk. The door clicked open.

The corridor was full of military people striding quickly to places unseen. She wound her way through the combination of green and white uniforms that formed streams of purposeful efficiency. Bodies lay on stretchers. All dead.

She found C1 and pushed on the door. It was particularly heavy. Inside, the room was empty except for a large hospital bed containing Cally. The room was bereft of any machinery and the walls were lined with heavy gray sheeting. There was a scraping sound as a chair moved on the other side of the bed. When she saw who it was, she stopped in her tracks.

“Chambers, what are you doing here?”

“Huh?” He sat up, waking from his light doze. “Yeah, good to see you, too, Inspector.”

“Why are you here?”

“I’m just checking up on the boy.” He rubbed his eyes and yawned widely.

“Why? He’s nothing to do with you.”

“Who else will?” He shrugged.

“There are people who deal with this kind of thing.”

“Where are they?”

She paused and sighed. “You have a point.” She looked down at Cally. “You heard about the case being closed.”

Reggie nodded. He stood up and made his way around the bed, moving in behind Tracy.

She looked at the fragile boy lying in the critical ward. The brittle fluorescent lights washed out his already pale complexion. His arms looked like twigs. “Where’s all the equipment?”

“If they put any machinery too close to him it doesn’t work properly.”

“And the gray material?”

“Lead-lined sheets. They were concerned that he might contaminate people.”

“Are we safe?”

“Yeah. We’ll all be dead soon anyway.”

“Have you had an uplifting day?”

“It makes sense. No one’s claiming responsibility. So who’s left? Aliens, that’s who.”



She rolled her eyes. "It's not aliens. My boss said so." She returned her focus to the young boy. "Hopefully he'll remember something. It's all we've got. I feel sorry for him."

"Just imagine," he said, wrapping his arm around Tracy's shoulders.

She lowered her head onto his shoulder and sighed. "What are you doing? Get off me." She shrugged his arm off and turned to face him. "I could report you for harassment, you know. But I'll put it down to fatigue and stress."

He smiled and moved close to her again.

"Stop it," she said, pushing him away. "You're being weird and annoying. And unprofessional." She smoothed down her clothes.

"Only if we're at work. And since it's nine at night, it's after hours."

"The police are always on duty," Tracy said stiffly.

"The police are, yes, but not every individual *in* the police. Police are people, too, and last time I looked, people needed sleep."

"We're duty bound. Serve and protect and all that. We have a responsibility to assist whenever and wherever we can."

"I am a po-lice ro-bot. You are not happy. You have three se-conds to comply."

"Hey, I am happy."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

"I am." Tracy placed her hands on her hips.

"Prove it."

"Prove that I'm happy?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"See? You don't even know how to show happiness."

Her eyes darted around the room. "Ha-ha-ha."

"Was that a laugh?"

"Er ... yes."

"Very natural. You know a laugh is more of a sound, rather than a word you speak awkwardly."

"Well ... show me how you're happy."

"Okay. Let's go to the pub. Ha-ha-ha."

"But it's Friday night."

"That's generally when people go."

She stared back at him. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Tracy sat stiffly on the edge of the ancient wooden chair. A glass of red wine was in front of her, and her hands were clasped together around the stem.

“Are you going to drink all of that?” she said.

Chambers looked at his pint glass. “Yes.”

“But it’s huge. How can you stay in control if you consume so much?”

“Some might argue that you’re missing the point. I, on the other hand, would argue tolerance. I’ve drunk so much over the years that I need a half dozen of these for them to have any effect.”

He raised his glass and drank heavily. And continued until he had drunk the whole glass. He slammed it down on the small table, nearly upsetting her untouched glass of wine. She looked at him in disgust.

“You’re not going to drink yours?” he said.

“I—”

“In that case I’m getting another one.” He swiveled in his seat and prepared to stand up.

“Another?”

“Unless you at least have a sip of yours.”

She looked around uneasily.

“Okay, I’m getting another one or two.” He stood up.

“All right! Just sit down. You’re causing a scene.” She slowly lifted the glass to her lips and paused.

“What now?” he said.

“Does this count as coercion?”

“Maybe bullying. Or peer pressure.”

“Don’t let me do anything stupid.”

Chambers grabbed her by the waist and pulled her out of the pub. She was screaming and whirling her fists, and getting in the occasional kick.

“Sorry,” he shouted to the bouncer, “I’ll get her home.”

“We don’t tolerate her kind ’round ’ere.” He leveled a threatening finger at them and rubbed his injured shin. “You’re both barred.”

“Barred!” Chambers cried.

The front door slammed closed and the bouncer glared at them through the glass.

“That’s a bit hash. Oh well, it was only my most favorite place ever to go.”

“Let go of me.” She shook herself free as Chambers released her. “I know people at the food-government-drink-closing-you-down place,” she shouted at the door.

“Calm down.” Chambers steered her away.

“He shouldn’t have said that. It was mean.”

“He was just being honest.”

“Well, people shouldn’t be honest if they’re going to be mean.”

“He was merely putting forth his opinion about your singing voice.”

“I have a *great* singing voice.”

“Yeah ... *grate*. Have you ever recorded yourself? Anyway, you shouldn’t have handcuffed him—”

“He was asking for it.”

“—to the urinal grating. Then kicked him into the trough. And held his head in the ...” He shivered.

“It’s a horrible place. They should be used to it.”

She shouted the last bit for no apparent reason to no one in particular. Then she started to run back to the pub entrance. He lunged after her and steered her away just as the bouncer started to open the door.

“Maybe in Essex, but we’re in W1. Most of those people were solicitors.”

“That would explain the wigs and dresses. I thought they were sub-par transvestites. I wondered why that man was shouting ‘not the silk.’ I thought he was obsessing over a dress.”

She poked him in the chest. A light mist had rolled up from the Thames, allowing the streetlight to throw a halo around them. She looked up into his face. Her eyes grew misty and she raised her hand gently toward his face.

“You know ...” she paused. She let out a sad sigh and turned away. “Let’s go.”

The two figures wandered side by side along the Thames. One staggered, shouting randomly at the ducks. The red glow of fires and the accompanying smoke rose from the crash zone on the other side of the great river. The view hit Tracy hard and she turned in toward the city center. The blocks slowly drifted past and she allowed herself the indulgence of sentimentality.

“Chambers?”

“Yes?”

“Oh, good. You’re still here. You know, you’ve been everywhere I’ve been over the last days.”

“Not everywhere.”

She snorted and held her hand over her mouth. “You weren’t in my bed.” She let out a laugh. “That sounded a bit rude, didn’t it? Shh, don’t tell anyone. It could be embarrassing. For me.”

She took a few more steps. “You’ve been everywhere important. Where are we?” She spun around, using a streetlight as support.

“Mayfair.”

“Oh my.” She pulled out her phone and opened the maps app. She squinted as she zoomed in. “It seems all blurry for some reason. Gosh. We’re close. Follow me.”

She staggered off down a series of small alleyways until she emerged on one of the upmarket residential streets. She walked along quietly, counting the houses in her head until she stopped in front of one. She ran her hand over the old brickwork, tracing the brass number screwed into the wall.

“I grew up in this house,” she said eventually. Her voice dripped with melancholia.

“In Mayfair? What did your family do?”

“My mother did nothing, because she was dead.” She waved her hand in a definitive slash. “And my father ...” She sighed. “My father was ex-military, honorable discharge. He was injured fighting insurgents in the Middle East. He hated being retired. Well, he hated everything.” She lowered her head. “Hated being wounded. Hated other people having fun. Hated wayward teenagers sneaking out at night. Hated when his commands were not carried out instantly. Hated less than A-plus results. Hated hugging. Hated saying, ‘Well done.’ Hated, hated, hated, until he ...”

She turned to face Chambers with tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry for you.” He patted her shoulder. She leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder. He hugged her awkwardly.

She stared blankly at the old building. “He drank a lot. Sometimes it wasn’t pleasant. Mother died when I was thirteen. I had five years of hell while I finished school then I left. It’s better if you let some memories go and move on. Then he got cancer, and I was pulled back into the place like it was some horrible ... horror movie. For two years I looked after him while he died in front of me.”

“That’s sad.”

“See that window?” She pointed up to the top-left window. “When he died and I came back to the empty house for the first time, I sat on the bed and looked out that window and cried until there was nothing left.” She looked up at the dark window.

“And you haven’t let go yet.”

She ran her hand along the brickwork of the Victorian fence. “I’m trying.”

“Yes. Very.”

She punched him on the shoulder.

He stared back at her, unmoving. “Considering your size, that was quite hard.”

“I train a lot. It keeps my friends entertained.”

“You have friends?”

Tracey smiled. “I have heaps.”

“Really?”

“No.” She sighed. “I seem to have a”—she tried to touch the tips of her index fingers together—“connection issue.” She burst into tears. “It all seems so lonely. What’s the point of it all? No friends. No family. I thought if I could have a family of my own it could make up for what I missed out on. But I couldn’t even do that right.”

She held him, reaching out for comfort. She could feel his muscles beneath the clothing, solid and shielding. Arms to be safe in. She closed her eyes and drifted off into fantasy.

“I’d better get you back to Rod,” Reggie whispered.

“Hmm, Rod who?”

“Your partner.”

“Yes, Rod.” She sighed dreamily, and then her eyes snapped open. “Rod! Oh my god. What am I doing? What are you doing?”

“Don’t panic. I’m not doing anything. Nothing has happened.”

“This is completely your fault.” She stepped away from him and gave him a look of horror.

“It would be if something had happened.”

“Just leave me alone,” she cried. She turned and ran off down the street.

Reggie picked up some of Cally's uneaten breakfast. It was military hospital food so it was bleak, but it was still better than the kebab he had had the previous night. He took out his phone, but his call went through to voicemail. He sent a text instead: *Cally is awake. Come quick.*

An hour later Tracy cautiously glanced in through the door. A young Indian doctor was in the room, holding a small silver box that clicked frequently. He glanced over at her and continued writing down his readings.

Reggie was looking at the TV monitor. Without looking over, he said, "It's just me here. You can take off your sunglasses. And unbuckle the belt around that ridiculously large trench coat. Possibly fold down your collar and remove the black hat. You're not hiding from someone or planning on joining *Spy vs Spy*."

"I'm feeling delicate. I've brought you something." Her voice was dry and raspy. Sheepishly, she brought out a small, cardboard coffee container from behind her back. There were two cups, a standard one, and another four times larger. She handed the small one to Reggie.

"I didn't know they made coffee in that size," he said. "One should see you right for the week."

"One? This is my third."

"You've had three in the last hour?"

"I ... the last two days have been difficult. The chief gave me a blast this morning over some beat-up accusation about trouble I supposedly caused at Candle Fire."

The doctor wheeled around and quickly left. She removed her sunglasses just as he bumped past her. A moment later something in his demeanor triggered a memory. She ran out into the corridor. It was still full of medical staff and the deceased. He was gone. She sighed and returned to the room.

"All okay?"

"Yeah, I thought I ... that doctor who was just here reminded me of someone I met in the crash zone who wasn't a doctor."

"Who or what is Candle Fire?" Reggie said.

"It's a little complex. I have a feeling Candle Fire is wrapped up in this somehow. Actually," she said, looking in the direction of the door, "more than a feeling. I found the electromagnetic weapon, and it had markings on it that could link it to them. Anyway, you said Cally was awake."

"Uh, yeah, he was for a short time."

"What did he say?"

“He cried a lot, as you would expect from a child who’s suddenly lost his parents. Then he said sorry.”

“What was he apologizing for?” Tracy raised her eyebrow.

“He wasn’t. He was sorry for us.”

“I might need another one of these mega-grandes. I’m not understanding much about today.”

“He mumbled about something being ripped, and that was pretty much it. He watched some CBBC for about three seconds and fell asleep. But at least he’s sleeping now, rather than being in a coma.”

They both stared down at the boy.

“How was Rod?” Reggie asked. He glanced at her.

“Eh? Oh. Look, about last night. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ... I hadn’t slept for two days and it’s been exhausting and I don’t normally ... Emotions were a bit ... He wasn’t too happy, but he forgave me and we’ll work it out.”

“He forgave you? For what? You didn’t do anything to be forgiven for.”

“It’s complicated at the moment. We’re meant to be doing things that need a lot of planning, and me being reckless doesn’t help. Can we talk about something else, please?”

“So you want children.”

She let out a groan. “Rod wants children, and if we’re going to work as a couple we should respect each other’s choices and ambitions. Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I didn’t know we’d time traveled back to the fifties. Surely it should be a joint agreement, especially when it comes to kids.”

“We are traditional, and it is. We both want this.”

“You’re fooling no one but yourself. And you’re further away from traditional than anyone else I’ve ever met.”

“Well, have you ever wanted children?”

“I think there’ll be a time, and I expect it won’t be expected, that the decision will be made on my behalf.” He gave her a smile, but there was no response. “I didn’t have a family, so I think I’ll enjoy the experience,” he added.

“Decision made on my behalf,” she muttered. “You don’t know how difficult it can be.”

“Then I think you’re missing the point.”

“Oh no!”

Cally’s voice startled the two adults. He was awake and pointing at the TV monitor. The screen showed a plane from a major international airline crashing into the heart of Manhattan.

And then all the planes fell out of the sky.