

SPECIALS

Five ordinary people whose commitment
makes them extraordinary



THE
COMPLETE
NOVELS

Based on the BBC TV drama series

Brian Degas and Harry Robertson

Brian Degas
Harry Robertson
Specials: Based on the BBC
TV Drama Series: The
complete novels in one volume

Аннотация

This novel, based on the groundbreaking BBC TV drama series, shows how it takes both guts and a sense of humour to become a part-time policeman. It was adapted by the series' creators from all twelve episodes, four of which are published here for the first time. 'You'll learn what it's like out there in the streets, and we'll learn whether you're competent to wear the uniform.' From nine to five, they are like the rest of us. Come the twilight, they don the blue uniform with pride, and volunteer their spare time to share the night vigil of the Bobby on the beat. BOB LOACH, a partner in a coach tour business, is 'all grease and few graces', with an ambition to be the first millionaire Special. ANJALI SHA is an NHS physiotherapist who treads the minefield of conflicting traditions: 'My family think it's a bad business for a well brought-up Hindu girl to prowl the streets at night with a man.' JOHN REDWOOD is a solicitor with an unshakable belief in the decency of his fellow-man. VIV SMITH is a young bank clerk: 'It might come as a surprise to you, Sarge, but not all women come with a built-in maternal

expertise of how to deal with kids.’ And FREDDY CALDER, an overweight salesman of ladies’ lingerie, conceals a shy and sentimental heart under a brash exterior. Five ordinary people whose commitment makes them extraordinary.

Содержание

SPECIALS	6
BRIAN DEGAS	7
HARRY ROBERTSON	8
Copyright	9
I	17
1	18
2	24
3	32
4	40
5	47
6	52
7	55
8	61
9	65
10	73
11	75
12	81
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	86

SPECIALS
THE COMPLETE NOVELS

Created, written and produced by

BRIAN DEGAS

&

HARRY ROBERTSON



COLLINS
CRIME
CLUB

Copyright



COLLINS CRIME CLUB

an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

*Specials: Have a Nice Parade and Specials: Ask 'Em, Tell 'Em,
Lift 'Em*

first published in Great Britain by Fontana 1991

Specials: Over and Out first published in this volume 2017

Copyright © Brian Degas and Harry Robertson 1991, 2017

Cover layout design © HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd 2017

Brian Degas and Harry Robertson assert the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue copy of this book is available from the British Library.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters

and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins.

Source ISBN: 9780008260590

Ebook Edition © November 2017 ISBN: 9780008260606

Version: 2017-09-07

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Part I: Have a Nice Parade](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Part II: Ask 'em, Tell 'em, Lift 'em](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Part III: Over and Out](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

I

•••••

Have a Nice Parade

1

He barely noticed the car on his tail, holding just behind and to the right, where it shouldn't be. Yet somehow he could sense the danger lurking over his shoulder.

Unfortunately, as he made his way along the freeway into Birmingham, Special Constable Freddy Calder's conscious mind was elsewhere. In fact, he was on the car-phone.

'Hi, John. Look here, I'll be with you in ...'

Raising his wrist with a snap, almost a salute, Freddy checked his Rolex – actually, an imitation Rolex, but at a quick glance no one was ever the wiser.

'... twenty minutes. And, old chum, what I have to show you is *sensational*.'

His gaze momentarily shifted to the sample case lying on the passenger seat, open just enough to offer a tantalizing glimpse of lingerie, a pair of sheer lace panties to be exact. Freddy's talent was to imagine just how they would look on virtually anyone he knew, or thought he knew, or even conceived in his waking dreams of knowing. Of course, lying on the back seat was his model, 'Salvador Dolly', a curvaceous cut-out figure of an ideal woman wearing only her underwear every hour of the day.

'Listen, this latest stuff's so light you better hold on tight to your secretary when she wears them.'

They shared a low, lascivious laugh reserved for men talking

about women. Whenever he sensed a customer had the same thoughts in mind, Freddy would start counting his money.

Accidentally and simultaneously, his car veered into the right lane, although he made a swift correction in steering with a slight move of his finger. It was then that he noticed the car on his tail: a maroon Audi, a 'mean machine'. Suddenly he was alert, but gave no outward or visible sign of alarm.

'Well, 'course in that case she's travelling as light as she can get. Yeah. Fantasy Island ... Don't we all! See you.'

Before he could put away the car-phone and look back to his wing mirror, he heard a Luftwaffe motor roaring behind him. Getting louder, the Audi pulled in parallel with him, then swerved toward him and back, as if testing his mettle, before finally surging ahead full throttle.

Freddy cursed. The fool in the mean machine didn't realize whom he was fooling with. Never cross Freddy Calder.

The chase was on. Guarding his intent – Freddy didn't want the fool to know it yet – he tucked his blue Sierra neatly in behind the Audi and started a little tailing of his own. His Sierra provided the ultimate camouflage: not new, perhaps, but trim, tidy, respectable, bright as a button, polished by a lingerie salesman's loving hands and totally inconspicuous in ordinary traffic.

Freddy reached for the car-phone and punched the number for Divisional Headquarters 'S' while keeping his aim fixed on the Audi ahead. Moment by moment, the solitary suspect appeared

to be accelerating, forcing the pace, maybe trying to shake his tail.

Nevertheless Freddy Calder was on the case. His mood had changed with his identity: now he was a secret agent of the law – a Special – trailing someone in a hurry.

‘Put me through to Sheila Baxter in Control, would you, Bill? Yeah, it’s Freddy Calder here.’

There was no reason to assume that the response would be immediate, efficient or professionally respectful. Nor was it.

‘Fred-dy Cal-der ... Sure I’ll hold, but this is important.’

Damn the bureaucratic mind. It was this kind of red tape, he reflected, that had delayed Napoleon’s conquest of Russia, which would have been better for everyone concerned, as history had demonstrated ...

Meanwhile, the Sirens were beckoning Odysseus, not only from his sample case stuffed with intimate and racy unmentionables but also from his anticipation of official sirens heralding the imminent arrival of the everyday police. And what would they think of Dolly?

Should he cover them in some way? Hide them? Absolutely not, for that was the secret of his disguise: a ‘Special’ in ladies’ underwear. Who would think to look at *him*? The fool in the Audi wouldn’t know what had hit him until it was too late. Freddy might appear to the casual eye to be pudgy and unimpressive, but underneath was a lion ready to pounce. When fists were flying, Freddy Calder would be the gent you’d want in there as a back-

up. Many a fool had learned that lesson the hard way.

Meanwhile, at Division ‘S’ headquarters, WPC Sheila Baxter was manning the control room – and that wasn’t the only contradiction in terms. In truth, the awesome-sounding ‘control room’ constituted four walls, no windows and no room whatsoever to manoeuvre. The sole generous proportion in this room was a desk too large, and the only semblance of control, computer terminals and the usual communication gear.

But it wasn’t home, and that’s what Sheila liked best about the place. She wanted to stay and keep this job, so she had to exercise a Job-like patience with some of the Specials.

‘Freddy Calder, how many times do I have to tell you? Don’t call on this line.’

In an attempt to win her sympathy, he told her that he ‘couldn’t get through by the proper channels,’ and he had a hot item that couldn’t wait.

‘What? What car? Listen, Freddy, unless it’s dropping gold bricks I’m not interested ... Well, for one thing, you’re not on duty. For another, I’m not supposed to give that kind of information to a Special. You know that.’

Perhaps he did, yet what difference should that make now, when pursuit was in progress through traffic becoming thicker as the city grew closer?

‘Sheila, believe me. I got a tingle in my nose about this one. The number is ... Ready?’

WPC Baxter grabbed her notebook. ‘Just a second, give me

that again.’

While entering the numbers into the computer terminal, she failed to observe the entering of Darth Vader – Police Sergeant Andy McAllister – behind her, looming above like a misery-seeking missile. Just as she realized his sinister presence, she also discovered something of an obstacle on the computer screen.

‘Freddy! Blow your nose. You’re tailing an unmarked police car, you wally!’

With that little piece of information, Freddy squeezed down on the brake and slowed considerably, while the idiot woman driver behind him pulled out and around with a screaming blast of the horn, although he and his brave Cortina did manage to escape intact.

Suddenly there was another vicious burst of noise from the car-phone Freddy was just putting to his ear.

‘Calder! This is Sergeant McAllister.’

Trying to keep his grip, McAllister held the phone – which he had abruptly acquired from WPC Baxter at the instant he resumed command – like a club.

‘Calder, you may think you’re a bloody Miami Vice, but I’ve news for you. You’re a *Special*, and that puts you lower than the lowest PC still in his nappies. And right now you’re a damned nuisance. In future, leave highway duty to those who know what they’re doing.’

The line went dead, and Freddy blinked hard. That’s the thanks you get for risking your life, he thought to himself, still

unable to calm his trembling fingers ... and as a *volunteer* yet!
Bunch of bloody desk jockeys.

‘Damned Hobby Bobby!’ McAllister muttered at no one in particular, although scared rabbit Baxter was at least ostensibly paying attention to his every word.

‘Pretend police, who don’t take their function at all seriously ... who sell brassieres! This is no place for a clown.’

As far as McAllister was concerned it was enough to bring the entire Specials programme into question.

‘Who’s his senior Special?’

‘His SDO is Barker ...’ replied Baxter.

An easy name for her to remember, McAllister mused.

‘... but he’s not been putting in much of an appearance lately, and things are being handled by the section officer, Bob Loach.’

I must have a quiet chat with Loach then, thought McAllister with a smile.

2

Cougar Coaches was busy in the late afternoon, hosting the methodical movement of vehicles being driven in and out of the garage. Prominently parked in the yard area reserved for the staff were the infamous Loach-mobiles, Bob's white Jag next to Noreen's Renault 25: hardly a matched pair.

Inside the garage were several buses of varying size and capacity, a few still waiting for repair or some adjustment: the mechanics were clocking off for the day. Unable to stop fussing over a particularly stubborn exhaust-system problem grounding one of the coaches for the last couple of days, works foreman John Barraclough was finishing the job himself. He had advised the frustrated young mechanic he could push off home after informing at least one of the Loaches as to the current status of and prognosis for the obstinate exhaust system.

In one corner of the garage, in the office constructed of white-painted breeze blocks, Noreen Loach was feeling trapped while trying to get somewhere: trying to leave a bit early so she could get to her appointment at the beauty parlour. There was always too much 'getting' to do.

She had tidied her desk until it was a model of efficient organization, and made her final tour of the kitchen, wash-up and lavatory in the annexe. Now all that remained to obstruct her was her husband, as usual.

‘I’m off, then. I’ll tidy up the Edinburgh entries tomorrow. It looks as though we did well on that one.’ – While she practised her nonchalant tone of voice at every opportunity, in her own mind she realized full well that it convinced nobody, again with the possible exception of her husband, the one hope she clung to in the present circumstances.

‘Oh aye.’

Another response typical of his ever-so-revealing remarks, she reminded herself.

‘Yes. Anyway, I’m late for my appointment.’ Before he could interrupt, she kept right on going, moving to the door one step at a time. ‘Can I trust you to call them up and say I’m on my way?’

‘Call who?’

Whatever her wishful thinking about making a quick exit, two words from him could dash such notions in an instant.

‘Judy’s Beauty Salon. And no cracks, Loach. I don’t have time for cracks.’

‘I was only going to ask, Noreen, how long you’d be there.’

Immediately she was defensive. ‘What for? I don’t have time to bother about your tea, if that’s what you’re asking.’

Obviously that was not what he was asking. What was she keeping to herself this time, he wondered.

‘I can grab a sandwich. It won’t be the first time.’

Apparently his gesture of self-sufficiency had tipped her over the edge.

‘I’m off,’ she shrugged, swinging her leather bag over her

shoulder in a huff and throwing him a warning glance. 'I can't stand it when you use that little-boy-lost voice.'

After waiting another few moments to assure himself she was definitely gone, he lifted himself from the chair, straightened his shoulders and assumed an altogether different frame of mind on his way to the back room.

When he emerged with his freshly cleaned and pressed uniform, he was a new man. Carefully he stripped away the long plastic dry-cleaner bag, and there it was: the armour of a peaceful people, a dignified suit of mere cloth, yet signifying to every citizen of the realm that this man, Robert Loach, was a Special, section-officer grade.

Inhaling a deep breath to expand his chest, he held the smart uniform up against himself as a mannequin, looked in the tiny wall mirror Noreen used to patch up her powder and picked imaginary specks of foreign matter and even a few filaments of nearly invisible dust already beginning to float on to the stiff collar.

That was when the door behind him opened, the moment Noreen had chosen for her curtain call.

'Forgot my keys.'

With as much diplomacy, aplomb and deception as he could muster at this moment, he backed away from the mirror as inconspicuously as possible while swiftly shifting his scrutiny to the illusory minutiae on the collar of his uniform.

Noreen went straight to her desk to fetch the keys, without

taking much notice of her husband caught preening himself in her mirror.

‘Did you make the call?’

‘I will. Give me a chance.’

‘I did that once and ended up marrying you.’

‘Very funny,’ he said.

On her way out again, she almost bumped into John Barraclough on his way in, holding up his oily black hands in front of her face, thus barring her path with a crude display of the vulgar side of his occupation. As she always remembered at such inopportune incidents, it was also her husband’s calling.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Loach. Didn’t like knocking on the door. Not with these.’

To impress his blunt point upon her even further, Barraclough extended his hands closer to her eyes so that she might focus on the grease slicking down the hair on his knuckles.

‘That’s all right. See you tomorrow, Mr Barraclough.’

He nodded politely, still with his dripping hands held up to his face. She managed what she hoped would pass for a tolerant smile and closed the door behind her.

Barraclough walked over to Bob Loach, keeping his hands away from the uniform and away from anything else wherever possible. With an eyebrow instead of words, Loach asked him what he wanted.

‘Sorry ’bout this, Mr Loach, but could you have a look at the Daf?’

‘Can’t it wait, John? I’m ...’

He tried to indicate what he meant to say by showing his uniform, almost like a grandparent cradling a new baby.

‘... all set, you see.’

John’s response was also wordless, but Loach could easily discern the meaning from his anxious face.

‘All right, let’s see it.’

Gently putting his uniform aside, Loach retrieved and pulled on a pair of overalls. There was no loss of pride and self-respect when he switched uniforms, at least that’s what he kept telling himself.

While lying on his back on a pallet under the Daf coach in the garage, Loach could hear the BMW of his partner, Dicky Padgett, howl into the yard and squeak to a halt just in time to avoid crashing into the garage itself. Sure enough, nary half a minute passed before Dicky’s polished Italian shoe was tapping the sole of Loach’s boot, which, unfortunately, was sticking out from under the coach.

In addition, there was another set of legs next to Dicky’s – shapely, stockings calves.

‘Mr P-Padgett.’

‘John. This is Michelle.’

Loach instantly determined that he had better get up and take a look for himself. It was well worth the trip: a flaming redhead, all leg and bosom (and more than abundant in that department).

Loach tried to concentrate his attention on Barraclough.

‘I think somebody’s botched the welding. That exhaust system’ll need another go.’

When Loach turned to the happy couple, Dicky suddenly adopted an aspect of mock horror.

‘No wonder our profit margin is small, Bob, if we do the same job twice.’

His next wisecrack Dicky addressed to the graciously smiling redhead.

‘And he tells me he wants to be the first millionaire Special,’ Dicky muttered into Michelle’s ear, an irony palpably lost on her, as she struggled to make some sense of what he was saying.

Dicky must have sensed her questioning mind.

‘A Special? You know, part-time bluebottle. He plays policeman in his time off.’

Sadly, Dicky’s remarks did not seem to be making their way past Michelle’s heavy dangling earrings. So she decided to play with them, perhaps in some attempt to realign her vibrations.

‘Ullo, Dicky,’ Loach offered.

Dicky acknowledged Loach’s presence without further ado.

‘You got my call about the Stratford job?’

Loach answered with a nod. An unsettling irritability stirred his middle as he strode across to the office.

‘Americans and Japs. Good money. And in the bin up front, Bobby boy.’

That was evidently going to be another exhibition of the genius for business that supposedly convinced Loach, long ago, to enter

into partnership with Dicky Padgett.

‘This is Michelle, by the way.’ Again he turned to confide in her. ‘Bob Loach. My partner. The one who gets his hands dirty.’

He emitted a dry laugh, then winked at Loach.

‘Lucky I met up with her.’

‘Oh, aye?’

‘Damn right,’ Dicky asserted. ‘The Stratford run will leave us short-handed. Unless we ask the joyous Noreen to step in and do the courier job. And I remember how nasty that was the last time ...’ Dicky’s voice trailed away.

Loach was dumbfounded, although he tried to conceal it. ‘You can’t be serious? Her as a courier?’

‘Watch it, Bob,’ Dicky smirked. ‘Equal opportunities. Sexist remarks. Ooh ...’

Getting no glint of a smile from Loach, Dicky sucked in his breath, then proceeded in a somewhat more serious vein. ‘All right. Humour me. I think she can do it. Tourists like a bit of glamour.’

By jove, he *was* serious. Loach had to take him aside.

‘Dicky, it’s Noreen’s job to fix the couriers. She’ll take one look at this one’s knockers, and –’

‘Bob, let’s not forget who put this deal together in the first place, okay?’

End of discussion. Loach could sense that time was running out on this issue.

‘Right now I don’t have the time to discuss it. I’m late as it is

for duty.’

With deliberate speed, he gathered his uniform in one motion as he walked out of the office. Even so he couldn’t fail to hear Dicky calling after him.

‘Since when did playing policeman come before Company business?’

What he did *not* hear was the next remark Dicky Padgett made. By then Loach was long gone and well beyond earshot.

‘If you’re not going to be around, Bobby boy, then some of us will have to start making the executive decisions.’

3

Special Constable Anjali Shah waited at the bus stop thinking there was nothing in particular about her appearance to suggest to other bystanders that they should be wary of a part-time member of a police organization in their midst.

Although she was always proud to identify herself as first-generation English, in many ways she still found herself uncomfortably in the middle of contrary and changing cultural influences, often self-conscious of the position she was taking in any group situation. She also considered herself a feminist, so she really couldn't rationalize standing meekly at the rear of a group of strangers waiting for a bus. Paradoxically, she also had to wage a continuing internal struggle against ancient traditions urging her not to stand near the front of the group, and, especially as a woman, and most certainly as a woman alone and unaccompanied by a gentleman, not to be 'much too conspicuous', as Uncle Ram would say.

Standing in front of her were two women of her age who were indeed conspicuous and none too timid about asserting their presence, a couple of Sharons, their hair teased into clouds and their names surely immortalized on the sun visors of cars driven by their Kevins. While in some sense Anjali could envy the bold, even brave disguise they adopted to face a world crowded with anxieties, nevertheless she could never assume that disguise for

herself.

Suddenly she recognized someone familiar – her section officer, Bob Loach – sailing by the bus stop in his fancy Jag. Impulsively she waved at him, a gesture perhaps uncharacteristic of the woman she imagined other people saw her to be.

Against all odds, Bob Loach saw her wave, and although he had overshot the mark, the Jag quickly slowed to a stop. Then he turned and waved back to Anjali, motioning for her to join him for the ride to Division ‘S’ headquarters.

The Sharons standing in front of her simultaneously got the same message, misinterpreting Loach’s wave and come-on as intended for them. The short one even had the nerve to return Loach’s wave. The two exchanged glances, half-seriously asking ‘What d’you think?’

Before they could decide among themselves, Anjali had run and jumped into the Jaguar. She wasn’t out of hearing range when the short one remarked loudly, ‘What a tart!’

Anjali had to laugh but she couldn’t quite convince herself to explain what she was laughing about to her section officer. He might see her as a bit silly but neither he nor anyone else would have any grounds to think of her as a tart. Yet she wasn’t positive that someone else, indeed a man who had waved at her from afar and picked her up in his handsome carriage, would laugh at the misunderstanding. So she smiled and kept the story to herself.

In turn, Bob Loach didn’t seem very forthcoming either: he appeared to mirror her distant attitude. He was friendly, and

made some attempt to offer polite conversation, but still he was reserved. Perhaps that was proper for a man in his position – as well as for an unmarried woman in hers.

Maybe that was one of the reasons Anjali looked up to Robert Loach. He was sympathetic to the concerns of the individuals under his command and was certainly thought to be ‘one of us’. Nonetheless, he clearly took his responsibilities seriously. Anjali decided he was more in tune with his role than she was with hers, at least in terms of what she could discern from his outward behaviour. His strength of character made him attractive to any woman, and Anjali was not unaware of her own desires and secret fantasies stimulated by a mature, older man who personified qualities she admired.

Later in the parade room for Specials at the Division ‘S’ station, Anjali and Section Officer Loach were looking smart in their neat, crisp uniforms, and she felt more comfortable with their defined roles. Yes, he was a section officer, but Anjali Shah could hold her head just as high: she too was a Special in her own right.

Of about a dozen Specials in the parade room, their ages varying from early twenties to mid-forties, one in four were women. Anjali felt honoured to be one of them.

The section officer cleared his throat, and she knew the meeting was about to come to order.

After reviewing the roster of duties on his clipboard and the faces of the Specials present, Section Officer Loach barked ‘All

right, settle down, troops.’ It was time to move along, take parade and get the show on the road.

‘I know you’ve heard it all before, but I want you to remember three things when you’re out on the street ...’

He paused for effect.

‘... Respect ... respect ... and respect.’

Loach once again noticed eyeballs rolling skyward and wished that perhaps the Lord High Executioner would authorize him to order their heads to roll instead.

‘Yeah, I know it’s boring. But watch out when you turn the next corner. All hell could break loose, and you’d better be ready for it.’

He prayed, as he did every single time, that each of them would take his words to heart and return home safe and sound. However, before he could deliver the climax of his address, the door opened and Police Sergeant Andrew McAllister popped his head into the breach. Raising a quizzical eyebrow in Loach’s direction, McAllister curled his finger, beckoning the section officer to him.

Loach held up his hand to signal a pause in the parade ceremony, then joined Sergeant McAllister at the door.

‘Before you get started ... a wee word in your lug, Section Officer Loach.’

Knowing how rarely McAllister assumed that tone of voice, Loach did not relish the anticipation of the nails being driven into his coffin.

‘While we both know in what high esteem the Specials are held by the regular force, it would seem that some Specials hold themselves in even higher esteem.’

What was McAllister trying to say?

‘I am, of course, referring to Special Constable Freddy Calder. He seems to see himself as Captain Marvel of the Flying Squad.’

Oh-oh, what was it this time?

‘While we appreciate enthusiasm, Loach, Mister Calder is exactly *that* when off-duty: *Mister* Calder.’

Freddy had probably arrested Princess Di for showing disrespect for the royal family.

‘I trust you’ll see that my words are inserted in the correct earhole. Over and out. And have a nice parade.’

And with that the sergeant left Cheshire-cat like, the vision of his teeth still hanging in the air.

Loach made a conscious effort to lift his eyes for action, as he returned to his place in front of the Specials. At the same time, he tried not to look into the eyes of the woman he had picked up at the bus stop and given a ride to only moments ago.

‘Okay. Where were we? Ah, right. Special Constable Anjali Shah?’

When he did look at her he was pleased to see that she was alert and responsive. In that instant he was reminded that Special Constable Shah generally demonstrated ‘the right stuff’ for the job, even though she was by no means a powerhouse in the physical sense.

‘Anjali, you’re on car patrol in the panda with PC Toby Armstrong. Okay?’

She nodded, no questions; but one of the wits in the room couldn’t leave well enough alone.

‘Cushy number.’

There was general laughter. Loach tried to ignore the minirabble.

‘Special Constable Viv Smith?’

When he looked up Viv Smith was applying some blush to her cheeks, but she indicated that at least she was listening. The next one wouldn’t be so easy, and he made sure his voice carried the menace of impending doom.

‘... And Special Constable Freddy Calder.’

Again the resident wit struck a blow for cynicism.

‘Batman and Robin!’

Yet he wasn’t quick-witted enough to escape Viv Smith clouting him with a graceful swinging arc of her shoulder bag.

Loach immediately forget about that nonsense when he realized Freddy Calder was nowhere in sight.

‘Flippin’ ’eck, where’s Freddy?’

Another wit took his turn. ‘Trying to get away from his mother.’

Loach could barely contain his irritation. ‘That’ll do. That’s out of order.’

At that inopportune moment, Loach heard the door open behind him, and when he turned to confront the interruption, a

little furry fox hand-puppet poked his nose in and spoke to the assembled Specials in a squeaky little voice with a distinct though amateurish American accent.

‘Foxy’s real sorry for being late, but there was this babe in a miniskirt.’

Freddy Calder had at last arrived. Loach was sorely tempted to strangle Foxy and break Freddy’s fingers.

‘Hey! Feel my whiskers. Are they burning, or are they burning?’

The hand-puppet entered the parade room, followed by a similarly red-faced Freddy Calder. His embarrassment didn’t excuse his crime. It was time for a firmly administered example of keel-hauling.

‘Sorry, sorry, sorry.’ Sprinkling his apologies here and there, Freddy must have noticed that Loach was not amused. ‘Really sorry, Bob.’

Freddy hurriedly joined Viv Smith, tossing her a Benny Hill grin. Loach’s glare wiped the smile off Freddy’s face.

‘Be serious, Freddy, for once. D’you know that Sergeant McAllister has just been melting the wax in my ears? You been chasing stolen cars again?’

That random probe apparently struck a nerve, as Special Constable Calder could no longer hide the guilt on his face.

Loach tried to go easy on him, out of a basic respect for someone like Freddy who had, after all, volunteered his services to become a Special, just as he and the others had.

‘I know you don’t miss much, but it doesn’t help to antagonize the police.’

Loach shook his head. It was no use. For all of Freddy Calder’s talents, as well as quirks, advice to him on diplomacy would always fall on deaf ears.

4

Constable Toby Armstrong was walking his partner, Anjali Shah, to the black-and-white panda they shared while out lurking through the jungles of Birmingham and local environs looking for trouble. Tonight they might find it simply by sitting in the panda and going nowhere. While talking about his wife, Toby was, for the time being anyway, happy to be happily married, or else he might be vulnerable to the temptations of this dark angel.

‘She’s pregnant.’

Anjali’s eyes widened. ‘Shirley?’

‘Who else?’

Anjali instinctively took Toby’s hand and squeezed it in hers.

‘Congratulations, Toby.’

As an afterthought, she did some mental arithmetic before coming to the logical conclusion about the nearly newlyweds and their first offspring now in gestation.

‘It’s a honeymoon baby!’

That must have been the correct answer, as it provoked a robust laugh from Toby that he didn’t explain until they were settled in the panda with their safety belts fastened.

‘Don’t mention the word “honeymoon,”’ he sighed, shaking his head in bittersweet reverie. ‘We stayed in this hotel down in the West Country ...’

Her blank expression suggested to him that she might not have

the faintest notion of the particular nuances and idiosyncrasies found in that region of the realm, so he took a step backward before proceeding.

‘You know? The ones that say they’ve a lot of character. Where some King Johnny spent the night.’ It was too late in the story to stop again and explain. ‘I reckon we had the same bed *he* did,’ implying its age. ‘It was gross. Like that –’

Through the air he made a deep scooping arc with his hand, illustrating the shape of the sacrificial honeymoon altar upon which he had probably developed permanent curvature of the spine.

‘– with squeaky bed springs.’

He had to chuckle in spite of himself.

‘If you’re right, and it is a honeymoon baby, I reckon we ought to call him Shakin’ Stevens!’

Momentarily a question flashed across his mind as to whether Anjali might consider his remark ‘not in the best of taste’, as she would carefully say. He hoped so. At least she might provide an occasion for some innocent flirtation. After all, his safety belt was in place: he was a happily married old man.

Because Freddy Calder was the last one in and, as per usual, the last one out, Viv Smith virtually had to lead him by the hand through the front entrance of Division ‘S’ in order to have any chance of getting some work done before it was time to go home again. Putting it mildly, this little-big lad could be absolutely maddening.

Nonetheless, Viv was flattered to be assigned the responsibility of babysitting the problem child of the bunch. That alone proved Loach had confidence in her: a single, smashing, hip young bird in charge of Freddy – Super Sleuth.

She decided she might as well take advantage of her plight this evening, and perhaps exploit the genuine gullibility of her intended victim, by rehearsing her latest sales scheme on poor Freddy, as she used to rehearse the lead in her school play.

‘You know something, Freddy? I’ve come to the conclusion that money is a very interesting thing.’

‘I’ll say.’

Brilliant repartee.

‘No, give over. I mean it.’ The time had arrived to establish credibility by making oblique reference to her regular position as a Teller in Accountancy.

‘Since working at the Building Society, I’ve learned a few things. You know, like stocks and shares?’

It was a bizarre possibility, but maybe he *didn’t* know.

‘Surely you’ve thought about that, Freddy? At your age?’

‘No,’ he scowled. ‘And less of the “at my age.”’

Such a sensitive dinosaur, though.

‘But you should. You won’t get very far pushing your fingers up a puppet ...’

Maybe there was a better phrase she might have turned there, and she quickly checked his eyes for any sign of awareness or intelligence for that matter, none of which could be detected in

the subdued light.

‘... But if you do it right, you can make a quick killing on the market.’

‘By going out and cutting my throat, you mean,’ answered Freddy.

Viv wondered if that might be a better plan than hers.

Through her side of the windscreen in the panda, Anjali Shah watched Special Constable Viv Smith and Freddy Calder passing by. Apparently concentrating on his driving, Toby wasn’t talkative at the moment, so Anjali had a moment’s respite. She was lost in her own thoughts of being close to and yet far from her family, from the frictions as well as the comforts of home ...

‘Not feeling broody, are you?’ Toby interrupted her wanderings.

‘I need a husband first.’ Now why did she let that slip, even as a joke?

‘Well, then?’ Toby asked slyly, sneaking a quick look to gauge her reaction.

Now that the subject was out in the open, so to speak, better to approach it lightly.

‘Don’t you start. It’s like a broken record back home.’ She almost broke out laughing, remembering her mother’s constant scolding. ‘My Ma thinks I’ve missed the boat, and Uncle Ram keeps telling me no one will marry an old bat like me.’

Actually, although she challenged and generally opposed everything Uncle Ram said, on principle, she was often secretly

inclined to agree with him on this unsettling topic. Not that she would admit that to Uncle Ram, or to Toby.

But again Toby interrupted her train of thought in a lower tone of voice.

‘From where I’m sitting, I see a pretty attractive bird.’

Anjali instinctively lowered her eyes, then immediately wished she hadn’t.

‘Thank you, kind sir.’

‘A bit tanned, maybe, but ...’

She winced slightly, trying to let his remark slide by, to erase it from her memory. She knew his gesture was merely intended to defuse the age-old timebomb between their cultures rather than spark it off with a casual insult, so again she kept her thoughts to herself, allowing Toby to continue.

‘... not bad, not bad at all.’

Indeed, he *was* trying to give her a compliment, and she could see that it was sincere, although she wasn’t quite sure what to think about the new direction their conversation was taking. Just as quickly she banished her doubts, reasoning that there was nothing wrong in modestly accepting reassurance from a friend.

‘You’re good for my morale, Toby.’

She wished that that was the end of it, but Toby didn’t give her a second to change the subject.

‘Listen, you may not believe this,’ he began in his slow, smooth, baritone voice, ‘but I can remember the first time we met.’

The alarm went off somewhere in the back of her brain. Simply turning and raising her eyebrows was enough to question his intentions.

‘I’m serious. I remember the day and the time, and what you were wearing.’ He tossed a Prince Charming smile her way before resuming his scrutiny of the car ahead.

For the first time in their conversation, Anjali was embarrassed. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. In her way, she did love Toby, but she could not possibly love him in his way, and she would rather her ears be made of stone before listening to him continue any further along this path ...

And yet she could barely wait for his next words.

‘You were wearing ...’ Must he delay the suspense interminably? ‘... a white shirt, black skirt, a check tie and jacket with silver buttons,’ he intoned lovingly.

She punched him in the arm. It had taken her that long to catch on that Toby was describing her uniform.

After investing her time and expertise in ‘building a foundation’ for the financial advisory role with Freddy Calder, Viv was unwilling to give up her chance of gaining his confidence, and eventually the management of his savings. As they scouted the pedestrian shopping area she tried to offer him a strong dose of fiscal common sense.

‘People like you always think money is a complicated matter. It isn’t. It’s all a question of market forces, and getting your money to work for *you*.’

There. Maybe she could knock some of that common sense into his head after all.

‘Oh, bless you, Obewan Kenobi!’

So much for the notion he was buying any of her carefully prepared argument.

The clown’s voice soured. ‘This sucker’s always had to work for his.’

Viv was determined to be undaunted.

‘Very funny. Listen. You buy shares in a company being took-over. Then when it gets took-over, the company doing the take-over has to pay you more for the shares. Because the shares are worth more now it’s being took-over.’

Even the simplest, most basic human sounds apparently sometimes failed to penetrate Freddy’s thick skull.

‘It’s all very simple, you know, Freddy.’

‘Simple, my big toe.’

This monkey was exasperating. ‘What don’t you understand?’

Freddy had to think for a few moments before he could figure out his answer.

‘Where I get the money to buy the shares in the first place.’

Viv Smith sighed, and paused to contemplate the company she was keeping of late.

‘Freddy, talking to you is the quickest way of getting a headache I know.’

5

In the corridor of Division ‘S’ outside his office, the sign on his door said CHIEF SUPERINTENDENT FRANK ELLSMORE, and when he walked out of his office through that door into the open territory beyond he wanted people to see that he had a clear-cut destination in view, plus the ever-resolute determination to get there. That was the mark of leadership, and he reasoned, rationally enough, that here was indeed what the troops needed to see in his demeanour: his attempt to embody the authority of the uniform, as well as to fill it. He wanted them to see a man of action.

Unfortunately, sometimes ordinary reality presented unexpected obstacles in his path: in this instance in the person of WPC Morrow, the new one. Just as Ellsmore was hitting full stride, he almost collided with WPC Morrow carrying a pile of folders, but just in the nick of time she managed to spin and evade him, yet still balance the folders in her arms so that only a few actually spilled to the floor.

‘Sorry, sir.’

One of Ellsmore’s oldest failings, and one of the rusty skills needing some polishing, was his conduct when caught in embarrassing situations, even of the most trivial nature.

‘My fault ... er ...’

‘Morrow, sir. WPC Morrow.’

Of course, Morrow. Neat. Agile. Attentive. What other mental resources might she be capable of contributing?

‘You’ve only just started here, right?’

‘Right, sir.’

Well, he had offered her the opportunity to introduce herself and make an impression, but she hadn’t taken the step forward. Talent should always be ready to rise to the top in an instant, he wanted to remind her. Instead he reminded himself that she had performed a nimble feat.

‘Well, if you’re as quick as you are on your feet, Constable, we won’t have much to worry about, eh?’

‘No, sir.’

WPC Morrow didn’t say anything more, and Ellsmore had nothing more to say. Standing here waiting for her laconic answers was getting him nowhere and only prolonging the agony of his embarrassment. So he did his best to nod a farewell, and left her for the lift.

WPC Morrow sighed and watched Chief Superintendent Ellsmore steam away with his sights firmly set on course. She was becoming accustomed to observing the Super sailing through life like a galleon in a high wind.

In the Specials’ parade room, Section Officer Bob Loach was vainly trying to make some semblance of order in his paperwork. His audible groans and grunts of brute persuasion seemed of no use in consolidating scraps of assorted documents.

Abruptly there was a sharp rap on the door, which opened

immediately. To Loach's surprise, standing there like a royal oak was Chief Superintendent Ellsmore.

'Chief Superintendent?'

As Ellsmore entered, Loach hurriedly straightened and shuffled the paperwork to the side of his desk.

'Should've known you'd be here ...' The Chief Superintendent didn't sound overjoyed at this discovery. 'Wanted a quick word, Loach.'

Loach was powerless to prohibit the Chief Superintendent from poking through the paperwork at random, like casually rummaging through someone else's toolbox, looking for nothing. It was an ominous diversion.

'Good God, it seems damn stupid you Specials giving up your free time to fight crime, just to end up processing bumff,' Ellsmore lectured, rippling a few pages of paper with evident contempt. 'Fruits of bureaucracy, that's what it is, Loach.'

Why was he stalling? All that this delay accomplished was to make him more nervous. Maybe that was the idea.

'We try and cope, Chief Superintendent.'

'Yes.' Ellsmore did not pursue that dead end. 'I haven't seen much of your SDO lately, but I hear he's been having some trouble at home.'

Telling himself there was no reason to panic, Loach was patiently taking in the information the Chief Superintendent was feeding him, but he still didn't quite understand what Ellsmore wanted him to swallow.

‘Anyway, I ... wanted to have a word with you about one of your lads, Loach.’

‘Trouble, sir?’ Here it comes, he thought.

‘Oh, no, no, no.’ Three times: he doth protest too much. ‘Just a storm in an egg cup.’

Brace yourself, this is it.

‘But you know, I hate there to be any friction between Specials and Police. There are enough jokes as it is.’

What is it, what happened? Who? Why?

‘It’s Freddy Calder.’

Loach’s blood rose as his spirits descended to the satanic depths of the underworld. Freddy Calder was an Achilles’ heel if ever there was one.

‘How long’s he been selling lingerie?’ Ellsmore was, sad to say, dreadfully serious.

‘About a year, sir.’

‘Right. And before that, he flogged ...’

This was getting more painful by the moment. ‘Kitchen ware.’

Ellsmore clucked his tongue in mock regret. ‘A pity he didn’t stick to it. You know, he tried to sell a pair of peach cammy knickers to a visiting Woman Police Inspector.’

Loach was sure his cheeks were already as red as he was going to lash Freddy Calder’s backside. But his own torture wasn’t finished yet.

‘And worse ... cracked some blue jokes with that damned puppet of his.’

That was too much. Loach's will was sapped, any hope of suitable revenge dwarfed by Freddy's towering imbecility.

'Have a word with him, Loach. Nothing strong. Just tell him to stop selling his ladies' undies on the premises in the future.'

6

Investigating the eerie surrounds of the Ellman Superstore at night gave Special Constable Viv Smith a weird case of the ‘creeps’, and having Special Constable Freddy Calder at her side was worse than *Rosemary’s Baby*: what loony Americans would call ‘a horror show’. Angular slabs of concrete cast deep shadows and what few sources of light were within reach merely served to spread the shadows out longer.

Slower and slower they walked, until Viv stopped. Freddy looked at her with questioning eyes, although not a sound emerged from his throat. She prayed there wouldn’t be another peep out of him, as she took a cigarette out of her shoulder bag.

‘Don’t say another word,’ Viv warned him in a low, cemetery whisper. ‘I said I’d give them up.’

The cigarette was in her mouth, and she was just about to light up, when a squeaky noise pierced the night air. She froze like a deer, although she might just as well have shrieked and jumped over the moon. Freddy also appeared to have been instantaneously transformed into a pillar of salt.

Slowly she turned, her antennae searching the horizon for the direction of the squeaking noise, which seemed to become louder every second, as if coming toward them from the shadows.

Suddenly one of the shadows was moving! And while it was moving closer, it was growing larger and the squeaking noise

louder and louder.

The moving shadow expanded to fill an entire wall, appearing to be a giant creature of some sort inexorably screeching toward them. The cigarette fell out of Viv's mouth, yet she wasn't at all sure she could manage a scream.

Something appeared at the bottom of the wall, beneath and much smaller than the shadow: something that was causing the shadow.

It was a supermarket trolley with a young child inside, being pushed by another child.

Quickly the Specials headed for the trolley, trying not to frighten the children the same way that they had been spooked.

The children immediately saw them and waited where they were. Freddy got to them first.

'Whoa there, stranger,' he soothed with a friendly smile, almost in one of his character voice impersonations.

Pushing the trolley was a young boy, not more than six years old. In the trolley was a little girl even younger. The two looked up with fear, uncertainty and suspicion mixed into their expressions of bewilderment. Viv's heart went out to them.

'Hullo,' she said gently. 'What are you two doing here?'

The children said nothing.

'Been shopping then?' Freddy inquired.

The boy laughed, unable to repress his reaction. 'Silly. It's closed,' he scoffed.

Another laugh from the boy even made the little girl smile.

God bless Freddy, he really did have a talent after all.

‘How did you get here?’ said Viv, trying to pry some basic information out of them.

The children still said nothing. Perhaps she was intimidating them with her direct inquiries.

‘You haven’t done much shopping,’ Freddy remarked.

‘No. Auntie’s shopping,’ the boy responded.

‘Your auntie?’ Viv asked him.

Again he didn’t answer her. ‘Charming,’ she muttered to Freddy. ‘They must think I’m the Witch of the West.’

The little boy looked at Freddy with imploring eyes. ‘We’re waiting for her. We’re waiting for Auntie.’

The looks on their faces made Viv thank heaven she had taken the trouble to come to the Ellman Superstore on this dark and lonely night.

There was important, urgent work to be done, as fast and efficiently – and delicately – as they could.

Suddenly an alarm was screaming in the night, and would keep on screaming until answered.

Someone who didn't belong there had tripped an alarm at Byron-Newman, a prominent engineering works that presented formidable barriers to any would-be intruder, although the alarm obviously indicated that this someone had trespassed beyond the point of no return.

Driving the panda, Toby Armstrong responded instinctively to the alarm with a hard jerk on the wheel, several seconds before they were told the direction over the radio.

'We're on our way,' Anjali replied before the voice at the other end could finish a sentence.

The sound of the alarm grew steadily louder as they approached Byron-Newman Ltd. The panda screeched to a halt. Toby half-expected to see a drawbridge and moat guarding the fortress, but, alas, no such luck. This was the real world; nobility was ancient history. Menace was immediate, somewhere ahead in the dark, where that someone was hiding.

Constables Toby Armstrong and Special Constable Anjali Shah hit the ground running.

Police Sergeant McAllister was replacing the telephone as Viv Smith, along with her section officer, Bob Loach, waited for the report on the immediate disposition of the two lost children.

McAllister's frown didn't change. 'Social Services will send someone as soon as possible.'

His gaze focused on Viv like a zoom lens in a movie camera. 'Until they do, Bonnie and Clyde here'll need looking after.'

The sergeant was plainly referring to the wandering waifs, yet Viv also gathered that McAllister was expecting *her* to do something about it. She bristled.

'Why look at me?' As if she didn't know.

McAllister expressed exasperation by moving a centimetre closer, raising his left eyebrow a millimetre and lowering his voice.

'Because you're a woman, for pity's sake.'

Enlightened Man, circa the Stone Age.

'It might come as a surprise to you, Sergeant, but not all women come with a built-in maternal expertise of how to deal with children.'

The laughter down the corridor distracted her, and unexpectedly served as a reminder that she was getting much too serious. Her rising blood pressure surely needed to be cooled.

Viv glanced at the distraction, then looked again. The laughter was coming from the high-pitched voices of three children: the little girl on one side, the older little boy on the other and Special Constable Freddy Calder in the middle.

Actually there was a fourth party at the party: Freddy's glove-puppet, Foxy, who was playing with a couple of coins. The two children were talking to Foxy as if he were more alive than

Freddy – a frightening thought. Indeed it was Foxy who was showing them the coin tricks: Freddy was merely his quick-fingered assistant.

Each child was enthralled with Freddy's antics. Viv looked over at Loach and Sergeant McAllister. She caught them smiling, and they caught her looking, and for a brief moment, they shared a quiet, knowing laugh among themselves.

Their amusement was interrupted by a PC rushing in with an urgent message written all over his face, yet his uniform suggesting he'd been in the middle of a poll tax demo.

'We've got Big Jess in the hoolivan outside!'

The PC's announcement brought Sergeant McAllister to attention. Viv was impressed. Who was this Big Jess all of a sudden?

'Drunk?' McAllister asked routinely.

'As a cock-eyed owl, Sarge,' the PC responded in the same old routine.

McAllister turned to Viv and Loach with a blunt request.

'Give 'em a hand, will you?' he asked with an edge of weariness in his voice. 'They've got the Queen of the Night – Mrs Godzilla – out there.'

Apparently Loach was just as unaware of this notorious character as Viv was.

'Who's Big Jess?'

'You don't know?' McAllister's expression turned from incredulity to a nasty, knowing smile. 'Then you've a nice

surprise coming, laddie.’

A moment before Toby got there, Anjali had reached the elderly security guard outside the Byron-Newman building and quickly elicited the information they needed.

‘The noise came from round the back,’ Anjali briefed Toby.

‘Wait here,’ Toby told the old guard. ‘We should have some back-up pretty soon. Okay?’

Toby didn’t wait for the guard’s answer before signalling Anjali that they proceed with their own investigation, and they set off in hot pursuit around the corner of the building.

It wasn’t long until the pair raced into an area crowded with an obstacle course of tall waste-bins. On the other side of the congested area they spotted two figures who suddenly bolted from the deep shadows and made a run for the perimeter fence.

In the semi-darkness, the suspects appeared to be two boys or young men.

Caught on the wrong side of the obstacle course, Toby and Anjali tried to hurry through the clutter of bins that were slowing them down and facilitating the escape of the fugitives.

Being afraid didn’t paralyze Anjali; fear made her run faster. She had never been able to overcome her inner panic in the face of danger, and she had no idea what would happen if she caught up with these bandits, or quite what she would do if they suddenly turned to attack her. Rather, she was driven by a sense of urgency, a blind compulsion to force her legs to keep churning. She made herself do what she instinctively knew had to be done,

suppressing any thought of the possible consequences.

As Toby and Anjali got closer, the young men were legging it to the high fence. One was clearly older than the other, and both appeared to be of Asian extraction. An inopportune thought flashed through Toby's mind, wondering what Anjali's reaction to them might be.

The fugitives started to claw their way up the perimeter fence. The older one was lugging a heavy metal box and trying to heave it over the top. Yet, despite being weighed down by the box, the older lad was making better progress, and had nearly reached his goal.

Unable to gain secure toeholds, the younger boy was panicking. Desperate, he grabbed ahold of the older one's jeans, trying to keep his grip, his only chance to escape again to freedom. The older fugitive was almost over the fence, and the outcome seemed to be in doubt: whether the older one would shake loose and boost himself over the top or the younger one would drag them both down.

Sensing his dilemma, the older one kicked out at the younger boy below, who lost his balance and fell to the ground, landing awkwardly with an anguished cry just as Anjali reached him.

She looked through the mesh of the fence as the older one slithered down the other side, tightened his grip on the metal box and vanished into the darkness beyond.

A moment later Toby caught up with Anjali. They heard a motorbike revving hard on the other side of the perimeter fence,

ready for the getaway.

‘He’s gone,’ Toby stated, accepting the obvious and resigning himself to capturing only one of the pair.

They turned to the younger boy trapped at their feet. Their prisoner was obviously in considerable pain.

‘I think his leg’s busted,’ Toby surmised from the queer angle of the boy’s lower left limb. The kid couldn’t be more than 14 or 15 years old, he thought, shaking his head.

He unclipped his radio, as Anjali tended to the boy. Looking up at her, the kid was squeezing his eyes, wincing in pain.

‘Hold on, lad. The ambulance is on its way,’ Toby said.

There was a hint of recognition in Anjali’s gaze at the lad.

‘D’you know him?’

‘He’s Raj Patel. I know his family.’

Unsure of quite what to do with this bit of information, Toby asked the next logical question.

‘What about the other one?’

‘I don’t know him,’ Anjali acknowledged, looking out through the fence. Her eyes narrowed, without looking back at Toby, yet still peering into the black hole into which the other fugitive had disappeared.

‘But I’ll recognize him the next time.’

8

It took a superhuman effort for Andy McAllister, Bob Loach, Viv Smith, two PC's and the arresting officer to force the struggling mass of a miserable prostitute by the name of Big Jess into a nearby cell.

While the weird wrestling continued, suddenly Loach let out a yell of intense pain. Big Jess had Loach's thumb between her teeth as if she were chomping on a sausage.

Loach made a fist with his other hand and threw it into the exposed face of Big Jess.

The impact moved her entire head away from Loach's thumb, and she slumped to the floor. The others managed to get a firm grasp on the mass of flesh, raise her off the hard floor and dump her on the bunk-bed in the cell with a great sigh of relief. Big Jess just snored and snuffled, no longer conscious of a world awake and outside her pleasant dreams.

In the meantime, Loach was examining his wounded extremity.

McAllister made a sympathetic cluck with his tongue. 'I suppose I'd better make a report that the offender suffered an injury during the struggle.'

Loach displayed the bloody stump of his thumb. 'She was going to bite it off!'

Sergeant McAllister restrained himself from snickering.

‘Don’t worry, laddie. That goes in the report as well. G.B.H.T.T.’
There was an inquisitive look from Loach.

‘Grievous Bodily Harm To a Thumb.’ He allowed his diagnosis time to register in Loach’s brain. ‘And get it checked.’

Then McAllister turned to the arresting officer. ‘Get the surgeon to check her.’ Truth be known, he was more concerned with Loach’s health than hers. Big Jess was the Frank Tyson of the prostitute world.

At the Byron-Newman engineering works, there was now an ambulance as well as three other patrol cars, and another vehicle belonging to the manager of the works. All of a sudden the scene had become as busy as it might be in the middle of the day.

Anjali Shah was looking down compassionately at young Raj Patel lying on the stretcher, waiting to be taken to the hospital to get some attention for his leg. He was visibly trying to contain his fear.

‘Who was the one who did this to you, Raj? What’s his name?’ She was making every effort to relate to him, not as a uniformed officer of the law but rather as a concerned human being from a similar background.

Nonetheless, he gritted his teeth and shook his head defiantly. There was nothing left to be said for now. Anjali and Toby watched the young man being placed carefully into the ambulance, as they were joined by the manager of the engineering works.

‘Another hero,’ Toby muttered.

The manager piped up in reply. 'If there was any justice, he should've broken his neck.'

Toby noticed Anjali's reaction.

'Bit over the top, don't you think, sir?' Toby gently chided him. 'I mean – they missed the money box. And what they stole was a bit of machinery, wasn't it?' Of course the manager was upset, but it was time to bring his anxieties back to earth.

'A very expensive drilling bit, officer,' the manager explained in a patronizing tone. 'Only about thirty-five thousand quid. Not that it makes much difference. Fat chance we'll ever hear of it again ...'

The next remark the manager aimed toward Anjali. '... especially since ethnics are involved.'

After staring her down, the manager was about to turn away when Anjali spoke.

'Excuse me, sir. Will you let us try to get your property back before you press charges?'

The manager was immediately suspicious.

'Why? You know something I don't?'

Anjali's response was neither timid nor equivocal. 'I know one of the offenders. After all, I'm an ethnic myself.' She wasn't mincing her words, Toby noted. 'At least let me make enquiries.'

The last comment startled Toby. The manager gave her a lingering look, which gradually dwindled into a knowing smile.

'Why not? The head accountant won't be back for a couple o' days.' His smile turned up at one corner, the equivalent of a wink

at Anjali, and he moved away.

Toby waited for the manager to get out of earshot before lashing into Special Constable Shah.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ he berated her. ‘You can’t make deals!’ The request should have come from Toby, if anyone.

Anjali made no attempt to contradict him. ‘I’m sorry. I had no right to do that.’ Yet this time she did equivocate. ‘But surely it’s just as important to contain crime.’

Her statement implied a question, although Toby was sure she knew the answer as well as he did. ‘That’s not what worries me.’

He had to confront her with the larger question, the underlying issue, although he was almost sure to be misunderstood. He tried to show his concern, rather than his own attitude toward those of Asian extraction.

‘Aren’t you identifying too closely with your own kind?’

The look in her eyes was the same as she had given the manager of the engineering works.

9

The view of Birmingham from the expansive windows of the ‘Pub on 4th’ – the purpose-built social club on the top floor of the Division ‘S’ headquarters – is transcendent and serene, far from the madding crowd below: one of the few material benefits of volunteering for public service as a Special. Restricted to Police, Specials and their guests, it allowed them to relax from the pressures and travails of their work and meet socially in a secure, private environment with all the comforts of home, including a bar, TV area and snooker room. Yet besides its exclusive, even privileged company the Pub on 4th was the same as any other perhaps, preferable only in its panoramic views and family atmosphere.

Tonight the pub was quite full and alive with shop talk and laughter. Not in the mood, Toby was sitting at a table with Anjali, the centre of attention, surrounded by young bucks, Specials and PC’s alike. Somewhat dispirited, he was just finishing his orange juice and getting up to leave.

‘Ah! Young love,’ one of the Specials remarked, obviously referring to Toby. ‘Bed calls.’

It wasn’t worth a sassy rejoinder, so instead Toby flicked his fingers at the guy’s head, though he missed by a long shot. He mouthed ‘goodnight’ and ‘see you’ to the faces around the table. Finally his gaze stopped, and stayed, on Anjali. He looked at her

for what seemed like an eternity without turning away; yet she returned his stare, challenging him with her eyes, unflinching. Beginning to wonder if the others were watching them, Toby eventually decided it was time to leave.

On his way out, Toby watched Viv Smith and Sandra Gibson at another table engaged in serious discussion. Sandra was the Mother of all Midland Specials, the administrative secretary who knew, filed, remembered and took care of all the Specials in the Birmingham area. Toby would have liked to have stopped and say hello, but Viv was immersed in the conversation in a manner that suggested any interruption would not be welcome, so he decided to amble on by, acknowledging Sandra with a quick wave and smile.

Viv took the occasion of Sandra's momentary distraction to knock back the rest of her vodka and orange. It wasn't her first. When Sandra returned to their conversation, Viv was ready to continue her diatribe. 'What really gets up my nose is what kind of a human being could leave kids wandering around a supermarket?'

Sandra nodded and pulled a quizzical face in agreement. Before Viv could continue her litany of complaints about the parentage of the lost children, Bob Loach wandered over to their table showing off the red-and-white badge of courage: his bandaged thumb.

Immediately Loach began to entertain the other PCs sitting at the table with Viv and Sandra. Although they had ceased

following or even listening to Viv, they interrupted any semblance of civilized conversation by raising their glasses, voices and laughter in toasts to the valiant Loach. 'Why didn't you get Big Jess to kiss it better?' asked one wag.

'Been sucking your thumb, Bob?' simultaneously suggested one of the others.

Loach smiled sourly and silently pleaded with Sandra for some sympathy. But Viv was having none of his interruptions.

'Now don't go giving Sandra a hard time with your problems, Bob Loach. She's off-duty. Having a quiet drink,' And busy with my problems at present, Viv wanted to add. 'She's not interested in discussing compensation tonight.'

The disappointment on his face was that of a disheartened little boy which, as ever, Sandra didn't have the constitution to resist.

'What happened?' she asked innocently, at the same time automatically removing a secretarial pad and pencil from her shoulder bag.

Viv decided that the only way to cut this short was to speak up first. 'A lady of the night called Big Jess bit it. I'd say Loach got off lightly.'

Loach ignored Viv and concentrated on Sandra. 'I suppose it'll mean a court appearance,' he sighed. 'As if I didn't have enough on my plate.'

Just feeling sorry for himself, Viv reflected. 'He's a lot on his mind, has our Section Officer,' she cracked.

Unfortunately Loach took the opportunity to venture off on one of his pet peeves. ‘Damned right. I’ve been Acting SDO for about three months. And doing all skiver SDO Barker’s paper work ...’

Viv tried to head him off at the pass. ‘Loach ...’

But it was already too late. ‘Don’t get me wrong. I don’t mind doing the job. But how long am I supposed to act as an Acting?’ Now that he was off and running, there would be virtually no stopping him. ‘I wouldn’t care, if I got a word of thank-you from our invisible SDO for the time I’m putting in.’

Loach’s tirade against SDO Barker was having an unintended effect on Sandra, although he took no notice of the time-bomb he could be about to ignite.

‘Change the channel, will you?’ Viv implored, though her voice probably revealed her sense of futility.

As expected, Loach barely paused to catch his breath before running on again. ‘Why can’t the sod phone and say: “Thank you, Bob.” It’s not much.’

Loach seemed completely oblivious to the devastating effect the lambasting of his immediate superior, Sub-Divisional Officer Rob Barker, was having on Administrative Secretary Sandra Gibson. Obviously he didn’t realize the connection.

‘If you want my opinion,’ Loach offered, although no one had solicited his views, ‘he’s got his leg over some bird, or maybe broken it getting off.’

That did it. Without a word, her face set in a bleak expression,

Sandra got up and walked out.

Loach was dumbfounded, the puzzled look on his face asking Viv: What's that all about?

'You really are a daft egg,' Viv remonstrated.

'What are you on about?'

'Rob Barker this, Rob Barker that. You're as sensitive as a Harpic.'

'I'm only telling it the way I see it,' Loach tried to rationalize self-defensively.

Viv wasn't letting him off the hook. 'Well, I'll be glad to tell Rob Barker the next time I see him.'

'Fine. Do that,' Loach concluded. To hell with the gent. But then he started to replay her comment and reconsider what it meant.

'What d'you mean "next time?"' he inquired suspiciously. 'When did you see him?'

Abruptly Viv corrected her course, becoming a bit more evasive in her tone. 'I've seen him a couple o' times in the last week.'

Loach was surprised by her answer. 'Where?'

'Where I work,' Viv replied: 'The Bromsgrove.'

A frown settled on Loach's brow. 'The Building Society? What for? A mortgage?'

The conversation was leading in the wrong direction, but there wasn't much Viv could do about it.

'No. He's got a mortgage already. I'm not sure, but I think he

was talking to the manager about selling ... selling his house, that is.'

Luckily at that moment Viv spotted Freddy Calder standing in the doorway. Smiling, she turned to Bob Loach to cut off his line of inquiry.

'Oh, oh! There's Freddy. Gotta go.'

Loach remained in some confusion as to what was going on while Freddy motioned Viv to join him, bringing Loach back to the present. 'That reminds me ...'

As Viv got up, Loach joined her, and together they crossed the room to meet Freddy.

'The woman from social's here,' Freddy informed her. 'A Miss Brownlow. I thought you might want to meet her.' Apparently, Freddy was happily impressed with Miss Brownlow. 'She's a smashing girl. And the kids like her ...'

Freddy turned to leave with Viv to meet Miss Brownlow. Loach made a weak waggle with his hand in an attempt to stop him, then waved both of them away. No use trying to drag Viv back for further questioning at present.

Surveying the crowded Pub on 4th last time, Loach noticed someone else he wanted to see. Weaving his way through the maze of people and chairs, he arrived at Anjali Shah's table as she, too, was trying to extricate herself and say her goodbyes. But the other Specials and PC's at her table were teasing her unmercifully and refusing to let her go.

'You want a lift home, Anjali?' suggested one with a sly smirk.

‘I go past your way,’ another mock-chivalrous Special chimed in.

‘Forget it, he’s only got a motorbike,’ scoffed the latter’s partner.

Still another pseudo-knight stepped into the fray: ‘If Anjali’s going with anyone, it’s with me.’

His challenge was met by a chorus of birdsong from the fellow rivals for Anjali’s company.

‘You can all sit down,’ she ordered them, a trace of a smile on her lips. ‘The man who’s taking me home is ...’

She kept them panting, awaiting the maiden’s fair choice.

‘... the nice man who drives the 44 bus.’

A series of muted boos greeted her announcement. Anjali left the table laughing, passing Bob Loach on her way out.

‘If you want to change your mind ...?’ Loach offered politely, not teasing her any more.

Anjali simply smiled shyly and walked by with her head lowered to avoid his eyes.

Shaking his own head, Loach watched her departure, then joined her former suitors at the table.

‘Well, George?’ queried the first one: ‘You blew out there.’

‘You want me to really try?’ responded the PC named George. ‘Show me the colour of your money.’

One of them turned to Loach. ‘What d’you think, Bob?’

‘What do I think what?’ he countered.

‘Has she got a heavy boyfriend, or what?’

‘Nah!’ his partner scoffed again. ‘Maybe she’s cheesed off giving massage all day.’

The others laughed at the lewd suggestion, but Loach turned on them sourly.

‘Only dipsticks like you would make an NHS physio sound like a nymphomaniac,’ he lectured them.

But his sobriety only spurred the others to lower depths.

‘Hey!’ one pseudo-knight interrupted as an idea popped into his head: ‘Did someone mention my hobby?’

10

Still in uniform, Anjali Shah walked up to the door of the modest terraced house where she lived. Retrieving the key from her shoulder bag, she unlocked the door and went in.

In the sitting room, her brother Sanjay was playing carom – a form of table billiards – with several of his ‘friends’. One strong main light was beaming down on the playing surface, so that several of the players’ faces were in deep shadow.

When Anjali removed her coat in the doorway, her Specials uniform was revealed. From the corner of her eye she noticed that the sudden sight of her uniform made some of Sanjay’s nervous ‘friends’ scatter their winnings across the board, in effect ruining the state of play.

Sanjay was livid. ‘Look what you have done, Jelly Baby! Go to bed.’

A trifle amused at his attitude, Anjali stopped a moment to look around the table. One face moved out of the shadow into the light. It was the young man, the young thief, she had earlier seen on the other side of the perimeter fence at the engineering works.

Sanjay turned to his ‘friends’ to apologize for his sister’s presence. ‘I have a snoop for a sister, you know.’

Her face hardened, as a sneering smile played around the lips of the young thief. Without another word she left them and went into the kitchen.

While she was making herself a cup of coffee, the young thief opened the door, came in then closed the door behind him. From the sitting room, she had heard one of the others call him 'Dev'.

This Dev moved alongside Anjali. He picked up a sharp piece of cutlery and played with it, perhaps trying to appear more menacing.

'So the little police lady is Sanjay's sister,' he began slowly. 'Don't you think that's funny? I think it's funny.'

'I'm sure Raj finds it very funny in hospital. He broke his leg,' she replied calmly.

Dev seemed unperturbed, and still fingered the cutlery. 'He's a good kid. He'll keep his mouth shut.' A sneer curled his lip. 'Just as you will, Jelly Baby. Is that what Sanjay calls you?'

She tried to remain unruffled, continuing the task of making her coffee while contradicting his assumption that all was well. 'I wouldn't bank on it,' she warned.

Dev moved closer to her. 'Listen, police lady. All I need do is ask your brother to say I've been here all night.'

Deliberately the young thief began to stroke Anjali's hair. Although she was immediately alarmed, there wasn't a thing she could do about it, which Dev obviously realized, so he continued. For the time being, she told herself, she would have to suffer and endure the indignity.

'What do you do then?' Dev asked. 'Have the police bring your own brother in for questioning? You're not that stupid, are you?'

At five minutes past nine, Viv Smith rushed in through the front door of the small suburban branch of the Bromsgrove Building Society, late for work again. As she quickly hung up her coat, out of the corner of her eye she noticed Maynard, the manager, holding his office door ajar, watching her. He checked his watch with a jaundiced look.

She was just settling into her position at the counter and unlocking her till when she felt someone touch her shoulder. It was only Madge, the young trainee.

‘There’s a call for you, Miss Smith,’ she said politely, yet with a bit of a frown. ‘A Miss Brownlow. From Social Services?’

‘That’s right. Thanks, Madge.’

Viv stood up and walked back to the telephone with the young trainee. Meanwhile Madge’s face was assuming a pained expression.

‘Mr Maynard told me to tell you about personal calls during office hours.’

Her duty done, Madge melted away. Viv reached for the waiting phone.

‘Miss Brownlow. It’s good of you to call ...’

The voice on the other end of the line was businesslike, yet personal and friendly as well.

‘You’ve traced the mother of the two children? That’s great.’

Lost and found. Viv sighed with some sense of relief, despite still wondering what kind of mother would set her children adrift in a supermarket trolley.

‘Where? She was in *Wales*?’

This new development was unexpected, but Viv had to confess to herself that she was becoming ever more cautious.

‘Of course I’m surprised,’ she admitted to Miss Brownlow. ‘Yes ... of course I’ll meet her.’

At that moment, Maynard was crossing the office and passing behind Viv. ‘Staff on phone means a customer gone,’ he admonished her in an adolescent singsong voice.

She made an obscene gesture behind his back.

‘Today?’ Not today, she wanted to protest. ‘Lunch-time?’ Not lunchtime, not today. ‘I guess I could.’ She didn’t know how in hell she could. ‘Okay, I’ll wait for you here ...’

Maynard was still keeping a wary eye on Viv. Yet immediately after ending her conversation with Miss Brownlow and replacing the receiver, she picked it up again and dialled another number. When the connection was completed, she tried to speak softly in a low voice to the love of her life (or, at least, of the moment).

‘Ginger? It’s Viv. About lunch ...’

It was obvious he guessed what she was going to say, so she didn’t have to suffer through it.

‘I’m sorry. You’re a love.’ She blew him a wet kiss. She doubted whether its sensual texture, let alone moisture, would survive the transmission to reach his ear, but gave it all she

had anyway. ‘Mwah! Sweetie.’ She would have to demonstrate first-hand what she meant sometime later when they were alone together.

In a hurry she replaced the receiver and turned around – only to find Maynard standing behind her, open-mouthed, in a state of shock.

Mrs Shah hovered around the stove figuring how to look busy with nothing much left to do, while her children, Anjali and Sanjay, finished their late breakfast. Though at times concerned about her son, she was always worrying about her daughter.

‘It is ten o’clock, Anjali,’ she cautioned, making a conscious effort not to sound too abrasive.

Anjali questioned her mother’s memory with a gentle reminder. ‘Ma? Tuesday I have a late start at the hospital.’

Observing her brother nonchalantly half-eating his breakfast and half-reading his newspaper, Anjali decided the time was appropriate to approach him lightly.

‘I see you’ve got a new friend.’

Sanjay put down his newspaper and looked up slyly at his older sister.

‘You mean Dev? I thought I saw the two of you in the kitchen together.’ He winked at her. ‘Fancy him, do you? He’s a good-looking fellow. But you’re much too old for him, Jelly Baby.’

He took another couple of sips of coffee before continuing. ‘Anyway, he’s up here visiting his uncle for a week or two, then he goes back to London.’

Speaking casually, Anjali tried to disguise the extent and purpose of her interest. ‘How did you meet him?’

‘He came along with Bati,’ Sanjay replied, then looked to his mother. ‘Ma? I need more coffee.’ Mrs Shah complied without hesitation. He switched his glaring eyes to Anjali. ‘You know, you’re sounding more like a policeman every day,’ he said sarcastically.

Their Uncle Ram, brother of their mother and adopted ‘father’ of the family of three, wandered into the kitchen. Apparently feeling stiff and sore at the old age of 60, Ram tried a tentative stretch of his tired limbs. As usual, his mood was cranky first thing in the morning.

‘Don’t all get up, it’s only your Uncle Ram,’ he mocked.

Sanjay needled Anjali at the earliest opportunity. ‘You’re just in time, Uncle. Anjali is giving me the third degree.’ He glanced at his sister to see if his jabs were getting to her. ‘About a friend of mine. I think she’s lusting after him.’ That should do it.

‘What a nonsense!’ Anjali muttered.

But Uncle Ram was suddenly interested, mildly rebuking her. ‘I will decide if it’s a nonsense.’ He turned to young Sanjay.

‘What boy are you speaking about? Do I know him? What is his family?’

An unfeminine and unbecoming grunting noise indicated Anjali’s irritation, but Sanjay was only too happy to respond.

‘He’s visiting from London. His name is Dev Patel. You know his uncle – Prem Ghai, the one who sells spice.’

Uncle Ram flattened his lips, clearly impressed. 'Prem Ghai is a very major businessman.' His calculating look at Anjali suggested he might have underestimated her.

'You are a slyboots,' he told her, 'and no mistake.'

Anjali was unimpressed. 'Uncle, look at me, and watch what my lips say. I have no interest in this boy. I do not wish to be interested in this boy. This boy is of no account.'

Just then the doorbell rang. Mrs Shah was relieved and thankful for the chance to answer the door and escape another family squabble.

His mother now beyond hearing him, Sanjay's eyes narrowed. 'Then why ask these questions? Are you prying into my affairs again? Is that it? You see I have a new friend? So you snoop. Now you're in the police you think everyone is a criminal.' Angry and disgusted, he stormed out of the kitchen.

Uncle Ram flapped his hands helplessly. 'He is right.'

'He's nothing of the kind,' Anjali answered sharply.

'There you go! I say something, and you contradict. You have no respect. I am the head of the family now that your father is no longer with us. You would do well to heed my advice.'

In the brief silence that followed, Mrs Shah returned to the kitchen from answering the doorbell.

'It's Mrs Patel,' she announced. 'She's in the other room.'

Uncle Ram checked his watch. 'I am late already, but tell her I can spare a few minutes.'

Mrs Shah shook her head. 'No, no. It is Anjali she wishes to

see.'

12

In the office of Cougar Coaches sitting opposite Bob Loach was a young man of 16 by the name of Kevin, about to be taken on as the new grease monkey. Loach looked at him and smiled, then turned his gaze to Noreen, who was checking Kevin's references.

'Fantastic!' Noreen proclaimed. 'He got a C in Woodwork.'

Loach winked at Kevin. 'I'm not taking him on to give a lecture in French, you know, Noreen. He's just an apprentice.'

Noreen intercepted the male club wink, abruptly deciding to examine callow Kevin a bit more closely. It was hardly a pleasant errand given his unwashed hair, unshaven face and the sweatmarks under his armpits.

'True,' she reluctantly concurred with her husband. 'But I think Kevin has a lot to learn about personal hygiene. Haven't you, Kevin?' She paused for a brief moment, to see if he understood what she meant. 'Beginning with what it means.'

Loach glowered at Noreen. 'All right, lad, go see John Barraclough. Tell him you're hired.' He offered a last word of advice. 'Remember, Kevin. We all have to pull our weight here.'

Noreen returned the references to the boy. 'In other words, luv, the only passengers we carry pay to get on the bus.'

Kevin nodded, getting to his feet while mumbling his thanks, then stopped at the door. 'Hope your thumb gets better, Mr

Loach.’

Noreen jumped in before Loach could reply. ‘I’m sure Jack Horner will watch where he sticks his thumb next time.’

His expression unsure, Kevin made a quick exit.

When he was gone, Loach turned on Noreen.

‘Look, Noreen ...’ he grumbled.

But she was already back at work and didn’t bother to look up.

The mother of Raj Patel was not crying; she was weeping. For her there was little comfort in surroundings of the Shah home decorated to resemble an idealized memory of Bombay. For her there was nowhere to hide from being treated as an alien untouchable in a pervasive and powerful class society. For her son she felt powerless, helpless, terrified.

All this convulsive anguish Anjali could feel as well, holding Mrs Patel’s hands and trying to calm her.

‘My boy is a good boy,’ she sobbed. ‘You work with the policemen. You tell them that. My Raj could never do what they say he did. You tell them they have made a mistake.’

Anjali wasn’t sure whether it was a good sign or a bad one that his mother could believe no evil of her son, but she knew it was natural, and she shared Mrs Patel’s heartache. What was more difficult for Anjali was to be professional, and dispassionate.

‘Mrs Patel, I know Raj is a good boy ...’ That was as much reassurance as she should offer, in her official capacity. ‘I’ll do what I can with the police,’ she promised, although she was honour-bound to state the pertinent facts as well.

‘... but he was there, so they may not listen.’

In the yard at Cougar Coaches, John Barraclough was launching Kevin’s shakedown cruise, showing him how to check for problems hidden under the bonnet of one of the coaches.

‘These oil levels are very important, Kevin. Any questions, lad?’

Kevin’s brow furrowed, ostensibly he was thinking hard, trying to make a good show with an intelligent response.

‘That Noreen. She doesn’t half give the Boss a bit of stick.’ He made a visible effort to figure it all out. ‘You’d think they were married.’

‘They are.’ Barraclough informed him, then followed with an advisory observation. ‘There’s marriages what are made in Heaven, lad; and there’s Noreen and Loach’s what are made out of barbed wire.’

Before he could elaborate, there was a roar behind them, and as they turned to look a dazzling new Porsche screeched to a stop. By now they were intrigued, and sallied forth to see which wild and decadent aristocratic personage had taken a wrong turn and nearly crashed into the garage.

As the passenger door opened, a pair of polished women’s shoes and well-turned ankles were exposed, immediately succeeded by shapely calves swinging out, smooth stockinged legs that seemed to go on forever, with no outer garment yet in sight.

They were a glory to behold, and Barraclough had beheld them

once before. As much could not be said for poor Kevin, whose jaw dropped.

Out of the Porsche climbed the long, lovely, endless legs – Michelle’s, Dicky Padgett’s latest ecstasy. Finally, to top it all off, Kevin dropped his toolbox with a clatter. The lad was unhinged.

When Michelle made her appearance at the door of the office, she gave Mr Loach and the book-keeper what Dicky referred to as her ‘devastating smile’.

Loach was devastated. Noreen favoured him with a calculating stare.

‘Uh ... this is Michelle,’ he quickly improvised. ‘Michelle ... this is Noreen. She’s the one you’ve to talk to.’ There – it was out.

‘Talk to me about what?’ Noreen snapped. She faced the intruder with a harder smile. ‘I’m his wife.’

‘Michelle completely slipped my mind ...’

Her smile softened for her husband, and she knew he would understand. ‘Michelle slipped your mind?’ She was careful not to allow any hint of glee in her eyes. ‘Come on, Loach ...’

Loach was flustered and flushed, and resented her outmanoeuvring him before he could begin to explain. ‘Listen to me. Dicky wanted to sign up Michelle for the Stratford tour. You know – the one we’ve got booked in for the end of the week.’ He didn’t dare tell her yet that Michelle was also here to ask for an advance.

Unpredictable, Noreen had a glint of danger in her eyes as she turned her own devastating smile on Michelle. ‘Let’s try and

establish something, shall we, Michelle?’

‘Sure,’ Michelle aped her smile with cheerful enthusiasm.

Noreen spoke to her slowly and carefully, as if to a child. ‘Have you ever been to Stratford?’

‘No,’ Michelle answered blithely, guilelessly, completely unaware of the freight train now headed straight down the track where she was standing.

‘Well ...’ Noreen began, closing in for the kill, ‘when you do a courier job, Michelle, it’s vital that you can answer any question that a tourist on the coach may ask.’

‘Sure. I know that,’ chirped Michelle, glad to be tossed an easy one.

‘For instance ...’ Noreen suggested – plainly divulging to anyone with even the slightest sensitivity that she was setting a trap, ‘what do you know about Shakespeare?’

At last there was a spark of recognition behind Michelle’s empty eyes, and she nodded vigorously.

‘You mean the wine bar up on the Marlow Road.’

Even Noreen was taken aback. ‘What?’

Michelle was unfazed, finally finding herself in familiar territory.

‘The *William Shakespeare*,’ she expounded. ‘You don’t want to go there. He’s got hands like an octopus, the owner. They’re everywhere!’ she pouted. ‘I only worked there for two weeks and my bum was black and blue!’

Hopeless, Loach concluded. What a crying shame.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.