



MICK HERRON

THIS IS
WHAT
HAPPENED

'Mick Herron is an incredible writer and if
you haven't read him yet, you NEED to'

MARK BILLINGHAM

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED

MICK
HERRON

JOHN MURRAY

To my sister, Anne

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

‘London’, William Blake

Part One

I

THE LONGER SHE SAT there, the colder she became. With her back to the cistern, and her feet drawn up beneath her, Maggie perched on the closed lid of the toilet, and concentrated on being as still as possible. An hour earlier, a spasm in her leg had caused the overhead lights to switch on. Their electric hum had startled her more than the glare. Someone would hear it, she thought, and come investigate. But nobody arrived, and the spasm subsided, and a few minutes later the lights turned themselves off again.

‘How long do I have to hide in the toilets?’ she had asked Harvey.

‘Until twelve. At least.’

‘The guard patrols all night long.’

‘But there’s only one of him. And he can’t be on every floor at once.’

She had an urge to confirm that the flash drive was still in her pocket, but any movement would bring the lights to life, and besides, she had checked three times already.

Alone in the dark Maggie squeezed her eyes shut, tried not to shiver, and made herself invisible.



Quilp House was twenty-seven storeys high, each spreading out from a central lobby area where the lifts were, and around which the stairwells ran. In the lower half of the building the floors were open-plan, with rows of desks divided into three or four workstations apiece. During the day a kind of electricity filled the air, which was not so much the ambient excitement caused by communion with the world's markets as much as it was the repressed emotions of people forced to work in close proximity, and thus hold in their baser reactions, their bodily rumblings.

From the twentieth level, the building changed character. Here, people worked behind closed doors, in progressively larger offices. Views became spectacular. The higher up you were, the further off you could see the weather.

On these floors cameras blinked at corridors' ends, little red lights above their lenses signalling vigilance. Occasionally they swivelled, redirecting their meerkat gaze.

'What about the CCTV?'

'There are two guards on the night shift,' Harvey had explained. He was patient with her. Without having to be told, she knew he understood what it was to step across the lines that bordered daily behaviour. 'One to patrol, and the other to watch the screens. The TV monitors. Do you know how many of these there are?'

She had a vision of a wall built of pixels, boasting as many views of corridors as there were satellite channels screening sport.

'There are six,' he said. 'And they alternate from camera to camera. Which means the odds are against your showing up on screen at any given time.'

‘So they don’t automatically detect motion?’

‘Maggie.’ He had reached across the table and put his hand on hers. Around them had been the usual clatter of young mums and earnest hipsters: like most of their conversations, this had taken place in the café where they first met. Where he had first approached her. ‘It’s fine to be scared. It’s fine not to want to do this.’

‘I do want to do it.’

‘And I wouldn’t ask if I could see any other way of getting the job done. If you knew—’

He broke off while a young woman squeezed past with a tray piled high with dirty mugs, their rims laced with froth.

‘I know you wouldn’t,’ she told him.

Because she was his only hope.

Her wristwatch pinged when midnight struck.

For a moment, the sound confused her – she had not been asleep, precisely, but had entered a fugue state in which memories and plans collided, throwing sparks off each other – and she jerked upright, banging her head against the wall. An image of her sister popped and vanished as the cubicle light flickered on, followed by the other bulbs in the lavatory. Her heart pounded. Someone would come. But nobody did, and after a moment Maggie unfolded her limbs, which were creaky with cold, and tried to rub life into them.

Pins and needles assaulted her fingers. She did not feel like an agent on a mission. She felt like a young woman up past bedtime, who wanted only to crawl beneath some covers and find warmth.

‘What do I do now, Harvey?’ she whispered.

It would have been nice if he'd been there, offering an answer. But it was up to her now. She was on her own.

Because it didn't matter – because the lights had blinked on anyway – before making her way out of the cubicle, she raised the toilet lid, pulled down her jeans and pants, and used it for the purpose for which it was intended. Then she rearranged her clothing, closed the lid, and had her hand on the handle before she caught herself – that would be all she needed, to send a watery alarm cascading through the building. She imagined security guards stomping up and down the stairwells, crashing into the lavatories on each floor, throwing open doors, looking for the culprit.

'Maggie, Maggie,' she murmured to herself.

When her heart rate was normal she unlocked her cubicle and tiptoed to the door and opened it and peered out.

The corridor was in darkness. The motion sensors were sleepy, and wouldn't kick in until she stepped outside. Even then they allowed a second or two's grace, as if they needed convincing that they weren't rousing themselves for someone of no consequence. For a mouse, creeping its night-time way along an empty hall.

Rather than a spy. An agent on a mission.

'Trying not to make the lights come on will only stress you out,' Harvey had said. 'It can't be done. You have to move to get where you need to be, and the sensors will do the rest. So don't worry about them. You can't control the things you can't control.'

It was nice that he was confident she could control the other things.

'Maggie, Maggie,' she chided herself again. Here was

the equation: if the lights were off, the guard wasn't on this floor. And if he wasn't on this floor, he wouldn't see the lights coming on.

Which meant it was safe to step out into the corridor.

But before she could do so the lights flickered and the door to the lobby clicked shut, and then – loud as a lion – she could hear the breathy whistling of the security guard as he rounded the corner, heading her way.

'I wish this were like the films,' Harvey had said, 'where you have an earpiece and a radio mic, and we're synchronised to the nanosecond. And I'd be hacked into the security system, so I could tell you when it's safe to walk down a corridor, and when to shelter under a desk. But life's not like that, Maggie. This business isn't like that. We're a lot more . . . We're less James Bond and a lot more, I don't know, Mr Bean or someone. We have to use what's at hand. And I wish I didn't have to ask you to do this. If I could do it myself, I would. If there were any other way . . .'

He had not finished his sentence. He hadn't needed to.

'And let me say this. You're a brave girl, a tremendous girl, and I couldn't be prouder of you. But if you want to back out, do it now. Because from here on, it'll be too late.'

'I don't want to back out.'

She did, though.

What he was asking was that she put her head in the dragon's mouth. It was so far removed from her daily life she might as well be watching it in one of those films it wasn't like, and even there at the table

she could feel her innards contract, her thighs grow watery. She'd wobble when she stood, she knew she would. And she ought to tell him he'd picked the wrong girl, a nobody, who couldn't be relied on. She'd dissolve into panic at the worst moment. She wasn't icy cool and she wasn't super-hot. He'd plucked her from a crowd, and really, it would be sensible to let her subside back into it, and lose herself among the traffic.

But if she said that she'd see disappointment cross his features, that strange mix of the ugly and the sad on which she'd come to depend.

And besides . . . And besides, what he was asking of her was important. For Queen and country, he'd have said in the old days, though here in the modern world it was more tangible than that. What he was asking her to be was a cog in a larger wheel, on whose turning much depended. He was giving her the opportunity of helping ensure that something did not happen. That there was a fundamental anonymity to this – success measured as an absence of event – did not faze her. Anonymity was her natural setting, her personality's screensaver. Just ask Meredith.

'Good, then. Good.' He fished about in his pocket.

For all he'd said about not being James Bond, Maggie had still expected something flashy, in a silver case perhaps, moulded to fit. But instead he'd handed her a very ordinary flash drive, the size of her thumb. It was black, with a white label so its contents could be indexed. This was blank, of course. When she reached to take it from him, he held it over her palm for a moment.

'But listen. Whatever happens, you mustn't let this fall into their hands. They mustn't know you've got it, mustn't know you've used it. Once it's done its job, you

have to either get it out of the building, or hide it somewhere it won't be found. And they will be looking.' His gaze was intense. She imagined this, the look men used when sending other men to war. *You might not come back. But I will remember you.* 'If they find you, if they know you've been there, they'll be looking for this. And they mustn't find it. I can't tell you how crucial that is.'

'I understand.'

'Do you?'

She could only nod.

He let go of the drive and there it was, on her palm.

Maggie made a fist round it, keeping it safe.

She melted back inside, letting the door close silently, and stood with her back to it, her heart's hammering the loudest sound in London. He would hear her through the wood, and see the light beneath the door. Or put a hand to it and push, the automatic gesture of the guard on patrol, and when he encountered the resistance of her weight, it would be over. Alarms would sound, or whistles blow. Those meerkat cameras would turn and point, and her image would plaster itself over the monitors downstairs – six of them? The other guard, the one whose job it was to lean back in his chair and eat doughnuts, would reach for the telephone. And it would not be the police he would call, Harvey had left her in no doubt about that. The people whose building this was, whose secrets it contained, they looked after their own. The last thing they'd do would be call the police.

But he won't see the light, she thought, because the lights are on in the corridor too. There'll be no telltale

yellow strip painting the carpet. This was just another door, the ladies' loo, and why would he check that it opened? It always opened.

His whistling was familiar, a tune on the edge of her recall. It faded as he walked past, and the creaking of his tread on the carpet disappeared. The door he'd come through, from the lobby where the lifts and stairwells were, was off to her right, and if he completed a circuit of the floor he would not pass by again but enter the same lobby from the other side. But she didn't know his routines, whether he might halt halfway and retrace his steps, or whether he was heading for a particular desk, or for the vending machine in the kitchen area . . . She could slip out now, and run into him three seconds later. Or this might be as close as their paths would come, and the fact that she'd just evaded him – had all but felt his breath on her cheek – might itself be a token that her safety was now assured.

Maggie, Maggie . . .

There were no tokens, no guarantees. But what was certain was that the light was currently on. Slipping into the corridor would cause nothing to change. As soon as this thought took hold of her she acted on it, standing upright, opening the door, stepping outside. The corridor was empty. Choosing the direction the guard had come from, she hurried round the corner to the lobby door.

She had spent hours in the toilet on the eighteenth floor. This was seven flights below where she needed to be, but that had been planned for – had been her own idea.

'If they catch me . . .'

(An outcome that had to be acknowledged.)

‘... If I’m caught, at least they won’t know what I was really after.’

‘You’re a natural.’ Harvey’s ugly face broadened when he smiled, and the tips of his incisors showed. He had a high forehead, a receding hairline, and while his hair was clipped short, it had a noticeable curl, and left to itself would probably fall into ringlets. It was a light dirty brown in colour. He favoured open-necked shirts with a check pattern, and in cold weather wore a long black overcoat with a wide collar, of a kind she could imagine adorning gangsters. ‘You’ve done this before – admit it!’

He joked to put her at her ease, and it worked.

So now she was in the lobby of the eighteenth, and needed to climb seven storeys.

The doors required a security pass. She wore hers on a lanyard round her neck, and flashed it now across the face of the reader, which blinked red to green and allowed her through. The stairwell had no windows, and the lights were constantly on, a health-and-safety requirement. But the stairs were uncarpeted, and difficult to climb noiselessly. They made her trainers squeak. She tried to step only on the runners, two at a time, but still foot and stair conspired to produce this noise, like a cat’s toy. If he reached the stairwell again – or so much as put his head round the door – he’d hear her. What good would speed do her then? Better to climb slowly, hugging the wall, out of the line of sight. She was just about to do this when a door, some flights below, opened.

‘Remember, the building won’t be empty.’

‘Even after midnight?’

Every so often a look would ripple across his face, like the shadow of a cloud, and in it she could see irritation, frustration – disappointment, mostly. She was adept at the art of reading disappointment. And when that happened it was as if a fish-hook tugged at her heart.

But Harvey had not let his feelings break surface.

‘There’ll always be someone. Not on the upper floors, but lower down, where the actual work gets done. You know, by ordinary people. Like you and me.’

He was not ordinary. But she was, and this was the obstacle she had to overcome.

‘The markets sleep for no man,’ he said. ‘But you should be okay. Overnighters are for junior staff. The top floors will be quiet. All the fat cats’ll be home in their little palaces, or snuggling their mistresses in five-star hotels.’

He’d actually said *snuggling*. The word distracted her from any number of questions, complaints really, worries – such as, What if I’m spotted? What do I say when I’m challenged? What if I’m caught in the stairwell, and someone shouts up at me:

‘Hello?’

Tight against the wall, she tried to make herself smaller.

‘Anyone there?’

She didn’t move.

For what felt like a minute, nothing happened. Perhaps he had been convinced by her pretended absence. The only way of being sure was to lean forward and see him not seeing her, but to do so would break that spell. But if he came up the stairs to check, if he found her trying to hide—

Another door opened. The one Maggie had come through.
'Sir?'

A deep voice, a bass delight. The security guard.

'Oh, Joshua, hi – thought I heard someone.'

'Just doing the rounds, sir.'

'Yeah, you don't need to call me that – how you doing, anyway? All good?'

'All fine, sir.'

Maggie recognised the rhythm of the exchange. A young man in a suit, and another in a uniform. White-black went without saying.

The younger man, the suit, came up a flight, so the two were only one level apart.

'You still turning out on a Saturday?'

Maggie heard a rustling kind of noise, as if he were miming something physical, the throwing of a ball, the wielding of a bat.

'... Sir?'

'The old rugger?'

'I don't play rugby, sir.'

'Oh, right, no, only I thought ...'

'Don't go for sports at all, sir.'

'Right. Must be thinking of someone else, yeah?'

'Sir.'

'Well, I'd better be ... Have a good night, Josh.'

'You too, sir.'

A door opened, closed.

Maggie's palms, flat against the wall, felt wet as well as cold.

'The old rugger,' the security guard said.

After a moment, another door opened and closed, and she was alone in the stairwell once more.

★

When she was ready to move, Maggie crept up the remaining flights. She kept her back to the wall, and allowed time for her trainers' squeaks to subside between each step. It reminded her of being a teen again, slinking to her bedroom after a night spent with Jezza, desperate not to make a sound, knowing that the slightest creak would wake her parents' wrath.

At the twenty-fifth floor she let herself into the lobby.

Before the lights came on, there were men in each corner, four of them, waiting – a trap. But when the now familiar flickering to life was done, the men turned into pot plants, their thick green leaves like rubbery imploring hands. Instead of earth, the pots were rim-full of smooth stones, between which, she imagined, each plant's roots twined and clutched. Low-maintenance vitality.

She took the right-hand door. There were offices here, but glass-walled, and she could see through them to the outside world – London after dark was a fair-ground whose wheels kept turning. Sleek buildings, already higher than they had a right to be, strained further skywards still, while in the spaces between them cranes clustered, resembling huge metal birds, building nests where the city allowed.

The streets were different at night too. Were colder, damper, and those who asked you for change did so in tones more aggressive than suppliant. The daylight hours taught them to know their place, and know it they did, and it was here, and now.

But she had a job to do. And once she was back on the street, Harvey would be waiting for her, bearing the thanks of a grateful Intelligence Service.

The office she was looking for was the largest on

the floor, a corner suite. Ahead of her, the lights buzzed to life, and she knew that if she were observing this building from across the road, a story would be telling itself, one in which a lone woman – probably a cleaner – made her way through the night, scattering darkness as she went. But no one would guess her real mission. The door was not locked. She entered the room. *It will take two minutes, no more.* Harvey's promise. Before the lights had time to turn themselves off, she would be on her way back to the stairwell. She approached the desk, on which a laptop sat, locked to its docking device with a chain sleeved in plastic. *Two minutes.* She reached into her pocket for the flash drive.

It was gone.

Whatever happens, you mustn't let this fall into their hands.

She went through her pockets again – all of them. Even the ones the drive had never been in.

They mustn't find it. I can't tell you how crucial that is.

In her throat, a rising tide. It would all overcome her now, this mission she'd been chosen for, its importance, her own inconsequence. She could run away, hide under her bed, let the world go on without her. Except that that's precisely what it would do, wouldn't it? If she ran now, and failed in her mission, then the things Harvey had warned her about would happen, and the world would turn for the worse.

Once it's done its job, you have to either get it out of the building, or hide it somewhere it won't be found.

It hadn't done its job yet, and it was still in the building. It must have fallen from her pocket, would be on the stairwell, or somewhere between this office door and the lobby, or else . . .

The toilet.

There, where she'd crouched for hours, waiting for the office block to grow quiet and dim. She'd all but frozen in place, and even now her arms and legs felt heavy. But before leaving she'd had a pee, and that must have been when it happened, must have been when the flash drive wriggled free from her pocket. How could she not have heard it? But that was a useless thread to follow. For now, the choice was stark. She could return to the lavatory on the eighteenth floor, or . . .

Or the world would turn for the worse.

Maggie left the office. For no sensible reason she ran in a half-crouch along the corridor, as if that silent watcher in the neighbouring building weren't simply following her story but preparing to pick her off with a high-powered rifle. But the watcher didn't exist. She was alone, and hadn't been found yet, but she had no right to be here, and there was a guard on a floor below, and more people below that. All these nervy thoughts made her clumsy – at the door to the lobby her lanyard caught on a button, and in a brief slapstick routine she tugged its catch loose and her security pass fell to the floor. She bent to collect it and, as she straightened up, saw through the lobby door's porthole window the lift opening, and a man stepping out.

Once through the door, he stopped.

Was he sniffing the air, like a dog, for strangers?

Maggie had scrambled round the corner. She was now in a break-out area, so called, as if it were from here that workers might make their escape: an area three metres square, surrounded by high-backed sofas. She

was lying on one in case he dropped to the floor and scanned for visible feet. Though it was more likely that he would simply walk past and see, not just her feet, but all of her, one whole young woman, twenty-six, very scared.

She closed her eyes, that ancient trick. *I can't see you, you can't see me.*

Harvey, what do I do now?

The man was talking. That same bass delight she'd heard in the stairwell. Joshua, the guard.

'Yo, yeah, I'm on twenny-five.'

crackle

'No, it's juss, lights are on, man. Like something triggered them?'

crackle

'Pussy yourself, man. Doing a job here.'

crackle

'Yeah, well, you get tired watching TV, we can always swap.'

The crackling stopped.

Joshua paused.

He's by the pigeonholes, thought Maggie.

She knew those pigeonholes well.

And if he was by the pigeonholes, he was standing not far from where she lay. Might even be staring in her direction. If he had X-ray vision, she was caught already. And if she made a sound, a squeak, a rustle . . . She was trying not to breathe. To make herself smaller than small.

The floor creaked. He'd taken a step.

Towards her?

It was like a thought experiment. Any move she made to determine his whereabouts would give her own away.

Another creak.

Was that one closer?

The sofa was red, though this didn't matter. Of the other three, another was also red, and the remaining pair were blue. Big bright bold shades. There'd have been a meeting and someone would have passed round a catalogue and a vote would have been taken. Unless there was an underlying protocol which overrode democracy – a corporate livery, a company style. This didn't matter either. All that mattered was that she was curled up on the world's reddest sofa, whose tall back was the only thing shielding her from—

crackle

'Yo.'

crackle

'Sweet, man, yeah, maybe a mouse. You know I put them traps down? The humane ones? Catch and release, right?'

The planet shifted, and if she hadn't already put a hand to her mouth, wasn't already biting down on her outstretched index finger, she'd have screamed.

He had turned and was leaning against her sofa. The back of his head had swum into her ken, a shaved and cratered moon.

'I'll release it I catch it all right. Release it from the window. Twenny-five floors, see if the little fucker lands on its feet.'

crackle

'So yeah. Kettle on. See you in ten.'

She could not breathe. She could not move. She could swear she could feel his heat.

Could smell the odour of smoked cigarettes.

The sofa moved again, crawled half an inch across

the floor, and seemed to vibrate at the same time – what was he doing, was he toying with her?

Catch and release. This was what cats did, they played with their food.

And then her heart flipped as he let out a huge sigh:

‘ . . . Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh . . . ’

When Maggie realised what he was doing, that he was using the sofa’s high back as a scratching post, she had to bite down on her finger again, this time to keep hysteria in. A big burly man, and he was giving it a real jiggle, reaching those places his own hands never could. It must feel so great, it must feel so grand, but oh God, what if he came round to push the sofa back into place when he was done? There she’d be, curled up like his special treat, and all he’d have to do was reach out and pluck her.

It didn’t happen. The sofa stopped moving as he finished his scratch and then he was gone, back the way he’d come. She lay there while he, presumably, checked the nearest offices, their glass frontages making it unnecessary for him to step inside, and then she was hearing the lobby door open and close, after which there was only silence.

Five minutes later, maybe less, the lights went out.

Harvey, you should have been there.

She wanted to make herself happy, to turn this into an anecdote.

It was like being trapped up a tree, only the bear can’t see you. And all it wants to do is rub its back against the bark.

But it wasn’t working. Joshua was gone, yes, but she was still here, and the flash drive still seven floors below, in the ladies’ loo – she hoped – and there was nothing

funny about any of it. Maybe one day. Maybe when she was in a wine bar, and Harvey was pouring the last of the second bottle into her big glass. Then it would be funny. But not yet.

The seconds ticked by, followed slowly by the minutes. She wondered if it were true, if there were mice in the building, and with the thought came a phantom tickle up her thigh, and she yelped and slapped at her leg – couldn't help it – and the lights came on.

Which was, as it were, a wake-up call. Maggie stood and clenched her fists and hurried to the door. Let herself through to the lifts, whose numbers showed that three were at ground level, the other on the twelfth. This was as much a guarantee of safety as she was going to get. Out on the stairwell the air felt colder, so much so her breath was visible. She counted the steps down: twelve per half-flight. One hundred and sixty-eight in all.

On the eighteenth floor, all was quiet. There were no potted plants here, though, and it struck her she'd never noticed this before. At night, you have different eyes. Different details shuffle into view.

In the ladies', everything was as she'd left it. The door to the third cubicle hung open and the toilet lid was down. The automatic freshener had spritzed the air, and a tang of artificial pine prickled her senses, but on the floor there was nothing – no flash drive – and her heart slumped inside her.

Whatever happens . . .

Where was it?

. . . you mustn't let this fall into their hands.

If not here, where?

She'd have seen it on the stairs if that's where she'd

dropped it. It would not have been possible to miss a thumb-sized wedge of plastic . . . This was the process her mind was going through, a logical one-step, two-step that, followed to its destination, would restore everything to how it ought to be, and leave her triumphant, the flash drive in her palm. But her body had ideas of its own, and even now was forcing her onwards, one extra step, beyond that final cubicle to the wash area, where the basins lined the wall. And there, in the centre of the floor, having scuttled under the partition, lay the flash drive. It was with a peculiar sense of calm and rightness that she bent to retrieve it. All that panic, Maggie, and where did it get you? Just an unnecessary shock, when if you'd gone about things in a methodical way, you'd be out of the building by now.

It was time to take a grip. Drive firmly in hand, she left the toilets and headed up the stairs again. The lights on the twenty-fifth were still on, her recent presence still eddying the air. In the corner office she knelt by the desk, unfolded the flash drive so its male part was showing, and inserted it into its port. Then turned the computer on.

‘What will it do?’

Harvey had looked at her thoughtfully, weighing up, she assumed, the exact degree of her right to know.

And if he had refused to say, would it have made a difference? She had come this far, after all – had allowed herself to be recruited. This might have made others bridle. Made them feel used. But being used was being shown that you were useful. And Maggie wanted to be useful.

Besides, he had already told her so much, so much.

‘The company is not what it claims to be,’ for instance.

And: ‘If you could be part of something huge – something life-savingly important – what risk would you be willing to run?’

Nobody would know, of course. That had been clear from the start. The heroism he was offering was anonymous, deniable, and might even be deemed criminal if things went wrong.

Turning it over and over in his mind, the way she was turning the flash drive over in her hand.

‘It will install a surveillance program into the company’s network.’

‘ . . . That’s all?’

‘It’s enough, believe me.’

He had a halting way of speaking, a verbal dawdle that became more pronounced when he was at his most earnest.

‘It will allow us to monitor all their internal communications.’

‘Can’t you do that anyway?’

‘Theoretically, yes. But not without using a much wider net. And that means bringing in GCHQ, and that means . . . I’m sorry, Maggie. We’re outside your need to know here.’

She said, ‘You’re worried that the more people know, the more chance there is of someone leaking the operation.’

‘Maggie . . .’

‘You’re worried there’s a traitor in your organisation.’

He glanced around.

‘Nobody’s listening, Harvey.’

She felt like they’d just swapped shoes – here she was, reassuring him. But they were talking quietly, and

the café was its usual mid-morning mayhem. Infants in their carriages and mothers on their phones. They'd have more chance of being overheard if they'd been using semaphore.

Harvey said, 'Certain operational . . . weaknesses have come to light. Which make this a particularly . . . sensitive matter.'

'Which is why you need me.'

He smiled that gently ugly smile of his. 'Which is why I need you.'

The drive weighed nothing. Weighed less than a snowflake.

'So I . . . ?'

'You plug it into the USB port, then turn the computer on.'

'I'll need a password.'

'Nope. You just wait until you're prompted for one. Then power down, and then remove the drive. Couldn't be simpler.'

It was safe in her grip. Safe in her hand.

Couldn't be simpler.

The screen asked for a password, in that officious way screens had.

Maggie was tempted to key a retort, *Ha ha, screw you*, but had visions of a net dropping from the ceiling, of bells going off. To have come this far to get snatched now, well. That would be . . . disappointing.

She held the power button down until the machine emitted its yelp, then closed the lid, pulled the flash drive free, and put it in her pocket.

Job done.

All that remained to do was leave.

She took a glance round the office before doing so. The view through the windows aside, it looked ordinary, as if no grim business were conducted here. The desk, the furniture, the two armchairs posed around the glass-topped coffee table, were unassumingly anonymous. The art on the wall had been chosen not to draw the eye. She had a vision of whoever it was did business behind this desk, a blank-faced man, a featureless woman, with a circular face and an inked-in nose. And then she blinked it away, and headed for the lobby.

For a moment, she considered summoning the lift and dropping twenty-five floors in one fell swoop, marching past the front desk with a wave. Harvey was waiting for her down the road. He'd be standing on a corner, their appointed rendezvous, checking his watch. *My clever girl*, he'd call her, or something. Job done. Job done.

But the lift would be a mistake, a change of gear she had no business making. Careful steps had got her this far, and careful steps would see her home. She let herself back into the stairwell. Twenty-five flights, fifty sets of stairs. There was a rhythm waiting in them, and her feet found it soon enough, just at that tipping point between speed and safety. When Maggie looked down she couldn't see the ground floor, and when she looked up couldn't see the roof. Caught between two extremes, so much the opposite of her real life, she might as well have stepped, not into a stairwell, but through the back of a wardrobe.

There'd be time for thoughts like this later. For now what mattered was these remaining flights, fifteen of them, fourteen and a half. Fourteen.

On the thirteenth floor, where else, the door opened, and she all but ran into his arms.

‘Miss?’ he said.

‘Oh,’ she said. She came to a halt. Vocabulary failed her. ‘Oh.’

‘Can I ask what you’re doing here, miss?’

‘I was just . . . on my way home.’

‘But you shouldn’t be up here, should you, miss?’ Joshua tilted his big head to one side. ‘Not this time of night. I know you, though. I know you, right?’

‘I work here,’ she said, fumbling her security pass free.

He clicked his fingers. ‘I do know you,’ he said. ‘You work in the post room.’

‘. . . That’s right.’

‘You work in the post room,’ he repeated. ‘But you shouldn’t be here now.’

‘No, I was going home.’

‘Yes, miss,’ he said. ‘But you’d better come with me first. Just while we straighten this out.’