

III

AN ANTHOLOGY OF MULTI-MEDIA SLASH FICTION

VOLUME THREE

WARNING: THIS ANTHOLOGY CONTAINS SAME SEX, ADULT ORI-ENTED MATERIAL. IT WILL NOT BE SOLD TO ANYONE UNDER THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN.

Published by:
Oblique Publications
PO Box 43784
Tucson, AZ
USA 85733-3784

oblique@oblique-publications.net http://www.oblique-publications.net

Send SASE or email for information.

Age statement required.

Pæan to Priapus III is an amateur publication, copyright © Oct. 1991 by Oblique Publications. All rights reserved. This copyright is not intended to infringe upon or conflict with other holders of copyrights. No reprints of any type are permitted without express, written permission of the publisher and individual contributors involved.

Also available from Oblique Publications the OBLAQUE series (Blake's 7 slash)

Oblaque

Oblaquer

Oblaquest

Oblaque IV: to be taken intravenously

Oblaque V: in venery veritas

the BENT COPPERS series (The Professionals slash)

...As a £3 Note

...As Two £3 Notes

the PÆAN TO PRIAPUS series (multi-media and literary slash)

Volumes I and II

This volume of **Pæan to Priapus** is dedicated with love to LDM, tolerant, long-suffering husband who seems to lose me to the computer for weeks at a time. (Sorry dear, no great white whangers this time. Can you wait til next?)

-CKC

CONTENTS

PREFACE CAROLINE K. CARBIS, EDITOR

ENGLISH DETECTIVES

A Gentleman's Gentleman 4 M. Fae Glasgow

CIVIL SERVANTS Back Alley 15 L. A. Scotian Just a Kiss 24 Dawn Woods

ENGLISH DETECTIVES Quantum of Solace 31 M. Fae Glasgow

ODDS, SODS... Triple Cross 51 J. M. Fabrication 53 Mona Moore The Cat's Miaow 54 Cally Fornia Donia

> ...AND REBELS Assault 57 Emma Scot

CIVIL SERVANTS Nanny's Teddy Tales and Other Bedtime Stories: Bedtime Story 70 Edi N. Burgh Wrong End of the Stick 80 Gael X. Ile

ENGLISH DETECTIVES Carpe Diem 95 M. Fae Glasgow

CIVIL SERVANTS Question Time 114 M. Fae Glasgow

Welcome to our third time out with this series. Several things set this issue apart. First, I'm sorry to disappoint Blake's 7 fans, but there is only one B7 story; that's just the way things worked out. Second, you'll find three related stories under the general title 'English Detectives'. M. Fae Glasgow picked three favorite literary 'tecs and did her usual 'what if'. Some of the characterizations are based on the written word while others are drawn more from televised versions. Third, there is another general heading of 'Civil Servants'. Here you'll find Wiseguy and The Professionals. You'll also find a novella about Peter Balliol, the MP character from For the Greater Good. Finally, somewhat after the fact, M. Fae and I realized that AIDS is also a recurring theme. With one exception, it doesn't dominate any story (and even then the story is not about death and dying, but about human rights and how we treat the living). Fiction and fantasy (and slash is certainly lovely fantasy) allow for anything, but the Glaswegian feels that the contemporary, more realistic pieces she does sometimes simply have to acknowledge the plague of our day.

And now, dear reader, enjoy the zine. Until the next issue!

ENGLISH **DETECTIVES**

A GENTLEMAN'S GENTLEMAN M. FAE GLASGOW

I have based this story on the books alone, and with no reference to the television adaptations, but you, obviously, must feel free to bring any interpretation of your own to this. I've taken information given in several of the books, most notably details given of Lord Peter's relationship with Bunter, the terms of affection used (although I took the liberty of stealing Lord Peter's affectionate 'acushla' from Parker and giving it to Bunter), also the triggeringpoint of Lord Peter's nightmares. I have chosen to expand upon subtle, doubtlessly entirely innocent details in the books (such as Lord Peter's pleasure over 'charmin' things' written to him in a letter from Mervyn Bunter; Lord Peter reaching out to Bunter and then racing off to his bath upon being ignored by someone 'too well-trained to notice' such things; the fact that Bunter's heart leapt in his breast when his master chose him instead of his new bride; the occasion upon which Bunter was so fearful of Lord Peter's life that he quite forgot himself and neglected to add 'my lord' at the end of every sentence uttered). Of such small innocences are large degeneracies built.

"YOURMAN BUNTER is an absolute treasure, isn't he, Peter old bean."

Lord Peter Wimsey waved his recently-removed boutonnière in the vague and general direction of his confidential man and assistant. "He's my right hand, couldn't do a thing without him, don't you know. He's my only bastion against falling into the dread Abyss of utter Chaos. Without my Bunter, life would be simply too, too dreadful to contemplate."

Mr. Bunter, the perfect gentleman's gentleman of the imperturbable sort, merely said: "More coffee, my lord?"

"M'm, an' once that's over the old palate, I do rather think we shall have a new bottle of brandy. Perfect way to end our little adventure in sleuthin', what? A fine 1800 Napoleon, absolute heaven an' quite the right reward. Have you finished potterin' about in the dinin' room yet?"

"Not quite, my lord."

"Well, when you have, do join us for a spot of brandy an' then a cigar before bed, why don't you. After all, without you, Bunter mine, we would all be sittin' up to our necks in the muck an' mire of that damned ornamental pond instead of sittin' here at our ease an' in luxury, secure an' dashed content with ourselves. You shall," he added expansively, "have that new-fangled camera lens after which you have been pinin' so silently. Or anythin' else that has stolen your fancy away, Bunter dear."

There was real affection in Lord Peter Wimsey's grey eyes as he observed his servant, and then real concern as he observed the slight puffiness under that worthy's eyes. As he was so fond of saying himself, beware theories, for if a man has a theory, then one can be quite certain the man will see nothing that he does not fully expect to be there. Signs of mere mortal fatigue were not something he had ever thought to see on the redoubtable Bunter's face, and therefore, his theorem that Bunter was unique and above human weakness kept him blind. Now, however, the scales were taken from his sight, and he saw that which he might well have noticed before. "Have I been deuced beastly to you recently, Bunter?"

"No, my lord," this said as Bunter made his rounds of the room, refilling the other two brandy glasses, that of the Honourable Freddy Arbuthnot and that of Mr. Parker, Lord Peter's policeman friend.

"Are you quite sure? Bit of a drooping flower tonight, wouldn't you say, Freddy?" This appeal being made to the young man upon whom Lord Peter could usually depend for prompt and heartfelt agreement, regardless of topic.

"Bunter? Your man Bunter will be as fresh as a daisy when we three are all dead asleep in out beds, old bean. Nothing to worry about there, is there, Bunter?"

"No, sir, nothing at all."

"I suppose you rather enjoyed all the excitement of our recent sleuthin', what?" Lord Peter said, in his usually hearty, rather foppish manner that served him very well in his attempts to hide his light under a bushel, in order that he could thusly observe all the more closely without arousing the suspicions of the observed. "An uncommonly bright Watson!"

"Yes: and thank you, my lord. Does your lordship require anything else?" the flawless man-servant enquired, pausing in wellgroomed perfection before his master's chair.

"No, no, we can all take care of ourselves until I toss these reprehensibles out on their ears, Bunter. Unless your fancy runs to you joinin' us for a brandy or three, you toddle off to bed, why don't you."

"Thank you, my lord," which comment, Lord Peter was quick to notice, was the nearest thing to an admission of exhaustion as he was ever likely to hear pass the lips of the formidable Bunter.

"What time does your lordship wish to breakfast?"

"Oh, half-an-hour after I pry my bleary eyes open, I should think, so don't you bother about gettin' up or any of that rot. I shall call you when I need you an' I shan't be offended nor my maidenly modesty impugned if you show up in your night-clothes, don't you know."

"As you wish, my lord. If that's all, then I shall retire, my lord. Good-night, sir," a nod to the Honourable Freddy; "and good-night, Mr. Parker." He turned back to Lord Peter and came to an almost military attention, his manner suggesting the parade ground rather than the quiet elegance of the living-room. "And a good-night to you, my lord."

"Good-night, Bunter, good-night. An' I say, do leave all the dreadful household drudgery tonight—I shan't want to find you scrubbin' out the scullery when you should be in bed, don't you know!"

Another slight nod, and then the door was shut and Bunter was gone, borne away on silent feet.

Without the restraining civility of Lord Peter's man-servant, the brandy and the language began to flow somewhat more freely, the beginning chit-chat of the recovered rubies and apprehended ladies man giving way to discussion of those matters gentlemen prefer to air either only in the stanchioned privacy of their Clubs or in the lesser loftiness of the living-rooms of bachelor friends.

The conversation, eventually, and as it always did, turned back upon itself to the subject of Bunter.

Eyes half-closed, Parker surveyed the destruction of the living-room, glasses and bottles and cigar-filled ash-trays littering every available, once-gleaming surface. There was even a rather grimy coffee-cup upon the black baby grand piano, a single head of chrysanthemum floating in the creamy remains. "Poor Bunter," Parker said.

"For putting up with me, what? Could not, simply could not, agree with you more, dear chap.'

"You're not too dreadfully bad, Peter my chum. Your man Bunter does rather well for himself, if you ask me." This slurred and slanderous utterance coming from the depths of a primrose-yellow chair, the occupant of which had his feet propped rudely upon the shimmering black of the coffee-table.

"An' what are you implyin' with that, Freddy? Bunter is the most honest, most loyal, most uncommonly wonderful chap a man could ever wish for. Every penny, every half-penny, I swear, is accounted for an' he presents those damned books to me every blest week."

"I didn't intend any slur on his character, old bean. I was simply tryin' to say that you're not so appallin' an employer, that's all I wanted to say, don't you know. There's no cause for you to go leapin' down a man's throat, when all he's done is defend your character. I just wanted to say that your man Bunter probably goes to bed every night countin' his blessings that he has a master such as you instead of that blighter Fitzgerald." He took another, rather carefully negotiated, sip of brandy. "Would never dream of sayin' a word against Bunter."

"I should jolly well hope not. Wonderful man. Be lost without him, I would be absolutely at sixes an' sevens every hour of every day, if I didn't have my Bunter to keep me straight. Don't you know," and Parker groaned with all the fervour of the very nearly drunk at the very definitely drunk, for he knew that this was the hour and this the level of squiffiness that loosened the tongue into reminiscences: "that after the War, when I was so ghastly, absolutely just ghastly rotten with my nerves, he found this flat? He took care of all of the arrangements; he oversaw the decoratin' an' chose all the soft-furnishings too. He was an absolute brick to me. Did you know he saved my life durin' the war, an' said it was to say 'thank you' for savin' his, when all I had done was follow him through the mud, don't you..."

Lord Peter's eyes had taken on the murky complexity of a spider's web again, his vision turned inwards to where the din of battle had yet to cease. Silence ruled the cheerfully primrose room, until, with the dimmed slowness caused by an over-indulgence of spiritous refreshments, Messrs. Parker and Arbuthnot rose to leave their host. Their farewells went unanswered, for Lord Peter sat hunched in his chair, gone adrift in some world he, and he alone, knew bitterly, horribly well.

"D'you think we should rouse Bunter?" Freddy asked in a stage whisper, all the esses turned to shh! by the brandy.

"No; he'll go to Bunter himself if he needs him. I must confess, I feel a fool. We should have expected this: it's always the same. He worries himself with a problem and then when he has time to simply sit and think, his nerves start failing him. The drink only makes him worse. We really should have known better, shouldn't we?"

Together, they stood shoulder to shoulder, each one of them glad, with that pettiness of

human spirit to which we all of us are prey, that he himself was not the one to suffer the depravations and humiliations of shell-shock and nervous indisposition of those few who had come back from the Sommes. After a time, each still with his burden of guilt, they turned, letting themselves out, the Yale-lock latching behind them with a melancholy click that did not impinge itself upon the lonely state of misery into which Lord Peter was slowly sinking. Perhaps, if we had been able to listen in to the sounds seeping into his mind, ebbing and flowing at first with the tides of memory, we too would have heard the distant lower of battle coming ever closer, ever more deadly. Perhaps, had we heard with his ears, we too would have heard the horror of men dying, doing what we had sent them over the top to do. Perhaps, had we seen with his eyes, we too would see the nightmare of No-Man's Land from which, for too many, there was no awakening, sucked down into the mud before last breath was breathed; or perhaps we would have been as Wimsey himself was: trapped in the memory of what it had been to be alive there, when all around you, and oftentimes under your orders, men were dying...

A noise, a sibilant silent moving, foot-step gliding over carpeting of a lesser quality than that which graced Lord Peter's domain, but that small noise in the night was no longer enough to disturb Bunter's slumber. The pressure of one hand on his shoulder and another over his mouth served, instead, to startle him from his cotton-woolled dreams.

"Hush, Sergeant!"

This was hissed at him from very close quarters, Lord Peter's brandy-warmed breath caressing his cheek, waking him immediately and alerting him precisely to the nature of the situation. It was not entirely unexpected, but he had hoped that the progress would have continued and that they would have had a longer interim between these nervous attacks.

"Be very, very quiet. There's an advance troop, not far from here—hsst! Listen, you can hear them. Can you? Hear them, Sergeant, can you hear them? Are they too close to my men? The reconnaissance unit I sent out at

dusk, they have come back, haven't they? All of them? Whole, none of them maimed? There aren't any more letters for me to write back to anyone's family, are there? Shh! don't say a word, they'll hear you!"

"It's all right if they hear me, Major. It's our own men, come back from their mission."

"Then I must go and receive their report, find out what the Bosch is doing, what he's planning. I must—but can't you hear the screaming, Sergeant? Bunter, oh, Bunter, it's young Davidson. Can't you hear him, choking in that foul water? He's trapped, Sergeant! I saw him falling, he fell into one of the shell-holes, and the water splashed all up around him, and I can hear him now, choking, I must go, I know I can pull him out—"

Bunter took a steadying grip of his master's arm, holding him still against the lure of healing something that could never be healed: he, too, had seen young Davidson go down. He, as well as the Major, had seen with the appalling brutality of war that Davidson had no possible fear of still being alive when he sank into that shell-hole of disease and decomposition. "Major," he said, holding on firmly whilst he rose from his bed, disdaining the proprieties in favour of the necessities, his dressing-gown remaining across the bottom of his bed. Clad, and most un-Bunterlike, in blue-striped pyjamas creased and crinkled from the heat of his bed. he began, with the infinite care and bottomless tact for which he was so rightly treasured, to lead Lord Peter—now gone back to being Major Peter Wimsey—to his bed and, he hoped with an aching heart, to rest.

It took a few minutes and much manœuvering, but finally, they gained the bedside, Wimsey's eyes still wide-pupilled and wild, his skin pallid and clammy, his entire body shaking as if an ague had him in its grip. Bunter sat him on the edge of the bed and his well-practised and ever-skilled hands divested Wimsey of shoes and clothing, turning aside, for a mere moment, saying: "Let's get you into your pyjamas, shall we, Major?", the last word being drowned out by a hoarse scream of: "No! Don't leave me alone!" and the thud as Wimsey's knees hit the floor.

Of a sudden, Bunter had his arms full of his panicked master, the thunder of racing heart reminding Bunter, breathlessly and dreadfully, of the tortured nights in the trenches. "It's all right, Major," he crooned, stroking the tow-coloured hair back from the high forehead, and after a few moments of this, his own voice proved to be a very pleasant baritone, easing into a blend of childhood's lullabies and the more cheerful of the popular songs of their days together at the Front. With a tenderness that would have shocked many, but not, perhaps, Lord Peter's mother, who knew far more than she ever breathed to a living soul, and who understood far more than the narrow mind of her vicar could ever comprehend with his unyielding fire and brimstone: with that same tenderness, Bunter lay his master down, intending to cover and calm him. Wimsey, however, with the mindlessness of fear that made him so loathe this aspect of his nervous destruction, clung to him fiercely.

"Don't leave me, oh, please, don't leave me! You can't, you mustn't, don't go," the endless pleading began, a familiar litary that never failed to bring tears to the publicly impeccable Bunter. Wimsey was curling himself inward, refusing, however, to lessen his grip on Bunter, thus pulling his man-servant off balance and on to the bed with him. "You mustn't leave me," whispered through the night, an anguished cry from a soul in the depths of despair, where faith no longer offers any hope and only the kindness of those one knows and trusts can give any comfort at all.

Stiff as a poker, Bunter tried, truly tried, to free himself, but Wimsey's agony would not let him go. "Please, sir," he begged in his turn: "Let me go. You must let me go. Oh, please..."

But it was not to be. Major Wimsey needed him, was desperate for some taste of mercy. The only one who had ever been able to help him, the only one who had ever stood beside him and suffered with him, had been Sgt. Bunter, and he could not allow Bunter to abandon him. In his nervous condition, his mind could not conceive of being left alone in this hostile, lethal darkness, and so he continued to cling, his breathing harsh in Bunter's ear, the sound of a man near his breakingpoint, struggling with bitter fortitude, not to

It was with something woefully close to gratitude that Bunter finally yielded and allowed himself to be drawn closer, until he held his master fully in his arms, the bedclothes pulled high enough to cover his master's nakedness, but not so high that the light of the moon could not find a swathe of perfectly pale skin to caress with its coolness. Bunter was a man of tremendous moral fibre. but which one of us would be proof against our heart's desire being placed so trustingly in our arms and needing to receive that which we needed to give? In this, if in so little else, Bunter proved to be nothing more, and nothing less, a man.

His hands were trembling, but still, he did it: he reached down and stroked, his palm flat and warm, across the tensely bunched muscles of Major Wimsey's shoulders. His own breath shuddered loudly, and at that, and the softly loving touch on his skin, Wimsey raised his head far enough so that he could see Bunter and looked clearly and closely at him. Only those of exceptional expertise in the field of human nervousness, and in the new philosophical science of what happened to a few, tormented men after the unspeakable horrors of war, would recognise that this was not Lord Peter Wimsey, fully compos mentis in the dark hollow of days between '20 and '21, but a man thrown back to being the very person he had been in '18, the final months of the Great War, frayed and fragile and very, very far from home indeed. There might be a muddle of experiences this time: perhaps the very first time, all mixed in with those furtive, almost shame-filled times, when Wimsey had come to the khaki cot that was in the far corner of his tent, perhaps even a mixing in of some of Lord Peter's own youth.

"D'you remember, Mervyn?" Major Wimsey asked, and the use of his Christian name made Bunter groan and his body betray him. "I can't forget it. That shell-pock, an' all the night-sky lit up as if it were a bally party. But we knew it was more shells comin' in—an' tryin' to catch us, what! You kept me sane that night, don't you know, even if we should never have done what we did. I suppose fear

does funny things to men, especially in the trenches when all you can smell is death and pain..."

Bunter knew what was coming next. Both during the War and since their reunion after the War there had been many repetitions of this particular act within this particular scene, with only the smallest of variations in the words the Playwright had written for them. None of it mattered, these small changes in their ritual, but only were you to stand beyond this room and disregard the criminal nature of the act that was now inevitable. No matter how deeply he scoured his heart, Bunter could not find it in himself to consider what he did to be criminal. Rather, it gave both comfort and healing, and since it had begun happening again, his master was recovering all the more quickly. So he asked himself: 'where's the harm? It makes me happy, gives me a bit of comfort and pleasure for myself, and it helps his lordship no end. It would be worse, really, to try to turn him away when he's like this. And who's to say what would happen to his poor mind and the terrible state of his nerves if I bade him no.' His conscience duly apportioned its due, his fingers strayed the length of his lordship's—'Peter's', he reminded himself, 'he's Peter again'-face, coming to rest on wide, rather thin lips.

"It wasn't the War, not for me," he said, as he always did, secure in the certainty that all this would be gone from Peter's awareness when he awakened in the morning, "I fell in love with you the instant I saw you. You were at the adjutant's tent, creating all sorts of botherations because you had no batman to take care of all the things you couldn't possibly be troubled with if you were to make a decent go of being an officer-'don't you know'!" he added with gentle mockery, still stroking flesh that was slowly losing its chill under the affection of his touch. "And I said to myself, that's the one for me. They had me marked down for someone else, but I slipped a whole pound to the man who made up the lists and had him send me to you."

"I didn't know that," Peter said, as he always did, genuine surprise written all over his face. "That was rather rum of you, don't you know. I'm not entirely sure—"

"Shh," Bunter whispered, his fingers playing over parted lips, "it's all over and done with now. isn't it?"

"Is it? But I can still hear them, Mervyn. Can't you? The dripping of the water—if there's too much of it, or if it should rain, we could drown here before one of the shells get us. And—" the panic was coming back, taking Major Wimsey away: "Bunter! The shells are being fired from beyond us now! It's happened, we have fallen behind enemy lines! They'll torture me for the plans if they capture me, you know that! You must kill me, now, before they can get me!"

"No, sir: beg pardon, for taking such a liberty, but you'll feel much better when I do," Bunter said very loudly, slapping Wimsey's face to break the rising hysteria, in present time as he had in the past, during that dreadful night. "I'm not going to kill you, no matter what. We're not behind their lines. we're in No-Man's Land and we are stuck, but only for the moment. I can get us back to our own lines, I promise you I can. The gentleman who employed me before all this had several country houses and one of them had boglands near it. Believe me, sir, I can get us through this mud and back to where we belong. You just have to give me a little time, until this fog lifts enough for me to know which way is which, and I'll get us home. I promise."

"Promise? Truthfully?"

"Yes, sir, truthfully. On my father's grave, I promise you."

He lay remembering in silence, as Lord Peter lay beside him, also remembering, perhaps the same things, perhaps different things, but of one thing we can be completely certain: neither man was yet truly free of the War, and neither one of them had yet found the Great Peace for which they had both fought so bravely.

It seemed, when it had first happened, (and it had happened more times than some people might say it should have both during the War itself and in the months since Bunter had been in Lord Peter's employ,) it seemed the most natural and the most charitable thing in the world, when he felt that hard thrusting of mortal fear against his thigh, to

reach out and take Major Wimsey—Peter—in his knowledgeable hands and ease him out of fear with pleasure.

Of course, it had been little more than that the very first time, trapped together in a shallow hollow barely large enough to shelter one man, and positively inadequate for the comfortable, or polite, shelter of two. They had already been pressed so closely together that Bunter had not had to move more than an inch or two to undo the buttons of Wimsey's fly, and it had taken little more than a few strokes of his hand to have Wimsey shuddering in release against him. There had been no surprise in him at that, only a deep happiness that he had been allowed such intimacy with the man he so loved and whose class placed him so completely beyond even his most foolish phantasms. The surprise for him had come when Wimsey, his face buried against Bunter's shoulder in an attitude he had since learned was an habitual one, had repeated Bunter's own actions, but on Bunter's person. Bunter, ever sensitive to the correct and proper manners, had protested, quite naturally, wishing to protect Wimsey from this vice into which he had been guilty of introducing his lordship, only to hear some muttering, barely distinguishable under the relentless pounding of both his heart and the enemy shells, words that sounded the way 'Eton' and 'Balliol' would if muffled against one's shoulder. It may even have been that his fear for his life added to the pleasure, but it had been the most wonderful experience of his life when Wimsey had reached his hand inside the coarse khaki of Bunter's own uniform and taken his member into a hand that was probably as knowledgeable as his own had been.

But that had been in the mud and the malodorousness of a shell-hole. They were in a soft and comfortable bed, now, and it was not the decay of other men's flesh that clung to Lord Peter's skin, but the lingering, tangy sweetness of verbena. There was never any trace of memory after one of these nights; each time it happened Lord Peter repeated it as if it were completely new, but his body demonstrably remembered what the mind forgot. There was far more to it now than the

boyish innocence of mutual manipulation of each other's private parts: there was, after all this long time together, a passionate experience between them, one that had branched out and flourished to include every aspect of the Greek love in which Bunter was rather shamefully well-versed. Bunter had also found, in the odd way of the nervous mind, that although Wimsey was thrown back to the War, when he came out of the battle scene, he would still want what he had come to crave as comfort in the field, and he had begun to commingle it with things learned and heard in the modern day of his life. Hence, (although the first time a passage from some ancient Greek writings had featured prominently in their night-time involvements, this inclusion of their real life had given Bunter a leaping, but sadly false hope, a hope that this might be more than a nervous tick of Wimsey's), hence it was that Peter would use some passage or some illustration from some ancient and rude book to arouse them both; equally, he might well employ the words that one was prone to hear when one dealt so frequently with the criminal classes. It made little difference to Bunter: he treasured every moment, all the more fiercely, perhaps, from knowing that Lord Peter would remember it not at all, that in the morning, they would be nothing more than master and servant once again, although the master was far more affectionate than most and the servant had to refuse some of the more excessive liberties offered him.

The hall clock was ticking very slowly tonight, every slight click and wheeze an eternity of duration, whilst Bunter waited for the moment to arrive, when Lord Peter would come through this last painful barrier into something that was neither light nor dark, but a sort of Limbo, where they lingered for a while. He truly could not believe that what they shared was evil enough to actually cast them into Hell itself, no matter what the vicars and Bishops said, but he knew that it was enough to keep him from Heaven. It was something he had thought of, often and with deep consideration, and he had marked this love to be worth the penalty he would have to pay. Indeed, as time went on and he gained

more happiness from this than from any of the dealings a man of his station and class was expected to have with the gentler sex, he had come to the decision that he would rather spend an eternity in Limbo than a lifetime in matrimony. He was rather fond of ladies, but as one would be of friends. His passion, that of the heart and of the flesh, was saved for his lordship now. His lordship, as if hearing this inimitable thought, began to move within the tender strength of Bunter's arms and it took only a very few interminable ticks of the clock for his pyjamas to be removed and consigned to the floor.

Bunter shivered in purest delight as lips caressed the point of his shoulder and as Peter's tongue dappled and dipped into the hollows of his throat. He arched his neck, so that his head tipped back and out of the way, to free more of his flesh for caressing. His own hands were not still, smoothing and kneading Peter's skin, daring lower and lower. His master lifted himself up upon his elbows, and then smiled down, with infinite sweetness and profound innocence—a complete freedom from guilt, which made Bunter, in his turn, feel more innocent still—before bowing his head to bring his lips to Bunter's and to kiss him, quite profoundly.

Straight, exquisitely soft hair brushed Bunter's face, and he reached up, filling his hands to overflowing with it. In the course of a day, he might brush this hair as often five times, but on those occasions, he must needs keep his face impassive and his hands impersonal, no matter how desperately he might long to caress the silken strands. He was under no such compunctions now, and he intoxicated himself with the feel of it, indulging his own desires.

"You really love my hair, what?" Peter asked him, breaking off from kissing him barely long enough to ask the question and certainly not long enough for Bunter to answer. "Well," and then there were more kisses. before he said: "I love everything about you. I love your black hair, so thick and lush. Your eyes, with eyelashes black as soot and eyes, oh, the way you look at me, Mervyn, acushla, makes my heart glad. And your mouth, I like that best of all when it is swollen and pinked

by my kisses."

Bunter, mouth covered by Peter's, could answer only with his body, surging up priapically with every seductive compliment.

"You have such a beautiful body, acushla mine. One day, I shall take you to Italy an' show you all the sculptures, and then you shall see how beautiful you are. Michaelangelo could have moulded you, your muscles so hard and your skin so flawlessly white. But," Peter gave a low, vulgar chuckle that thrilled Bunter to the depths of his soul, "you are of much," a hand squeezed his phallus: "much," there was another caress, so perfect that he was growing in size with heart-thumping speed: "better proportions in those areas of purely masculine beauty, don't you know."

There was nothing they had not shared together, and there was nothing that Bunter did not dare. "Take me in your mouth," he asked, urging his lordship to kiss a path down his body.

"I shall take you in my mouth," Peter said through a mouthful of alabaster pap, the flesh warm and responsive against his tongue, "and pay homage to you."

Impatient with the impediments of the cloth, Wimsey threw the bedclothes aside, sheets and blankets and counterpane landing in a tangled heap by the side of his bed. He cared nothing for those, only for the perfect masculinity revealed in new nakedness. Bunter was, as Peter had said, as beautiful as a statue created by one of the Old Masters, but far from as cold or as lifeless. Every inch of him was tingling, and he was writhing and wriggling with the pleasure given him. His body was pale in the moonlight, apart from the dashes of black hair that high-lighted details of his body, most particularly a line of soft blackness that Peter was following to where it blossomed into a small bush of hair, and a most need-filled erection pulsing there.

"Oh, what a beauty you are, Mervyn acushla, what a rare and perfect beauty you are."

With those words, Mervyn Bunter arched in an exquisite agony of delight, for Peter's mouth had descended upon him, and Bunter could barely endure the joy of watching his flesh disappear into that loving and amorous mouth. His flesh was gleaming, here, with the

perspiration of passion, and there, with the moisture of his lordship's oral caressing. It was, very nearly, his undoing, and so he tugged, breathless and wordless, until Peter freed him and came to lie beside him.

"Not so fast, Peter," Bunter said, his eyes gazing at Peter's face whilst his hands tweaked and twisted Peter's nipples, much to that man's delight. "Shall I tell you what I want tonight?" he asked, pausing once to taste the prominence of small pink nipple.

"Oh, yes, tell me. Tell me the way I like to hear it, oh, please, do indulge me. I shall," he said, and his eyes were very knowingly seductive, "do anything at all, absolutely anything at all that you might want me to."

"Well, then, I shall indulge you, as you shall indulge me. I want to roger you, Peter, I want to bugger you and sodomise you, and fuck you. I want to know you," he said, his hand going between Peter's legs, and he smiled as Peter rolled away from him, but only so that he might return, flat upon his belly, his nether regions exposed and utterly defenceless. "I want to cleave to you, and plough you and plant my seed right in you."

Peter stretched his arms behind himself and parted his cheeks, exposing that most secret of buds, pink and vulnerable to Bunter's exploring fingers.

"You want me to, don't you? Shall I fuck you, then? Shall I?"

"Oh, yes, fuck me, plant me with your seed," Peter moaned, rubbing his front and his own hardened need against the sheet. "Come on, Mervyn, do me."

"In just a moment, Peter, you stay there just like that, while I get something to ease my way in your back passage. Wouldn't want to cause either of us any hurt, would we now?" He did not even need to leave the bed, a small jar of soothing unguent being kept in the drawer beside the bed. It had much-vaunted medicinal purposes, but Bunter sincerely doubted if the manufacturer had divined some of the uses to which his gelatinous solution was put. He covered his fingers with it, and slowly eased one digit into Peter's bottom, smiling at the sheer animal pleasure this brought both of them. As the small mouth stretched hungrily for more, he slid a

second digit in, and then a third, until Peter was mewling with his pleasure and Bunter himself was dangerously close to being unable to control himself. Gently, he withdrew his finger and laid himself atop his lordship, his engorged penis finding the waiting maw easily enough. He pushed, not softly, the thickness of his shaft slowly disappearing inside the milk-white flesh, soft cries of delight coming from Peter and himself both. Peter shoved upwards, quite abruptly, and Bunter was buried up to the haft in him, and both their cries now were rough and animalistic, peppered and spiced with the crude eroticisms in which lovers find such pleasure.

Bunter withdrew, completely, the breached flesh closing only slowly behind him, and then he thrust forward, hard and immutable, plunging into Peter, possessing him thoroughly. Again and again he did this, watching his own hard flesh plunder softer flesh, taking absolute possession of his master, loving him to the very core of his being. Peter's body was hotly satined around him, a ribbon of tight muscle clenching at the base of his rigid priapism, keeping him inside the body he held so dear.

Peter was raging under him now, a maelstrom of pleasure and demanding need. He had pushed up onto his knees, so that Bunter was now coupled with him like a dog, so that Bunter could plunder him all the more deeply and with all the more determined force. Bunter, for his part, wrapped his arms around Peter's middle, clinging on tight as a barnacle, only his hips moving, up and down, like the pistons on a steam engine, stopping now, to remain buried in groaning flesh and to move, in tiny, deep circular motions of unendurable delight, until either he or Peter wrenched them back into the thrusting patterns once more.

Again and again, they did this, Bunter especially, although Peter assisted him with every ounce of his being, trying to make this last as long as possible. But as we have noted before, even Bunter is only human, and as he thrust deeply inside the man he loved beyond life itself, the hungry muscle clenched around him, milking him, whilst there was a quiver where his glans was buried in tender flesh. It

was then he felt the first hot-liquid spurts of le petit mort caress his hand. It was too much for him, and his body trembled and shuddered as he spent himself, his seed spilling inside Peter, anointing him with pleasure.

It was almost over now, the passions both nervous and animal. With a very gentle speed, Bunter used the large linen handkerchief and the carafe of water he always laid out for his lordship to clean away any evidence that might cause such difficult explanations if questioned. That routine task accomplished, Bunter lay in the dry warmth of Lord Peter's bed, his body comfortably and comfortingly entwined with his lordship's, waiting through the silence that happened now, as often as not, patient for the next words, for he treasured them, cherished them dearly and never tired, no matter the circumstances, of hearing them again. He longed for them, even though he knew that they marked the end of each idyllic tryst and signalled the marshalling forces of recovery, which he both loved and hated. Very quietly, it came, the softly spoken words marking both a beginning-of healing, for which he longed, truly longed with a profound unselfishness of love—and an ending—which he dreaded, with a depth of despair heartrending to know.

"This gentleman who employed you—is he holding your position for you?" The same words, spoken to him after their...liaison in the nightmare of being trapped in No-Man's Land.

"I'm afraid I really don't know, sir. No mention was made of it when I volunteered."

A pause here, as Wimsey thought the same thoughts he thought every time this happened. "I don't have much need for a gamekeeper myself, but I'm sure my brother would. He's not a bad chap, old Gerald. Quite a decent employer, I should imagine. I shall drop him a line for you, if you should find yourself in need of a position after all this is over."

"I am sorry if I misled you, sir. It was not in the capacity of gamekeeper that I was employed. I was a footman, Major." He held his breath in the real world, not wanting to miss the slightest nuance of what would be said next.

"A footman? Yet you were sent out into

mud?" This last was always uttered with the true loathing for mud that any man in the Trenches nurtured in his bosom. "Then, when this is all over and done with, and if we both come through all of this in once piece, don't you know, you come and look me up again. You've done an absolutely splendid job of batman to me here, I do believe you would be a spiffing valet." The blond-brown head ducked in to hide in the crook of Bunter's neck, and that man cradled Wimsey close, running his fingers through and through Wimsey's hair, eyes threatening to spill tears of happiness and misery both. "Be rather put out if I never got to see you again after what we've been through, don't you know."

"I shall be sure to do so, Major," he said, his voice trembling past the lump in his throat. Oh, how much an agony this was, and how much a pearl beyond any price to hear the words that told him he was wanted, and needed, and loved, in his way. Words that were spoken as they had been that night, not in the thoughtless heat of passion, but in the contemplative honesty of the aftermath.

"You will come to me, won't you? You will come and stay with me, be my man?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I shall," he said, promising himself so much farther beyond mere valet. He was promising his heart, his loyalty, his life. "The very instant I obtain my demobilisation papers, I shall present myself to you, and I will stay with you."

"Promise?" Lord Peter's voice was becoming vague and fragile now, a higher pitch entering into it, warning Bunter that they were running out of time.

"I promise you, Peter, I'll come to you and stay with you forever and for a day."

He had done precisely that, of course, and had, indeed, stayed with Lord Peter, and would continue to stay with Lord Peter, no matter what. There was only one thing that could possibly make him leave his lordship, and that would be a direct dismissal from the man's very lips. Rising from his master's bed, silent as ever, he knew that dismissal would never happen, excepting, of course, the risk of what his master might feel he was bound and due to do, if these nocturnal secrets were ever to come to light. Quietly, he put his

pyjamas back on to hide his nakedness, and then dressed Lord Peter in his favourite mauve silks, finally making the bed neat and tidy around him.

Padding on cold, naked feet, he went back to his own room, wrapping himself in his dressing-gown and slippers, so that if Lord Peter had returned enough from the night, then he should see nothing whatever amiss. Then on to the kitchen, whence he returned with the bromide ready for his master, and gave to him, Lord Peter propped up demurely on his pillows, Bunter standing decorously eighteen inches from the bedside.

Almost immediately, the bromide worked its usual magic, Lord Peter's eyes growing heavy with sleep. At the last moment, he stretched his hand out and whispered: "Mervyn, acushla."

Bunter came to him, of course, perching himself on the edge of the bed and holding the beloved hand while the very last of the man who called himself simply 'Peter', and who loved him, was subsumed by sleep and lost to him, if not forever, then until the next bout of nervous agony. Though it grieved him dreadfully to watch Peter fade away and leave him yet again, Bunter could not wish for his return, for such a return meant untold horrors for Lord Peter, whom Bunter loved as much, though more discreetly, as he did Peter.

Finally, Lord Peter was fully asleep, and so Bunter removed the extra pillows, disporting his master more comfortably to rest all the way through until morning. He left the hall light on, to give some light should the unwanted happen and his master awake in screaming nightmare, and by that light, he returned to the bedside. Bunter's gentle hands cradled his lordship's head, tangling in the tow-coloured hair at the temples, and a kiss, nonetheless chaste, but of fervent, passionate devotion was pressed to Lord Peter's brow.

"Good-bye," Bunter whispered, to his lover and his own unattainable dreams: "Good-bye."

"Oh, dash it all to the Seven Hells, Bunter! Why did you not remind me last night, *before* I had all that deuced brandy, I hasten to add, that my sister and my mother—both of them together, and me with a hang-over, Heaven help me!—were breakfastin' with me? Jolly poor show, Bunter, an' not up to your usual standards at all, don't you know."

"If I may be so bold, my lord," Bunter said, rearranging the chrysanthemums (which were, by supra-human efforts the only remaining visible sign of the entire preceding night), "I did not remind your lordship, because your lordship had not informed me of the event."

Lord Peter looked at him with the skittish remorse of an untried horse. "Oh, damn, I really am being beastly to you, what? I say, why don't you take the day off, have yourself a bit of a break away from me an' my silly trials an' tribulations. Take whatever cash is in the housekeepin' an' spend it on yourself. Go out an' buy yourself somethin' absolutely top-hole that you've wanted for absolutely ages, don't you know."

"If I might remind your lordship, the Dowager Duchess and the Lady Mary, your sister, will be arriving within the quarter hour."

"Oh. Right, absolutely. After brekkers then, you just take yourself off. Oh, do this for me, please, acushla?"

The endearment caught him completely by surprise and the chrysanthemums very nearly decorated the floor instead of the baby grand. He was, fortunately, saved by the bell and was able to excuse himself neatly and hasten off to answer the call at the door.

The Dowager Duchess and Lady Mary Wimsey swept in, the younger giggling and laughing as she draped Bunter with her fur.

"Hallo, Polly," Lord Peter greeted his sister, kissing her with uncommon affection on her cheek. "And mother, dear. Come in, come in, make yourselves comfortable. Bunter's created his usual perfection for breakfast, in between coping with my beastly temper an' the uncommonly bad mess we made of this room last night."

Bunter seated the ladies at the table, deftly serving three breakfasts, the only sound he made the faintest click of silver upon silver as he served the eggs.

One sip of the coffee, and Lady Mary was heaping lavish praise on his impeccable head. "I say, Bunter, you will tell Cookie the secret

of your coffee, won't you? Hers is barely fit for drinking, and only if one drowns it in farm cream and demerara."

"I shall be honoured, Lady Mary."

Drinking her coffee, her eyes brightly alert and far more perceptive than either of her children would ever give her credit for, his mother said: "Peter, I hope you're treating this man of yours well. Bunter is a treasure, an absolute treasure."

"He's my right hand, don't you know?" Lord Peter said, blissfully unaware, lost in his own theory of Mr. Mervyn Bunter and therefore unseeing of what was in front of his, admittedly red-shot and bleary, eyes.

Bunter felt a thrill of pure happiness suffuse his heart, but he was far too well-trained, and also far too discreet, to ever allow it to show.

"I simply could not manage without him. In fact, I would go so far as to say, Mother, that life without him is more than I care to contemplate."

Only inches away from Bunter, the towcoloured hair gleamed in the morning light, the exact shade as the chrysanthemums he himself had chosen for the piano. For a moment of divine insanity, his hand trembled, reaching, almost, as if to touch. But then, sanity and reality returned, and he turned the gesture into a correction of an already perfectly correct collar.

"Oh, don't fuss so, it makes my nerves twitch, don't you know, Bunter."

Of course, none of his reaction to that pierced his imperturbable armour, either. "I do beg your pardon, my lord."

"See, Bunter? I am being an absolute beast to you! I demand that you take the day off an' do somethin' perfectly wonderful for yourself. I shall muddle along without you."

"Very good, my lord," Bunter said, his tones perfectly modulated.

"An absolute treasure, your man Bunter," the Duchess said, watching them both together, missing nothing at all.

"Oh, couldn't agree more, Mother. An uncommonly wonderful fellow."

And Bunter, ever the perfect gentleman's gentleman of the imperturbable sort, revealed none of either his love or his pain and simply said: "More coffee, my lord?"

SERVANTS

BACK ALLEY L. A. SCOTIAN

The Professionals and Wiseguy back to back. Both feature hot sex and slightly bitter endings, and both deal with the problem of trying to deny your sexuality and who you are. In 'Back Alley', Doyle's a bit ahead in coming to terms with what is happening to him and Bodie, while in 'Just a Kiss' it's Frank who both reads and misreads the situation.

ADRENALIN SURGE, fear pounding through their veins, rush of life at the sheer exhilaration of survival. Doyle was stalking in front of Bodie, bootheels staccato click-click-clicking, back rigid and taut with strain, left hand clenched into a fist at his side, pocket of light gleaming briefly on it as he walked past the back window of some anonymous pub or other. Bodie held his breath for a moment as Doyle paused, a hesitation for thought, and for a dreadful minute Bodie thought Doyle was going to opt for booze, was going to drag them in there, amongst people, back to civilisation whilst he was still so high on the surviving that he could hardly keep himself from baring his teeth in a predatory smile and howling his victory for all to hear. They were alive! Made it through another night, magic kissed, all the bullets flying past them, knives blunted when it came to their skin. Alive. Him and Doyle, Doyle and him, link forged stronger with every time they came through a firefight like that. But Doyle was still standing outside the back door of the pub, head cocked, listening to the noisy signs of life and frivolity from inside, as if the idea was appeasing the exultation of fear conquered that was still turning Bodie's bones to jelly.

Bodie couldn't take it, not tonight. Couldn't handle the jollity of strangers, the empty smiles, the stupidity that made them feel so fucking secure in this green and pleasant land, secure in their fatuous ignorance, blissfully unaware that not two streets away, three men had been killed and a cache of high explosives whisked out from under the noses of terrorists. And none of the morons in that pub would have the least clue of the animal within, if he were to go in there. None of them would see the danger that was still singing through him, making him more alive than those fools would ever be. No, he couldn't take it if Doyle went in there. Have to leave him alone, have to leave him, back unguarded, and how could he do that after tonight? They were a team, a pair, couldn't walk away from Doyle now. But he couldn't stay with him either, not if he were going into that pub. Not if he were going to play pleasant little civil servant with some bored chit of a girl, chatting her up, buttering her up, the slow and uncertain ascent into her bed. But he'd be expecting Bodie to come in with him, sit beside him, would give him a wink and a smile, nodding at Bodie's girl, no doubt best friend of the one Doyle'd picked for himself.

It had its lure, Doyle picking a girl out for him, Doyle

selecting his partner for him, but it wasn't enough, tonight, to have Doyle's hand so vicariously on his sexuality. Wasn't enough to have a wink and a smile.

Wasn't enough to have a girl, for that matter. Christ, but he'd explode if he had to sit through the usual courtship crap, would burst with adrenalin and the need to move, to fuck, to do it *now*, and rough, and hard. Needed it, needed it right now, not in half an hour or two hours, not after all this time of watching Doyle in action, right up to the second when they would split up, each to disappear off to shag his bird, a knowing and intimate smile lingering between them, the unspoken promise to share every salacious detail in the morning.

Morning. He wouldn't make it to morning if he didn't move this very second, if he didn't fuck his brains out right now. Swallowing hard, he clenched his fists into the pockets of his leather jacket to keep from clenching those hungry hands into fistfuls of Doyle's hair as he held Ray's head and fucked his mouth. He stared at the lush hair, at the halfaverted profile, thinking about that mouth, thinking of Doyle, of the sex that coiled between them, day after day, just waiting, always waiting. Whilst Doyle stood here in a dirty back alley, pondering god alone knew what. If Doyle went into that pub, Bodie knew he'd have to simply walk away and find a way to ignore the cord that chained them together. Christ, Doyle had almost died tonight, getting in the way of that maniac with the knife. The punch of adrenalin hit him right in the groin, making sure that there wasn't a chance in hell that his hard-on would subside, that the sexual heat would abate to mere flicker. Doyle had almost died for him tonight. A few more inches, and that knife would have been in his throat, not creasing the top of his shoulder.

Bodie could suddenly taste the blood. It would be seeping under the leather jacket, sticking to the softness of cotton t-shirt, staining the skin, flowing down into the hollow of Doyle's collarbone, tangling in chest hair...

He had almost died tonight. The blood was

there, the way Bodie had imagined it, seeping from a pain that was wondrous sweet, for it meant he was alive to fight another day. He flexed his shoulder, grinning at the flare of pain, free hand rubbing at his crotch, every move of his hand tugging on the small throbbing spot where the knife had kissed him and left its bite behind. Not enough to even bother with an elastoplast, the kind of wound that healed best when left unmolested and unhindered. The kind of wound that simply made him light-headed with relief. He had actually thought that knife had had his name on it, and had seen that horrible feardriven knowledge in Bodie's eyes too. And that, he recognised, was what had given him the push, the sudden burst of energy to move, incredibly quickly, get out of there, away, down, out of range of the knife, hear it whisper seductively in his ear as it came down to fuck its way into him.

But he could think of other things he wanted to fuck him. Such as a lovely long, thick hard cock. Or fingers, three or four of them, stabbing into him, fucking him while a cock fucked his mouth and his own cock fucked a mouth, all of it hard, all of it primal male, all of it shouting to the Universe that he was still fucking alive, that the bastards hadn't got him this time. This time. Sobering thought that, as he'd stood looking into the back hall of the pub, staring at boxes of crisps and empty crates, but not so half as sobering as the realisation that he would do the same thing again, even if he knew next time round that the bastards were going to get him. He'd do it, if it meant Bodie getting out of there. If it meant not having to stare down at Bodie's corpse, at blue eyes gone fish-belly dead, at mouth gone slack with the last breath's soughing. How was he supposed to realise that, to finally see that the day he had dreaded had actually dawned and then just smile a casual goodnight and drop Bodie off at his own flat? At least if they went into the pub, if they picked up birds together, then they could stay together another hour or two, close, maybe even touching, if space was tight around the pub table and the girls were the friendly sort.

But he didn't want the softness and

pleasantness of a woman tonight. He wanted fucking. He wanted it up his arse, wanted semen erupting into his body, wanted all that masculinity and manhood becoming part of him, wanted the hardness of cock up him in celebration of surviving even the slide of the knife. And, he turned his head slightly to see the man he knew now that he would die for, he wanted that cock to be Bodie's. Wanted it to be Bodie to replenish him with spunk, with the essence of maleness. Wanted it to be Bodie to fill him up and take away the hollow hunger of adrenalin and fear.

And if Doyle didn't move, Bodie was going to either run as if all the hounds of hell were at his feet, or fuck the poor bastard up against the nearest wall. As if the thought had been heard, Doyle looked over his shoulder, eyes glinting brightly fierce in the light from the pub. But he said not a word.

Not that they ever did. Not in the feverish afterglow of a dangerous job, not in the heat of devouring passion. Yet the wildness was still there, turning and twisting, flickering in his glance, burning Bodie as it passed over him, peeling clothing and armour away in a fell swoop. And abruptly, it wasn't god who knew what Doyle had been pondering, but Bodie.

Sex.

The next step between them, the hunger fed, the need met, the sweet aching of their bodies sheathed in one another. It was there, all over Doyle's face, in his eyes, in the painful bulge of his jeans. Words stoppered in his throat by the flashflood of lust, Bodie moved to Doyle, grabbing him by the arm as he passed, never slowing his steps for a second. They both knew where they were supposed to be going, to borrow Cowley's car to get home in, but now they both knew what they were actually going to do: go to just one flat, to just one bed.

Sex.

They were going to fuck, and the knowledge flowed between them without need for word, the undulating desire alive between them as tacitly and perfectly as the unison in which they worked. Shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, they walked on into the darkness of the

alley, to the spot Cowley had claimed to have left his car. Bodie thanked everything under the sun that Cowley had picked tonight to be magnanimous, to offer his car to replace the shot-up Capri, whilst the Old Man himself went back with the one surviving prisoner. Footsteps crunching the crumbled edges of tarmac, they hurried, the hardness at their groins hastening their movements. Bodie's cock was chafed by even the softness of his underwear, and he could barely think of anything but how much more sweetly Doyle's arse would rub at him, when he was buried in him. Or how much more sweetly, with more unconfessed, insidious pleasure, Doyle's cock would rub at his own arse, when Doyle was inside him. Tonight, thankfully, and with a sigh of relief, he didn't give a shit who was going to end up on top, no need for the usual wrestling match to see who it would be. He could survive either way, as long as it was with Doyle, as long as it was Doyle's tits on his, body on his, cock on his. That was all he needed. Doyle. To hear him, feel him, drink him in, make them part of each other. Alive. Both of them, alive and whole and—together. That made him frown, as it always did. It wasn't right, somehow, to be this...needy of Doyle, to feel this achingly hot tenderness inside for his partner: for this man. Doyle stumbled against him, or simply leaned in a bit closer, so that the lithe thigh muscle caressed his, making his breath catch in his throat and the snub head of his cock push his foreskin all the way back. Mouth dry, from lust, from adrenalin, from— He wasn't sure that he wanted to know what it was. Knew that he didn't want to know what it was. Forgot it, all of it, everything in the real world, everything in his job, his life, his philosophy, when he saw that distantly red gleam of Rover, tucked away almost completely out of sight. Christ, but he was going to fuck Doyle in there! On Cowley's seats, where the Old Man had been sitting not two hours before. That was where he was going to lie with Doyle, and let all this life flood from them. Alive. He turned to look at Ray, catching sight of the subtle move of cock on thigh and the whetting of lips as parched as his own.

He could feel his heat, the susurrant rub of denimed thigh against denimed thigh, the more liquid sound of his own jeans where they slid against Bodie's bone-coloured cords. Even licking his lips didn't moisten them enough, the skin feeling as if it would splinter and crack. But once Bodie started—

Shit. Bodie would never kiss him. Kissing was the last bastion of being straight, the one thing that marked the difference between queers having sex with each other and two straight men having it off for mutual convenience. Anyway, kissing wasn't the kind of thing they did, not really. Leastways, not until they were both well-gone and too high to think about anything other than their bodies and the keening lust in them. But the car was there, only a few yards from them, and the keys were in his hand, jangling nervously loud as he shoved them into the lock, wicked grin inviting Bodie's as he looked over his shoulder at his partner looking at him shoving a long hard object into a tight-fitting hole. He would have made a witty comment, but his brains were in his balls and the closest attempt he could make at a witticism sounded suspiciously like begging. A quick look around the alley, and he knew that there was no-one who would see them, were no back windows facing them, no doors for someone to stroll out of, and not a light in sight. Safer than some of the places where CI5 agents had been known to vent their sexual frustration. The door unlocked, he pulled the back one open, stopping for a moment to look at Bodie, to make sure that his tacit message had been received and understood.

He wanted Bodie to fuck him. Didn't want it the other way, didn't want all that power under him, he wanted it in him, filling him up, taking away the disharmonious chill of having almost—so fucking close: he could still smell the steel of the knife mingling with the rust of his own blood—died tonight.

For Bodie. Whose hands were on him, cupping his rump, fingertips roving over him, whole hand large and strong and ungentle as they pushed him into the car. With his usual grace, he turned himself, lying on the back seat, legs pulled up awkwardly, fingers fumbling in his haste to get his clothes off.

Jacket slipping to the floor, where it tangled with Bodie's and Bodie caught at them both, Doyle staring whilst those hands that had been so firm on him scrabbled in the inside pocket for the expected tube of lip balm. He grinned up at Bodie then, his own hands not slowing as he pushed impedimenta out of the way, clothing unbuttoned and unzipped, showing his skin dim in the faint light, eyes and teeth bright with his lust. A devil of wicked delight flourished in him, whispering again that this was the man he had been willing to die for.

And then it was back, with a frissoning thrill of fear and excitement—this, here and now, hovering over him with such serious eyes, was the man he had been willing to live for. The distinction seemed important, but for later, when thought would have its time and place. But for the moment all that mattered was Bodie and the intoxicating desire and elation that was flooding his veins. Flat on his back, shirt lying wide open, one shoulder bared, reflected city light from the overcast sky kissing the elegance of his collarbone and dancing in the hair on his chest, he taunted Bodie. Spitting into his palm, he stroked the wet flatness over the dry heat of Bodie's cock, the dampness of his palm limning every vein and every corpuscle all the way up to the corona, where the moistness made by his mouth mingled with the moistness made by his prick. Slowly, fingers teasing himself as much as Bodie, he dappled in the wetness, bringing the salty slickness to his mouth, to where the tip of his tongue could capture it as surely as his body had captured Bodie. Exultant, he threw his head back to laugh, but the sound died into a sobbing moan as Bodie descended on him, broad shoulders blocking out the light, the thrum of his heart drowning out the minute noises of the outside world that trespassed into the car.

He wanted to suck him inside, until his bones were hollow straws. Hands steady, mind reeling, he pushed aside the clinging fabric, unnoticing of how Doyle winced as dried blood pulled free, setting new droplets rolling, slowly, like tears, down the arch of bone and the curve of chest. Not looking at Doyle, Bodie lowered himself, until his cock was pressed against the demanding surge of Doyle's and his mouth was open, tongue laving with voracious tenderness at the claret drops. It was frightening, to be so fiercely aroused by the taste of Ray's blood, this saline thickness more exciting than the forbidden sweetness of cum. For this, surely, was more taboo still, with its baggage of Transylvanian terrors and white-skinned Baronesses who had fed upon the blood of young virgins.

Because it had nothing to do with eternal youth for him. Oh, no, this was the sexual thrill of his partner's life, spilled for him, wounded for him, seeping from the flawless skin to be consumed in lust and—

Suddenly harsh, he pulled his mouth away from Doyle's wounded flesh, moving to crouch between his legs, back bent under the lowness of the car ceiling, bodies cramped together, his own clothes as dark as the shadows at Doyle's groin. His cock echoed Doyle's, seeping and aching, balls drawn up tight, filled with the resurgent roar of need. Roughly, he tugged at denim he had never thought could ever be too tight, until now, when he wanted it out of the way, to reveal Ray to him, to make his partner vulnerably naked. But finally the jeans were off and Ray lay there, so very, very close to him, too close for him to see him clearly, only a dizzying impression now of pallid skin and brown hair, pink cock slowly reddening with lust, he found his control slipping, skittering from him as common sense had. Hands fumblingly shaky, he found the small tube of lip balm, his own lips peeling back from his teeth in feral mockery of his usual smile: funny, wasn't it, how one of them always managed to have something just like this in his pocket the day they had to go into one of Cowley's little cock-ups? Sometimes it was this, occasionally it was even a carefully unexplained and unquestioned tub of cream, the unobtrusive smallness tucked into the glove compartment, or lying ever so casually in a bedside drawer. But they always had something to make the fucking easier, to aid and abet the sliding thrust of cock into arse, or cock against cock, when they were both so

wild that spit didn't keep them wet for long enough. Curling his body over under the confines of the car roof, he shoved his left knee between Ray's, his right leg braced stiffly immobile between the back seat and the driver's seat, his strength holding them steady. His fingers were slippery now, snaking inside Doyle, the enraptured face going wilder with every twist of the screw, those fingers scissoring and turning this way and that, loosening a mouth of muscle that was already eager. The pink hole became a maw, Doyle's face staring at him with the fixed glare of extreme passion, breath panting so loudly that Bodie could even hear it over his own. And the words—those, of course, were silent. Never spoken, never uttered, never brought out to face the light of day, no matter when they did this, no matter where. That face wanted more, the arse impaled on his stiff fingers demanded more, slim hips gyrating to suck him in deeper, his knuckles digging into the tautly hollowed muscles of Doyle's rump. He was going to have Doyle, lay claim to him, brand him with his invisible mark there, deep in his soul where no-one would ever see it, but he'd know.

They'd both know. Both, and the thought ambushed him as the groan fled lushly from Doyle even as Bodie's fingers abandoned his arse, the pink vulnerability sucking at him with blind desperation. But Doyle wasn't blind, those green eyes watching him with terrifying knowledge as if Doyle could see all the way into the darkest corner of his being. The secret stirred, redolent as a beast, and Bodie stared at Doyle, locking them gaze to gaze, hand to hand as he gripped the strong hands in his own, and then, finally—

He was thrusting inside him, no long slow penetration, not for the two of them, it was never like that. Eyes widened as he refused to let Bodie go, rejecting his body's urge to close in on itself and miser the ecstasy away in the secret pleasure places, he stared up at blue eyes gone dark with passion as Bodie plundered his body. He wanted to watch this, wanted to see the moment as well as feel it.

He wanted, quite terrifyingly, to *know* Bodie. To see him, and not just like this, face twisted

with some inner pain even as the pleasure rifled through them both. He shifted a little on the pliant leather of the car seat, bracing himself more securely, letting go of Bodie's hands to cajole the other man in closer, nearer, breath for breath, heartbeat for heartbeat, whilst their pulses shouted in harmony and their bodies moved in unison, Bodie thrusting into him so hard, so wonderfully fucking hard, tearing into him, sundering him, until it was their union that reforged him. He heard them both moaning, throaty, animal noises, mingling with the wet slap of balls hitting his arse and clinging, briefly, caressingly, to his own sweat-damped skin. Above him, Bodie's eyes were tightly closed, shutting his partner off from him, separating them into two separate entities who just happened to be using each other's bodies.

And he wanted more than that. He was nothing but a tangle of pleasure and a haze of undefined need, but he knew he wanted more than Bodie turning away from him to listen to nothing but self-pleasure. His right hand rose, slowly, counterpoint to the rhythmic beating of cock up his arse, then his fingers closed on the curve of shoulder, touching the fineness of skin with a caress that was always taboo. Until they got his far. Until their bodies overruled their minds, and their fears, and it was nothing but the two of them in the entire Universe. His hand cupped Bodie's cheek, thumb brushing the corner of Bodie's mouth, there, where the lips were parted and the tip of Bodie's tongue could be seen. And touched. But he didn't linger, his hand moving round, pulling Bodie down, lower, lower, only a few inches, but for them, an eternity of distance. Eyes still wide open, all the green leeched by the dimness of light, until they were as silver as a mirror for Bodie to see himself in, he watched and watched, until Bodie finally looked at him, actually looked at him, and all the walls were down, all the barricades thrown aside and nothing left but the man himself.

And what he saw took Doyle's breath away. But then Bodie was kissing him, driving recognition out of his mind and filling him instead with the devouring hunger that was Bodie's mouth, Bodie's tongue, his partner

filling him, tongue fucking his mouth as cock fucked his arse. He locked his arms round Bodie's shoulders, hauling him in tight, his arse clutching Bodie close, body milking him, his own cock rubbing hard, hard, along the sweetly rough line of belly hair that pressed down into him with every thrust of Bodie's hips. And he was drinking Bodie in, drowning in the sweetness of him, consuming him, absorbing all that life and love and sheer perfection. Cum was pooling in his balls, heat spreading, and Bodie was fucking him faster and deeper, until a moment strung itself out to impossible length, exquisite pleasure, and he was cumming and cumming, his keening cries sucked in by Bodie's mouth, Bodie's back sweat-slicked under his clawing hands, Bodie's cock fucking life into him, the sudden satin of cum filling his arse, Bodie sliding in and out of him so sweetly, and he could feel all that life in him, celebrating his survival, replenishing what he had almost lost.

And then it was over. Bodie's mouth left his, Bodie turning his face away, slowly easing his softening cock out of Doyle's body with a noise that was embarrassing for all the intimacy they had just had. The cooling stickiness trapped on their bellies was nothing compared to the cooling, sticky awkwardness of the atmosphere between them. Not quite looking at Bodie—not daring, in case he read the censure there, in case he read the unwilling knowledge there—Doyle sat up in the space beside Bodie, digging his jacket out from under his partner's, keeping his face averted whilst he used his hanky to mop up the seeping evidence of their insanity. In Cowley's car, Christ! He couldn't actually believe that they had been that far off their rockers, that they couldn't even have waited until they got to one of their flats—but the nearest was Bodie's and that forty-five minutes away at that. If they'd tried to get that far, they'd have ended up with Cowley's big Rover wrapped round the nearest lamppost. But to have done it in the Cow's car—Christ, he thought to himself, Ross would have a field day with that one! And Cowley would have them out on their ears so quick, their heads would be spinning. He couldn't get over how incredibly stupid they'd been. After all, this wasn't a quick shag in some dark corner, rubbing hard and fierce and feral against each other till they came, still with trousers chastely zipped, half the time.

Except—they hadn't done it like that in months. Oh, that was how it used to be, right back at the beginning, when they had first discovered that the adrenalin rush took them both in exactly the same way, sitting in a small dark room together, hiding out for god knew how much longer, and the fear and the thrill making them both so hard. God, he could still remember hearing it, the almostsilent sound of Bodie's hand rubbing across those cords of his, and his own eruption of desire at the image that had come with the sound. Thoughtless, that night, pure survival instinct, the urge towards sex. Nothing more than a furtive wanking, side by side, never touching, but listening to each other, the sounds of their breathing, the rub of hand on prick, so attuned that he would have sworn blind he had heard Bodie's cum splash on the floor.

Cleaned up by now, he struggled his clothes back on, squirming around until he was decent once more, grateful for Bodie's silence, unwilling to even attempt conversation after tonight. Beside him, Bodie was moving, getting out of the car, going round to the driver's side, getting back in without so much as a glance at Doyle. Careful but quick, Doyle checked the back seat for anything that Cowley might find and use to hang them with, but most of the damage seemed to have been done to the tail of his own shirt, a damp patch clinging stickily to him. Yet better that than Cowley so much as suspecting them.

Fuck it, they could be tossed so far they'd bounce for what they'd just done! Never mind the fact that they weren't queer or anything: HM's Government would brand you as a shirt-lifter or a nancy boy for so much as looking at another bloke for too long. Unless you were both from the right public school, of course. A quick look at the back of Bodie's head, and he was scared by the pang of tenderness that undermined him at the sight of Bodie's hair curled by sweat and rumpled by his hands.

Not something he wanted to think about.

Not something that was safe for him to think about: too many times of Bodie telling him what he thought of queers. Too many times of sitting there in the cold light of morning coffee in CI5's rest-room while Bodie explained, carefully loud, to Murphy, just how common it was for men like themselves to fuck anything that was still alive after the combat was over. Rape, he'd explained, was the norm after any battle, but sometimes a man was lucky enough to find someone as desperate for the nearest convenient hole as he was. No, best not to think about kissing Bodie.

He got out, settling himself back down in the passenger seat, saying nothing, offering nothing, revealing nothing to this man he had just let fuck him. But it was only fucking, he reminded himself, as Bodie drove off with enviable calm. Blokes do that kind of thing all the time, he reassured himself, giving himself a quick mental run-down of the percentage of perfectly normal men who'd shag another bloke when there were no women available: prison, the navy, merchant navy, oil-rigs... All right, he conceded, eyes drawn unwillingly to the smoothly white hands that clenched the steering wheel with such strength, with the strength that had clutched him, lifting him up in the throes of orgasm to be hugged so tightly his ribs ached. But that was to be expected, really, given the kind of situation they'd been in tonight. He'd nearly forgotten that. He'd almost died tonight, for Bodie. Worse, though, he'd wanted to live for him, wanted not to hurt Bodie by dying in front of

Maryjesusandjoseph, what the fuck were they getting into?

He knew, inside, where his heart was beating too quickly, the beats skipping with fear worse than that kiss of the knife. *That* was the easy kiss to cope with. But the other, and the hunger and the need and the—

With frantic fear, he turned the thought off, ignoring it, kicking at it until it retreated so far into the back of his mind, he could actually pretend he'd never even thought it at all. Christ, it wouldn't be rabid terrorists he had to worry about, not if it ever came out what he'd almost been willing to admit! Bodie would be after him with the nearest hatchet,

and not even being best mates would save him. Not if Bodie suspected him of being queer. Bi, he amended, thinking about the women in his life, but Bodie wasn't the sort to make that kind of distinction. Funny, in a sick kind of way, that he had to pick as his first bloke, a man who would knock him into next week if he tried to get it to go beyond a friendly fuck. But he couldn't think about that, couldn't, in case it showed. He always had to be that bit careful, keep that bit of distance between them. Easy enough done, in some ways, especially if he'd met a nice girl, but when they were actually fucking, him and Bodie, christ, but it was only a matter of time before it all came out. He'd better start being a bit more careful, a bit more circumspect. But still, he was drawn, again and again, to stare at Bodie, as if to commit to memory the features of the man he'd wanted to live for.

And if Doyle didn't stop looking at him with cow's eyes—he stifled a snigger of pure hysteria at that unintentional pun—at him, he'd punch the stupid sod and blacken both eyes fucking shut. Christ, you'd think they were on their sodding honeymoon, stupid little prick. Typical, that. Have a bit of a fuck, just to let the adrenalin and the fear-lust out of your system, and the stupid prick was going ga-ga and gushy on him. Not that Doyle had actually said anything, of course, but the expressions spoke volumes. Probably, Bodie conceded, a hell of a lot more than Doyle would ever want shown. Best to just pretend that he hadn't noticed, let Doyle work it out of his system. Once that horrible second where the knife had looked like a dead cert was nothing more than a vaguely remembered routine oppo, then Doyle would be back to his usual caustic self. But shit, the dozy bastard looked as if he were head over heels in love...

Probably why Doyle always kissed him. Nah, he rejected the idea, no way on God's green earth was Doyle a pansy. Too tough by half, not a limp wrist on him. Just the heat of the moment, and no women available.

That, of course, ignored the minor detail of the pub they'd stood behind, and the raucous female laughter they'd both heard. But it was different with women, he consoled himself. Wasn't fair to expect them to understand. And they took longer to be ready for it at the best of times, so what were the poor girls supposed to do when the man they were with had his balls in knots and didn't give a shit for anything but coming as quickly as he could.

So why had he licked Doyle's blood up then, instead of just squirting some gel inside him and then getting on with the serious fucking?

And why had he been so desperate to claim Doyle, wanting to make Doyle belong to him? Well, that was easy enough explained, wasn't it? Best mate—no denying that, best mate he'd had, up to and including his SAS teammates—best partner, almost killed right in front of his eyes, and if you added to that the fact that Doyle had actually deliberately put himself in the way of that knife to protect Bodie, well, stood to reason that a man—any man, surely—would need to make some kind of claim to him. That was it, he decided, comfortable once more. Definitely heat of the moment, and if he'd been a Viking, he'd've have raped and pillaged. Suddenly, he reheard it, in Doyle's voice and with Doyle's knowing look and with Marty's simpering snigger: Rape all the men and pillage all the women.

Why the fuck had he let Doyle kiss him? Kiss him again, that part of him who could remember the way Marty had grinned at them, 'all us boys together'. Again, that same small voice demanded insistently, remembering that day in the mixed pub, rough trade mixed in with the queers who liked it butch as hell, 'bent', that punter had called them. Bent. Couldn't be. Not them. But then he thought about Doyle kissing him, bringing him down until their mouths touched, until Ray's tongue was against his, until that subversive warmth bled through him, imbuing the whole thing with more emotion than he'd ever given anyone else. He tried, for a minute, to remember his girl back in Africa, the one he'd been willing to kill Krivas for and/or risk his job in CI5. He shouldn't have done that. He remembered her, every last detail, from the way she smiled, to the way she kissed, t```o the way he felt when he was inside her,

kissing. Christ, boy that he'd been, he'd called that love. So what the fuck did that make what he felt for Doyle?

There was no way he was going to answer that one.

Best mates, he repeated to himself, a talisman, a charm to ward off evil. He wasn't queer. Couldn't be. He'd had too many women, for starters, liked to many of them, loved more than one. But not like Doyle. That, he told himself, was different. He needed Doyle to survive, needed him—

Needed him enough to fuck him in public, and to think it was a good idea to use Cowley's car. He squirmed in his seat, aware out of the corner of his eye that Doyle was just as uncomfortable-but he had more reason to be, mind. The way he'd ploughed into him, never done it quite as hard before. Should check to make sure Doyle was all right. Not that there was much chance that he would be, not when he considered that he himself felt like one big bundle of strained muscles and bruises. He swore blind that there was a bruise across his shoulder-must've hit himself against the front seat at some point. So poor Doyle must be dying a death over there. Take him home then, give him a couple of cans of lager, hot bath, rub down with embrocation, that should do the trick.

Yes, but what about after? Or what about during? Did he honestly think it would be just exactly the same thing he'd offer Murphy after a rough oppo? Massaging that long back, that rounded rump, probably bearing the marks of their lovemaking—

He jerked the steering wheel viciously, cutting down a side street, changing direction, no longer going home, but racing to Doyle's place. It wasn't lovemaking. Hadn't been lovemaking. Would not let it be lovemaking. They weren't like that, not them. Men who made love to other men were fairies and pansies and queers and ginger beers and anything but CI5 agents who worked in what was so delicately referred to as 'other government agencies'. No queers in HM's 'other agencies', oh, no, not after Philby and his bunch. And he and Doyle weren't queer anyway. He forced himself to take a deep breath, to get a grip on himself. It had been

nothing more than a perfectly understandable rocks-off situation that had got a bit out of hand. To be expected when one partner discovers that not only is the other one willing to die for him, but that it actually *matters* to him.

Traffic light bleeding red on their faces, Bodie dared to look at Doyle. And the thought came to him: he kissed me. His cock stirred, his heart beat a little faster, and fear came in on bovver boots.

If he faced it, if they talked about it, Doyle would suss out how he felt, which is more than he wanted to do himself right now. Doyle would know, and Doyle, bless his rotten little soul, was always one for calling a spade a spade. Queer. Doyle would call him bent and he just might not be able to remember in time to say, 'yeh, but who was it who kissed who, eh, *mate*?' He might just sit there and then it would be true.

But he couldn't let it be true. He looked at the shops and pubs lining the side of the street, then at the private houses with their lights slowly going out, and thought about what it would mean if any of them heard someone laugh at him and call him queer. Oh, Christ, no, he wasn't queer. He'd beat them to a pulp if they tried that with him. As for the first pansy who fluttered his eyelashes at him—he'd kill him. Yes, he would. All right, so he wouldn't kill him, but he'd duff him up a bit. Done it before—there were faces in front of him, from Northern Ireland, that bloke down Islington and god, yes, remember him from third form, when his dad had walked in? 'He was making me do it, da, honest, he were bigger than me and I was dead scared till you came in, honest, da, I'd've done the bugger one before but I was too scared...'-do it again if one of them tried to turn him like that again.

Then, beside him, Doyle stirred—

That look on Bodie's face, when he'd kissed him, fucking hell, it couldn't have been, could it? Could it?—

—right leg brushing Bodie's, right there where Doyle's own knee had bruised him in their blind lust and the crampedness of the car. Violently, he pulled away, glowering at

Ray, precisely the way Doyle would glare at him if he messed around in public too much. So what d'you call fucking in the back seat of Cowley's fucking car then? he asked himself hysterically, then shut that down, relegating it once again to something they did when this rotten fucking job got to be too much for any sane man to cope with. What was that phrase Ross had for it? Oh, yeh, 'referred aggression and the need to affirm that you are still alive', that was it. And a hell of a lot better than lovemaking.

Doyle's place.

"You coming up?" About as much welcome in that as willingness in himself, and with an odd edge of speculation to it, far more than the simple question warranted. As if Doyle were asking him something else entirely.

"After almost twenty-four hours straight on the job?" he joked, watching the speculation burn, momentarily, into disappointment. But he went on, hurtling on without brakes, steamrollering over Doyle, over feelings, over speculations, over hopes but most of all, over his own fear-filled insecurity. "No, not me, my old son," and he found his old grin, relaxing as he pulled it on, reassured by the familiarity of a face of his own that he knew and which didn't threaten to pull his whole life apart. "Am going home, getting some kip, and then tomorrow, I'm going out with the luscious

Inge." He waggled his brows suggestively, then his face froze as Doyle didn't join in the game, as Doyle actually looked—hurt. But that wasn't how they played the game, and anger grew in him, getting ready to burst out. But Doyle spoke first, wan smile, brittle eyes, but still, with a slow unfurling of real relief.

"The big dancer? The one who wants to work her way through the *Kama Sutra*?"

"None other," he beamed, reassured beyond belief that Doyle wasn't going to turn difficult on him.

"You just make sure she doesn't get you in any knots you can't get out of. If you're late for briefing again, Cowley'll have us *both* stuck in records for a week."

"I'll be there," he said breezily, waving as he pulled away from the kerb, shouting, "see you, mate!" over the crunch of the tyres.

Oh, yeh, he wasn't queer, stupid of him to even think it for a minute. Never been queer before, wasn't likely to start just because he had a partner who reacted to danger the same way he did, now was he?

So why did it stick in his mind, why did it make him rougher with Inge than he had to be, that memory of Ray Doyle, his partner, the man who had almost died for him, the man who kissed him, left standing there on the pavement, alone?

JUST A KISS DAWN WOODS

Eyes wide open in the darkness, all Frank McPike could make out without his glasses were the fuzzy shapes of shadows cast by the light that streamed in through the window.

He felt like a cadaver on a slab, lying stiff and silent as he listened to the tiny whispers of a house this old, the odd creaking of the bed, and Vince's quiet snuffles. There wasn't

enough light to read by, but too much to avoid seeing the big shape lying beside him, if he let himself look. But in the absence of sight his other senses were doubling up; odors assaulted him, his ears were straining, his skin tingling to feel any movement from Vince Terranova. This was a damned stupid idea, and he still didn't know why he'd let Vince tell him what to do. He could have made up the bed in Vinnie's old room, he could have slept on the fucking couch—anything would be better than this exhausted, aching anticipation of...of nothing at all. Vince moved beside him, settling down, and he cringed when he felt the hairy masculinity of a leg brush his. If he just didn't move, if he kept perfectly still, then Vince would have to drop off eventually. No one could stay awake after the last few days they'd had. No one except Frank, for the godawfulest reason of all.

He counted sixty seconds of stillness and released the breath he'd held—just as Vinnie rolled and threw an arm across his stomach. The heavy heat burned through his undershirt and he sucked in his stomach, willing to burrow through the mattress at this point anything to get away from his friend's oppressively intimate body. Just go to sleep, he ordered himself, but fluffy white sheep turned immediately into hard, bronzed Vinnies, all of them staring at him with eyes so dark he wanted to fall into them and drown. Vince moved again, wrapping himself all around Frank and Frank tensed in frustration as the blood began to pound in his groin, his body reacting violently to Vinnie's unconscious sensuality even as he swore at the unfairness of it all.

His body wanted Vince, and didn't give a damn about the cold-shower thoughts his mind was raining down on it. To lie here this close and do nothing was purgatory, the only restraint staying him the sure and certain knowledge that Vince would punish him far better than any Biblical devil if he acted on his impulses. He tried to edge away, but he was practically hanging off the edge of this damned little bed already. There was nowhere to go, and even as he tried to get away from those affectionate arms, Vince pulled him back. Frank could feel the flaccid cock pressing against his hip, hot groin bleeding heat through the old jogging shorts Vince wore instead of decent nighties. Like he'd get any sleep this way.

They were both exhausted, and he knew he should have passed out before the blankets settled. He would have, too, if it weren't for this overanimated teddy-bear in bed with him. If it weren't for being so close to what he wanted, and the arousal kicking through him, and this anxious waiting in his body for each tiny zephyr of Vinnie's breath across his skin. He tried to push the heavy, masculine weight of Vince's leg off his-

"Frank? You still awake?" Vince muttered. "Yeah." Shit, even the sound of his voice was getting to him tonight. See what exhaustion could do to a man's self-control. Time to get out or get his ass kicked. "Look, this bed isn't big enough for both of us, lemme just take the couch...'

"Whassa matter?" And Vinnie cuddled up closer, for all the world as oblivious as a child. I'm comfortable, you're not buggin' me."

No? Well, you're buggin' me, buddy. "Yeah well, isn't that just swell for you." He started to turn away and was caught again, this time by a wide-awake man who could read him better than anyone, even in the dark. He could practically hear the gears turning as Vince evaluated the situation and just lay there, paralyzed, waiting for Vinnie to kill him for it. The arm around his waist strayed down past his firming cock to his thighs, just barely touching him but damned well enough for Vince to get the picture. He tried to bat the arm away and was flustered by the quiet chuckle.

"Got a little problem here, Frank?"

"Whaddaya mean, 'little'?" he defended himself gruffly, trying to defuse the situation with humor and hide his embarrassment. He was a grown man, for godsakes, it wasn't as if either one of them hadn't been in this kind of situation before, was it? Nothing to be embarrassed about as long as Vince didn't know why he was up. Just laugh it off, then get out of here before Vinnie hit him over the head with outraged Sicilian-stallion machismo.

He hadn't expected Vince to check out the

'little' comment. But that was exactly what the man was doing, hand coming back up to settle right on his cock. Frank sucked in a breath as an electric thrill rushed through him, arousal crowding out thought. How the hell was he supposed to react to this? Lie here and take it or grab Vinnie, turn him over and fuck him? "Uh, Vince?" he managed, if a little shakily, clenching his fists to stop from filling his hands with the feel of his Vincent Terranova, "you wanna get your hand off my cock?"

But now Vinnie was rubbing him through his underwear, and he didn't know if he should scream or groan.

Vinnie grinned at him in the conspiratorial semi-dark, his hand pressing Frank's cock so sweetly. "What good's that gonna do? You're not gonna get any sleep like this," his hand tightened, stroking the entire length of aching cock, "are you, Frank?"

"I'm not gonna get any sleep with you doin' that, either." The protest was feeble, nothing more than a mere formality, he knew, since he hadn't made a single move to pull Vinnie's hand away. Hell, it was all he could do to keep from arching up into the lazy caress and grabbing a handful or two of Vinnie in return.

"Maybe not, but you'll sleep soon enough after you get yourself taken care of." The heat of the warm hand collided with his balls, cupping him, while fingers traced patterns on his skin. "C'mon Frank, it's nothin'. What're friends for?"

None of Frank's friends—at least, not the straight male ones, which was the category Frank always thought Vince had fallen under—had ever been for *this*, that was for damned sure. "Vinnie?" he asked tremulously, half scared that Vince would stop, half terrified that he wouldn't. "What're you doin'?"

Vince was leaning over him now, tugging his underwear down to free his erection and palming it again all in scant seconds, laughing with quiet indulgence. "What d'ya think I'm doin'? C'mon, Frank, not even you could've forgotten what this is all about. I'm helpin' you out. Relax, don't worry about it."

Frank wasn't worried. He was panicked. But not enough to move, not enough to do anything to stop this.

"Yeah, that's it, just lay back and go with it." Vinnie's voice was just above a whisper, stealing through the darkness behind Frank's closed eyelids, and it felt too good to have Vinnie working his cock. Blind, he reached out and grabbed a sweatshirt-clad shoulder, squeezing in the rhythm Vince was using on him, desperate to finally touch Vinnie carnally at last. He was so goddamned hungry for this, so embarrassingly desperate, like some horny teenager at the Prom. But he'd wanted this, wanted Vinnie for so long that not a whole hell of a lot else mattered. He knew he should have stopped this before it started. He should never have gotten into this fucking bed. But he had, and now there was nothing in the world that was going to get him out of it. Not until they had finished what Vince had begun. The warm hand grabbed his balls, pressing them hard up against his cock and he gasped out loud. This was just too good to be true, like one of those \$19.95 mail-order offers on TV that looked so fantastic you wanted to reach for the phone even as you called yourself an idiot. And as much as he wanted to reach for Vince in return, he was terrified of that little voice in his head that was calling him an idiot, telling him that pushing, now, was risking it all. He still wanted to grab Vince, still wanted to rub himself against that heavy cock covered in the delicious silk of those tantalizing shorts-but childhood memories had too strong a hold. He couldn't forget his father, who had the hurtful habit of haring off right when Frank reached out to him, right when he realized just how much Frank had needed him around.

His body had declared war on his brain and was taking no prisoners; he just surrendered to the fact that his partner, friend and constant wet-dream was bringing him off. Beautifully. His hips started the harsh cadence of fucking, straining up against Vinnie's palming hand, and he groaned.

"See? I was right, wasn't I?" Vince asked in a friendly whisper, teeth gleaming in the dark while his hand spread pre-cum the length of Frank's cock. "This is all you needed. Yeah, just let me take care of you."

Frank didn't waste a breath on the answer, and he didn't waste a thought on the de-

tachment in Vinnie's voice. He just reached down to clasp his hand around his partner's, silently demanding an increase in pressure and pace. And Vince obliged, squeezing his cock tighter, so tight it was a wonderful ache, the heady pressure stripping his cock as Vince let his hand be guided, adding his own erotic twists with thumb and forefinger whenever he seemed to feel like it. "That's it, Frank. C'mon, let yourself go. Don't hold back, you're always holding back. It's just you and me here, just me giving you a friendly hand. Oh, yeah, that's it, let me do this for you."

Frank wasn't going to argue, not when his whole body was going tense, taut nerves heralding the familiar rush of approaching orgasm. "Oh, Vince," he groaned, left hand stroking Vince's back, right hand rubbing restlessly over his own chest, plucking at nipples trapped under sweat-dampened cotton. Frank was on fire, his chest heaving now in the effort to keep up with his body.

Vince's hand left him and he whimpered in frustration, mindlessly reaching out to bring the pleasure back again.

"Just a minute, Frank, I'm not gonna stop. Need to get all this out of the way." He felt the big body shifting beside him and then two hands grasped his undershirt, sliding it up off his stomach; felt a sudden eruption of pleasure ripping through him as fingers briefly—too fucking briefly—twisted his nipples, deserting his chest to push the sheets down past his hips. As far gone as he was, he could still hear the affection in the deep voice, could still hear the way the accent had thickened. "Don't wanna mess up this stuff," was the cursory explanation, and the voice was definitely trembling as much as the hand on his cock. He wondered if Vince could see him better than he could see Vince, wondered if Vinnie liked what he saw; but then Vince unerringly took up where he'd left off and Frank forgot how to think. He just felt, instead; felt the hand squeezing and rubbing his cock, felt the hairy warmth of forearm against his belly and the soft silk of shorts against his hip that covered Vinnie's reacting cock. Vince's free hand sneaked over his shoulder to tease at his nipple, and Frank was whimpering again. The rough pinches closed a circuit, the connection a live-wire current straight to his balls with every squeeze and tug of Vinnie's fingers.

Oh, he'd wanted this for so fucking long, and here it was in his hands—in Vinnie's hands—in Vinne's hands—in Vince's hand on his cock. Frank wished there was more light in the room, wished he could see the soft expression on Vince's face that was reflected in his voice. That was definitely the best of all; that Vince was doing him, that Vince was loving him the way he wanted it, the way he needed it. After all the hopeless, stupid self-consciousness, after all the tender affection and the aborted attempts to bring Vinnie to bed with him, here it was all by accident, all so perfect.

It felt like scant seconds, and suddenly he was coming, fireworks going off in his body as he arched, tensile, off the mattress. Oh, it was beautiful, Vince doing this for him, and he reached up with both hands, clutching at the bigger body and pulling hard, toppling the heavy weight down across his chest and gasping against muscled shoulder as his nostrils filled with the scent of Vinnie.

Vince was chuckling against his throat, the quick breaths electric against his skin. "Hey Frank," Vince breathed into his ear, panting a little, "I never knew you had it in you. I always thought you'd, you know, flash your badge then order your dick to salute 'n spill it." Vince laughed at his own humor, and Frank found the breath to laugh with him even as he clenched his fists into hot muscled skin, even as climax echoed through him. Vince always had thought he was a prude. Well, that would change soon enough, he decided with an anticipatory sigh.

Vinnie was still holding his cock, squeezing it tight but unmoving, his other hand rubbing Frank's shoulder reassuringly. "Yeah, that was pretty good, huh partner?" Vince asked as he started to settle down, the leg moving, welcome, back over Frank's knees. There was one thing Vince had forgotten, one more tiny thing that Frank wanted as his body trembled in the glow of sex with Vinnie. He reached up, tangling his fingers through the thick dark hair and pulling his lover's head down, pressing his lips against the full mouth

and running his tongue along them to tempt them open.

And then something was suddenly, terribly wrong. With an undefined sinking in his gut, he realized that Vinnie had gone tense in his hands. But only for a split second. In the next second Vinnie was shoving his hands away and jumping out of the bed, turning on the lamp and then turning on Frank. In out-of-focus horror, Frank watched as Vinnie wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, staring down with an unmistakable look of disgust on his face.

"What the hell did you do that for, pal?" he demanded.

The question was all hostility and accusation so that Frank stammered, "What's going on here, Vince? It was just a kiss, nothing to get worried about." But if anything the disgusted look was increasing. Vince aborted the next swipe at his mouth and Frank swallowed, the situation becoming sickeningly clear.

"Why? What are you, some kinda fag?"

The accusation was a slap in the face that made Frank finally drop his eyes...and realize exactly the picture he presented. His cock was still hard and teardrops of cum spattered his belly, cum that was there because Vince had just brought him off. His tee-shirt was up under his armpits because Vince had been considerate enough to move it out of the way, his nipples still puckered hard from Vinnie's fingers. Under the circumstances, this visible surfeit of pleasure was mortifying. Slowly, not daring to look at Vince as the implications settled heavily on him, he lifted his hips to pull his shorts back up, pulled his tee-shirt into place to cover his wet belly, then slid his feet out on the side of the bed opposite Vinnie. A thought for his glasses brought a blush to his cheeks, and he left them where they lay; seeing Vince more clearly would not be an advantage.

Praying for anything except what he was expecting, he remembered his father saying 'You be a good boy, Francis, and I'll be back real soon,' and asked, "You mind tellin' me just what's goin' on?"

"Maybe you could tell me better," Vince replied, sounding so indignant, so betrayed. "It was all pretty clear. I thought," he started feebly, heart chilled and brain numb as the aftershocks pounded at his shattered emotions. He knew what the answer was going to be, but he had to ask anyway. "You're straight, aren't you?"

"You bet your ass I am." From clear across the bed Frank could feel Vince's desire to bolt, like a rope stretched too tight between them and fraying under the stress. He sat there, just waiting, for the axe to fall. "Look, maybe you'd better take the couch after all."

The semen on his belly was chilling now, soaking into his shirt and sliding down his skin. But the emptiness inside him was so much more chilling than that. "Let me get this straight," he tried, tight-lipped and terrified. "You just jerked me off, but that's okay. That's just 'helpin' somebody out.' But I tried to kiss you and now I'm on the couch?"

"I—" now it was Vince's turn to be speechless, at a time when Frank needed desperately for him to have the answers.

"You what, Vince?"

"I dunno. It *is* different, though. I thought you were just, you know, keyed up. I sure as hell didn't think it was because of me."

Frank sucked in a careful breath. He was exhausted, his emotions were too close to the surface for a conversation like this. It was a certainty that if they kept talking tonight, things would get worse and not better. He wanted to get the hell away but he didn't trust himself behind the wheel of a car, not this tired. Besides, given that they'd be at work together in two days time, a pre-dawn exit was a little too dramatic.

"Look Frank," Vince went on into the lengthening silence. "There's blankets in the hall closet; you can use my old bed, or sack out on the couch."

"Right, I know where they are." He felt the scream roiling up inside him, wanted to turn and shout, 'You're tearing me apart and you know it. Don't fucking dothis to me!' He wanted to blast Vinnie with the truth, and ask just whose cock had stiffened up against him during all of that. He was desperate to defend his own feelings and demand that Vinnie acknowledge his. But instead, he quietly picked up his glasses and slipped them on,

finally getting out of the bed that he should never have gotten into in the first place. He went to the doorway and turned, desperate to find something to say, something to make tomorrow easier, but his mind had gone on overload when Vince had jumped away and flicked on the light.

Somehow, he managed to get the gentle apology out past all the other stuff lined up in his throat. "Vinnie? Look, I'm sorry. I don't know what to say." It hurt to see Vincent Terranova so uncomfortable in his own skin, but it hurt even more to have the look on the handsome face chiselled into his brain. Frank dropped his eyes.

Vince looked guilty. Vince felt responsible and betrayed at the same time.

"Don't say anything, Frank, just—get some sleep. We'll talk in the morning, okay? It'll look better in the daylight."

Frank thought it had looked a whole lot better in the dark. "Right. Okay." In fact, he couldn't imagine that what was coming tomorrow would look like anything at all he wanted to see. He trudged out of the room, picking at the damp stickiness of his undershirt and shuddering with the cold chill of it. Mind on neutral, emotions cauterized for the moment, he fished blankets out of the hall closet and dumped them on the overstuffed leather couch. He'd had more than his share of fantasies on this couch, and the creaking of leather as he gingerly moved under the covers vividly rebuked him for every one. As soon as the blankets settled, Frank felt the first shivers of reaction grip him. Not sexual pleasure but nausea shook his body, and he swallowed down the gag reflex several times before risking a deep, fractured breath.

Dawn's early light provided just enough lifting of shadow for him to recognize every painful reminder of the years-long relationship that he had just possibly, in twenty minutes of ignorant self-indulgence, utterly destroyed. Over in the corner was the baseball Sparky had chewed to hell and back that Vince had kept when the dog died because 'it's scruffy like you, Frank' and because Sparky would only fetch it when Vinnie threw it. On the mantle was the infamous plastic souvenir Liberty Bell that he couldn't but

smile at even now. Frank wondered if it would be there the next time he came over here. Then he wondered when the next time he came over here would be. Or if it would be. Try as he might to avoid it, Frank's guilt rolodex loftily entitled, "Repercussions of This Betrayal of Vinnie's Trust," was spinning at full speed in his head. No more beers. No more understanding. No more 2:00 a.m. visits because he needed the support of someone who understood him, because Vinnie obviously wouldn't want to understand him after this. No more starfish head-to-toe hugs when Frank felt close to the edge and no more careful gestures when Vince fell over it. His license to touch Vince had just been unconditionally revoked, and all because Vince had touched him so goddamned well.

But damn it. Frank hadn't misunderstood what was behind that whole bedroom farce. He couldn't have. The picture replayed in his mind, his own responses embarrassingly edited, and there was Vince, doing a lot more than was necessary to just 'help out'. There was Vince, voice trembling and cock thickening, whispering words to urge him on. Vince had wanted him to let go, had wanted to be there when it happened—was there, breath panting against Frank's neck with obvious pleasure—and there was Vince standing by the bed looking guilty, looking betrayed. Maybe the fact that some part of him, conscious or not, had been enjoying it was worse in the long run, because Vinnie sure as hell wasn't admitting that it had happened that way.

And oh God no, what about the job? Each of them had, over the years, assessed the risk of their personal relationship to Vinnie's cover; somehow Frank didn't see that being a problem anytime in the near future, because he couldn't imagine how they'd be able to work together. What the hell were they going to do on the job? And what about Uncle Mike? Well, Dan might understand but he'd be the only one. How was Frank supposed to explain to Paul Beckstead why his top team couldn't be in the same room together anymore? He could just see it now, the neatly typed report titled "Betrayal of Trust Between Field Supervisor and Undercover Operative: the role

of homophobic fucking therein." This sure as hell wasn't a joke, and if it was then it wasn't funny. Field agents had to trust their supervisors above anything and anyone else, and tonight had screwed that up royally. Now Vince would have to get beyond this—and so would he—before that loyalty and trust even had a chance to begin anew.

I should never have put my glasses on. I should have left 'em off until I got out of the room, so then maybe I could have pretended it wasn't as bad as it really is.

Frank pulled off his glasses and lay them on the end table above his head, scrubbing hard at his eyes and refusing to acknowledge that the water in them was anything more than exhaustion. Not even his emotional turmoil would be able to keep him awake for much longer, he hoped. But just in case, he

turned into the back of the couch so that when Vinnie came out of that bedroom later, Frank wouldn't have to see the expression on

It wasn't as if he'd been naïve enough to expect anything else. If he'd thought Vinnie could have accepted something different, something to make them both happy, then he would have hauled Vinnie off to bed months ago. Only Frank had known better. So it wasn't as if he'd had any hopes to lose... He could praise his foresight until Hell froze over, and pat himself on the back for having known his friend and subordinate better than anyone else in the world, but it was a damned hollow comfort as he lay here on this clutching leather couch alone. He'd been right about this, too; this was much, much worse than purgatory.

ENGLISH DETECTIVES

QUANTUM OF SOLACE M. FAE GLASGOW

M. Fae Glasgow's Adam Dalgliesh in 'Quantum of Solace' is mostly based on the characters in the books. Nothing has ever been written to overtly indicate that Dalgliesh might be bisexual, yet a careful reading does not eliminate the possibility. Assume bisexuality and the psychology of the man becomes fascinating. Quantum is a quiet piece in a contemporary setting.

HE NEEDED A HOLIDAY: at least, he hoped a holiday was all he needed. This past time had been a cacophonous maelstrom of murder cases sensationalised by the hunger of the press and an infuriating whirlwind of unwanted publicity. There seemed to be no peace for him: there was always someone who wanted to talk to him either about his 'staggering success' at solving three rather nasty crimes in a row or about his 'hauntingly stunning' new book of poetry. And, much to his extreme distaste, most often of all, the desire to unearth what made a 'policeman like him' write 'poetry like that'. An exceedingly unwelcome question for him, especially since he had no idea what the secret might be.

Once, he would have been able to answer succinctly and eloquently, but now... Now, he pondered that question himself, and was no longer sure where to begin to find the answers. There were even times when he looked in the mirror and had no idea who this reflection was. A poet, who happened to use as his inspiration the worst in people, the degradations and despairs that led to and from murder? Or a policeman, a two-dimensional television caricature, amalgam of Dixon of Dock Green and the Sweeney? There was one thing of which he was absolutely certain: he needed a break away from all of the questions and the questioners, time alone to refuel, time alone to simply breathe and think and feel. Time, perhaps, to fill the mourning silence within and to bury the dead.

He was unutterably tired, of the job, of the fawning praise for his poetry, of reporters waiting for him outside his work and ringing him at his home. He wanted rest, and so he had put his house in order, packed his car and gone off to Norfolk. Despite his best laid plans, his attempt to escape to his aunt's house had been an unmitigated disaster, thanks to that hack from *The Sun*. It seemed that not even the solitary comfort and ease of the countryside was proof against the brashness of a so-called seeker of truth—especially one trying to beat the *News of the World*. Still, it had been nice to simply throw everything back into his car and drive off, no plans, no list of places to see, nothing to do and plenty of cash in his pocket. No prior arrangements, and therefore, no way by which the Fleet Street hounds could run him to ground. The village he'd lunched in had been perfect for his needs, quiet and sedate, sitting placidly amidst countryside that was pretty, not spectacular, nothing here at all to stimulate

the mind or the adrenalin. Nice and quiet, and the house the old lady in the shop had given him directions for was even more secluded.

So it was in the dead end of the afternoon that he found himself driving along meandering narrow roads which still looked as if horses and carts would be more at home on them than the sleek metallic-ness of his own modern-day steed. The sky was glowering at him with that threatening mixture of black clouds and sunset arguing to see which would fall first. A trifle anxious, he put his foot down a little more, less than keen on the prospect of trying to find an old farmhouse in the dark. He switched his headlights on, a startle of animal eyes flickering at him from the bordering hedges in the gathering gloom. The road was a tangled skein, never straight for more than fifty yards, rising and falling as often as it twisted and turned, far more rural than he had expected and far farther from civilisation, the lights of his car alone in taking over the sun's failure to challenge the rain-heavy clouds. But he should be all right, he reassured himself, for if what the old dear had said was true, even if he missed the house, he would eventually come to the village. And as he hadn't come across a village yet, he should be seeing the house any time now.

There was the sign by the side of the road, a neat white rectangle and red striped post, complete with a patch of gravel just big enough to park one's car whilst one struggled with the enormity of the wooden gate. He was warm by the time he got back into his car, the sheer force of moving that damned lump of wood more than compensating for the first cut of winter. A few feet forward, then stop the car again, get back out from the car's heat, into the air and wrestle with that great weight of wood once more. But he was too familiar with the country to ever consider leaving a gate open, tempting though that was when he'd felt the first heavy drop of rain aim, unerringly and successfully of course, down the back of his collar. By the time he was back in the car, the clouds were opening, the defeated sun was rapidly retreating, and his windscreen wipers were mixing the first

gobbets of rain with the dust, forming a muddy paste on the glass. So busy getting the washers to clear that off, he was taken by surprise when he rounded what proved to be the last bend in a long driveway, so long that it was almost another minor road. The old farmhouse he'd been told about sat there, huge and grey, with only one window lit in any show of life, and he could, with a stretch of the imagination, see that it could look welcoming, given summer and sunshine and children playing outside.

For the first time, it occurred to him that he really should have rung through first. The place hardly looked ready for visitors and it was, after all, well past the summer season, and for all he knew, perhaps the old lady in the shop had simply forgotten that not everyone was like the local pub and took guests in year round. In front of him, the lone light went out, and at this discouraging sight, his heart sank. He really did not relish turning round in this weather and going back to the village or going onwards in the hope of reaching the next habitation before the rain had set in for the night. Best then to simply approach as if one were fully expecting to be fully accommodated, thus lessening the risk of rejection. With more of those cold raindrops finding the back of his neck, he pulled his luggage from the boot, and ran, as quickly as possible under the circumstances, across the gravel and onto the flagged portico. The bell, in brazen contrast with everything else he'd seen so far, was modern, one of those fancy things with speaker and light and more buttons than seemed strictly necessary for either form or function.

He turned away for only a moment, but the door was answered almost immediately, opening behind him as he looked out at the gathering night and the downpouring weather.

"Yes?" said a voice at his back. "May I help you? Or d'you have a thing for standing out in the rain?"

The voice was melodic, a faint hint of Welsh in there somewhere, with softened consonants and a wry lilt of humour. "Oh," he said, and felt stupid at his own inarticulateness, since he should have been expecting the door to be opened and someone there to speak to him.

"I hope you can. Help me, that is. I'm looking for somewhere to spend a few days..."

"I don't take guests in during the winter," his not-to-be host intoned, "but, as you look so woebegone, a veritable waif in the storm," and the humour was warm instead of wry, "I shall take you in and give you shelter. For tonight, anyway, and we'll see how we go along tomorrow. So come in then, and stop letting all the heat out."

The man walked away inside, calling out over his shoulder, "Oh, and you'll have to bring your own luggage in—all the staff have been laid-off for the winter."

So much for warm hospitality and total comfort, Dalgliesh thought to himself. But at least the house was warm and dry, and as a procession of on-going lights lit his way along corridors and up stairs, he appreciated how very pleasant a place it was. Chintzy, but in the best possible way, the sort that reminded you of family homes and mothers reading favourite books to favourite sons. Picture perfect, really, like something off a stereotypical greetings card, and usually just as insincere. But not this place. There was an air of real homeliness here, of family and love and good solid roots. Almost an echo of happiness, faint as the wispy smell of polish.

"Here you are," his host was saying, stepping into a room that was overflowing with an enormous bed. "If you hang on a minute, I'll put fresh sheets on for you and fetch some towels and that sort of thing. It's not one of our usual rooms," he went on, moving around, rearranging things, tugging the curtains shut, "but they've all been thoroughly shut up for the winter now. Easier to put you into the family part of the house—if you don't mind, of course?"

And Dalgliesh was struck by how very icily grey those eyes were, so pallid as to be almost colourless—or the colour of the dead. Unnerving, for their illusion of transparency, and for the sharpness of the mind revealed by them. "Yes, that's fine, of course it is," he said automatically, not giving it a thought.

"Good," his host replied and moved as if to leave.

Some perverseness in Dalgliesh made him push at this odd man with his strange com-

bination of welcoming and aloofness, "And shall I need to pay you in advance?"

The grey eyes were turned on him with all the life of a gutted fish, no reaction showing at all, save for a fine line of contempt. "As you're a stranded traveller and I'm putting you up in the private part of the house, I wouldn't dream of being so rude. In fact, I don't think I'll charge you at all," and the humour was back now, but biting, bitter, turning inwards as much as outwards. "That should save me the bother of pampering you. I'll have my breakfast at 8, thank you."

The door was shut firmly behind the retreating man, leaving Dalgliesh dripping in the middle of a room that was bursting with personality and felt as much like home to him as a dungeon would. Castigating himself for his foolishness, he picked up his cases and started taking out the things he would need for overnight, leaving the rest of his things neatly packed away: no point in bringing anything else out, not when he was going to be travelling on in the morning. There was something about this place that made him want to leave, something in the attitude of his host, perhaps...

A gust of wind rat-a-tatted the rain against the panes and he moved gracefully between the writing table and the overstuffed armchair to pull the curtains, pausing for a moment with both hands stretched as in crucifixion. transfixed by the night outside. It was as wild as the North Sea out there tonight, the treetops tossing like waves, the rain glinting and shattering in the reflected light of his room, grass rippling like the tide. The glass of the window was cold against his face, his breath clouding the transparency but warming nothing. And that, his clear, analytical mind realised, was what was wrong with this room and his host. Everything was precisely as it should be, but there was no warmth there, none at all. Lifeless, listless, as if the place had been shut up and left empty for a generation or two, and his nameless host was just the same.

A knock on his door, and he started, pulling the curtains closed before calling, "Come!" in his best Yard voice.

"Look," his host began in the way of someone

who needs to speak before he thinks better of it, "I'm sorry for having been so snotty with you. It's not your fault you're stuck here, is it? You're welcome to stay, and as my personal guest, not some paying tourist. We'll both pitch in, then you won't feel guilty and I won't feel resentful. That all right with you?"

"Yes, of course," he said, good manners speaking before he'd really listened to what had been said. "Of course," he repeated, this time meaning it. "But you keep on saying I'm stuck here. It's only for the one night..."

The laughter was startling, as bright as a summer's day and joyous, although there was a hollowness to it. "Only for the night? Who doesn't know this area then? Listen, boyo, we're at the bottom of a valley here, with two rivers within spitting distance and no drainage to speak of. Rain like that out there and every dip in the road turns into a swimming pool and half the roads get covered in mud running down from the hills. Take my word for it," he went on, hands deftly mitring and tucking the sheet into place, and if Dalgliesh noticed the faint tremble of those hands, he was too polite to remark upon it, "you'll be stuck here for three or four days until after this rain stops, unless you want to end up chancing the road through, which is really stupid."

"And I've to take your word that this rain isn't in any hurry to stop?"

"Did you look at those clouds this afternoon, or were you too busy admiring the local beauty spots?" The niggling was back between them, sharp little teeth on words that should have been perfectly pleasant. Disgruntled, Dalgliesh realised how much of the strain in the atmosphere was coming from himself.

"It's my turn to apologise," he said by way of answer to his host, finally crossing the room and helping straighten the modern duvet in its traditionalist cover.

"Oh it is, is it?" The grey eyes were on him again, and Dalgliesh caught a glimmer of something before uncommunicative blankness returned. "What for this time?"

"I'm tired and that always makes me out of sorts. I've been," he took a breath, deciding not to confide entirely in this stranger what he was at such lengths to hide from the reporters who had come after him, "working too much recently and you know how that kind of pressure builds up." Well, there was nothing wrong in not telling the entire truth, especially when the impetus to confess all was really a means to garner some sympathy. He rubbed at his eyes, and when he looked up again, all the sympathy he could have hoped for was facing him.

"Come downstairs with you, and we'll find ourselves something to eat. My name's David Thomas."

After a moment's pause, he took the outstretched hand and said, "Duncan. Adam Duncan." He almost grimaced at his own cowardice and his deceitfulness, but the lure of complete anonymity was too sweet to resist.

"Duncan, is it then? Duncan it shall be." David Thomas was almost grinning at him, a wicked lick of enjoyment in his eyes and Dalgliesh was suddenly sure that this man knew exactly who he was. And more than just his name. Something in the way those remarkable eyes were regarding him, with deep and certain understanding—but then, a blink, and it was gone, replaced by the empty-house shuttering that he was already too familiar with.

"Adam," he said, as Thomas went out of the room. "No need to be formal under these circumstances, is there?"

"Adam," drifted back to him, softly, gently, so caressingly that he began his first conscious wondering if this man might be gay. "Then you shall call me David. Here, into the kitchen with you, and we'll just have a look-see to see what we can find."

There was a great clattering of doors and drawers, of cabinets and dishes, with copious mutterings to sound the way. "This shall do nicely," David finally said, digging a bowl out of the back of the fridge and sticking it into the microwave. The compulsory pings and hums followed before he sat down at the plain pine table, a strong, broad hand waving Dalgliesh to follow suit. "You're not vegetarian or anything, are you? Because if you are, then you're not going to enjoy our supper at all!"

"No, I'm as carnivorous as the next man," Dalgliesh said, settling himself on a chair that

was large enough for once, and comfortable with it.

"Unless the next man is a vegan, right? There's bread, too, from this morning, so it's still lovely and fresh."

"Yes," he said, looking up, not quite sure of what to say next. It was always easy enough when he went in as a policeman, all the questions that needed to be asked, all the answers that needed to be ferreted out. It was even easy with friends and acquaintances, really—all the questions that ought to be asked, all the answers (and how's your son? He must be what, 14 by now? How are you after your operation? How's the new job? The new house? The new wife?). There was always something he could ask that would set them off like a stream in spate, but this man, this stranger, there was nothing he could find to say to him. Awkwardly, he looked around the kitchen, seeing the age under the plaster and behind the modern fixtures, seeing the passing centuries in the massive depth of window sill and lowness of ceilings.

"Before you say anything," Thomas' voice interrupted him, "you don't have to say anything at all. I hate small-talk and I'd rather say nothing at all than sit here mouthing boring crap at you."

Perversely, he found there were a lot of things he suddenly wanted to say. To begin with: "Is this," and a nod encompassed the kitchen, "sixteenth century?"

"No," Thomas said with utter sincerity and a smile lurking gleefully in the corner, "it's twentieth century. Most deep freezes are, you know."

"I didn't mean—" he finally noticed the glint of laughter and realised that he'd been had, albeit very small-ly and very gently. And, finally, he also recognised that the liveliness that was growing in the grey eyes was attraction. Sexual attraction, aimed at himself. Well, not to worry, he'd had men attracted to him before and no doubt would again. The question was whether or not he was willing to allow an attraction to grow in himself. Falling silent, he sat and watched as David Thomas wandered around the kitchen putting this together with that, putting the butter into what was obviously one of the 'good' dishes,

slicing bread thick and crumbly, all the movements unhurried, Thomas making no attempt to allure him. And that, funnily enough, was what made it all go 'click' inside. Attraction peeked out, considering, this youngish man with his thick hair that tickled at his collar and his broad shoulders.

The silence stretched, as comfortable as the pleasant quiet he had shared with his aunt, but with just a soupcon of tingling awareness. Once, then twice, Thomas looked over his shoulder at Dalgliesh, his face both somber and serious, as if he, too, were considering the other man in the room. Dalgliesh leaned back, perilously, in his seat, his eyelids hooded as he watched Thomas watching him, and he catalogued what the other man would see: himself, no longer in the first flush of youth; tall and slender, but with an interestingly mature, not effete, face; hair receding, but still dark and strong; well-dressed with quiet expensiveness, everything chosen as much for comfort as style; and with eyes that had made people complain that they felt more like the victim on the slab awaiting autopsy than a useful witness. So he smiled, half in apology, and caught his breath at the response.

Thomas smiled at him, his whole face lighting him up, limning this rugby-ish man with pre-Raphaelite beauty. And he was beautiful. Not handsome, not attractive, but beautiful with the same kind of radiance he remembered his wife as having had.

"Ready?" Thomas was saying, and for an absurd moment, it was as if they were both going to descend into a music hall skit of double entendres and bad puns. But then the beauty reasserted itself, the slow curl of attraction billowing out from David to touch, briefly, Dalgliesh's skin. "Supper's ready. Stew and bread, cheese and biscuits and there's a bit of cake for afters, if you want it."

Again the temptation to indulge in double entendre, but Dalgliesh said instead, quite gravely, "The savoury will do for me, thank you."

For a very long minute, they simply looked one at the other, the unspoken question passing—*I'm interested. Are you?*—and being answered—*not usually, no.*

Even though he had meant it to be: no, absolutely not, not ever.

Dalgliesh looked away then, balanced on the razor's edge of blushing, turning himself away from the implication of the invitation he had just given. The lack of definite refusal, his very turning-away and the slow ooze of colour into his cheeks all said, 'persuade me', not 'hands off'. And, he confessed to himself with a wry inner smile as he methodically ate his stew and tore his bread to pieces, he wasn't entirely sure he wanted a 'hands off'. After all, he was here as someone else entirely, no-one knew where he was, no-one could possibly find out. It was, he discovered with a rush of adrenalin, the perfect freedom to truly be himself, and that rather bitter irony appealed to him, the poet in him quietly storing the moment and the truth away to be filtered and distilled and brought out later, transformed. The silence between them now was peopled with short glances, quick, speculative looks, the occasional fleeting smile. It was flattering, to have someone so interested in him again, but there was a niggle of personal dissatisfaction there too, as if he were being idle and parasitical to just sit here and let the other man do all the work.

"Coffee or tea?" asked the other man, for all the world as if there were no awareness of anything but polite strangers chance met. "Or something a bit more on the medicinal side?"

"Oh," Dalgliesh rose to his full height, saw a flicker of attraction darken eyes, smiled, "definitely something medicinal, I think. To keep out the weather, as they used to say."

"Brandy? Or I have a very good cognac, if you'd rather."

"Cognac. But the washing-up..." he trailed off with all the delicacy of a solitary person who had never learned to like the tawdriness of household drudgery.

"The washing-up can wait until tomorrow. You're not the only one on holiday around here. Through there, into the sitting room. I'll only be half a tick."

Immediately on his left was a window that was being thrashed behind the curtain by a limb of a tree and the staccato beat of the rain. In front of him, the hallway was punctuated

by doors and by paintings, the two often combined into fanciful modern icons, lush scenes of beauty, sensuality twining vaguely with amorphous mythology to create images that were never clear but were still disturbingly sexual. One in particular caught his attention and he stopped for a while to stare at it, his mind cataloguing the details and realising that the whole was far more than the sum of its parts. There was nothing actually there, nothing he could actually point at and say that this, or this, was sexual, but still, the whole thing combined to give him a feeling of warmth in his groin, the pleasant reassurance of potency. Behind him, he heard a door closing and moved on, too polite to ever actually be caught poking and prying-when he wasn't on duty, that was.

The sitting room, when finally he found it, reached out to him, embracing him in its warmth, the heat from the fire being the least of it. He was used, in his work, and now in his private life as well, as the two overlapped more and more invisibly, to gaining impressions of places instantly, on the move, or while his mind was occupied elsewhere. But this room did not allow for that, overflowing with bits and pieces in a profusion that was actually soothing to the eye. It was a rare luxury for him, in these days of overwork and underliving, to have the time, or the inclination, to browse through a room the way other people would slowly leaf through a book, turning each thing over carefully in its turn. The fireplace, with its crackling orange and red and blue blaze, naturally drew the attention first, the white frippery beautifully impractical for a working, traditional coal fireplace, although he supposed that modern smokeless coal made the cleaning easier than in the days of generations past. Feet planted firmly before the hearth, he was rather self-consciously indulging himself in that most atavistic and manorial of reactions: the seigneur rubbing his hands before the fire. So he turned his back on the fireplace, stepping forward as the heat bit at his backside, and took his first good look at the room. Once a policeman, always a policeman, he thought dispiritedly, disgusted with himself once more because he couldn't look at anything without analysing and cataloguing it as if it were an exhibit in some court. I submit those items grouped as A, m'lud, as evidence that the suspect is fond of reading. Still, for all his self-mockery and disenchantment, he went over and switched the lamp on beside the bookshelves, not quite running his finger over the spines as he read the chaos of titles, everything from lurid science fiction to serious books of science, from books of funny limericks to a complete John Donne, from books on being a good Catholic to half a shelf of books on being a good homosexual, with a liberal dusting of westerns, gay fiction and several books on holistic health and literary analysis. And half a shelf of erotic fiction, all of it unabashedly gay, judging by the uncompromising titles. An absolute cornucopia of contrasts. Which tickled his intellect and suddenly made Mr. David Thomas far more attractive than before.

"See anything you fancy?"

He actually jumped, as guilty as a schoolboy caught peeping through the keyhole. "Ah, yes," he brazened, picking a book at random, "just something to glance through before I go to sleep."

Thomas laughed a little, mocking him. "Well, that should send you to sleep quick enough, though it's not something I'd've thought you would want to just 'glance' through. Anyway, here's your cognac. Pull up a pew, why don't you."

Thomas was watching Dalgliesh carefully, gauging reactions, interpreting body language, and Dalgliesh found himself wondering what his body was saying while his mind was trying to work out what it was going to do. It was one thing to be intoxicated by this feeling of freedom, another to be blinded by a delusion of it. And for the moment, he wasn't quite sure which case applied here. He switched the lamp off again, leaving the room quite gently lit by the fire, the way his host apparently preferred. There was an armchair placed opposite the one David was sprawled in, a glass of cognac on the small book table beside it. The heat from the fire spread pleasantly down his right hand side, casting shadows across his face, mirror to the dancing darkness that turned Thomas into such a mystery.

Silently, with only the small noises of the fire and the large blares of the storm to keep them company, they sat face to face, sipping the seeping heat of their cognacs, companionable over the deeper uncertainty. Thomas had a generous hand, the cognac poured deep and copious into the cut crystal glasses and Dalgliesh knew that he had been offered a way to lower his inhibitions if he wanted it. And knew, suddenly, noticing the way Thomas was consuming the spirit, that the other man needed that more than he did himself. Which was intriguing. Which was erotic. Why would a man, an openly gay man, need so much Dutch—or in this case, very fine French—spirit before he would flirt with someone who hadn't actually said no? Perhaps, he conceded, because I haven't actually said yes, yet. Perhaps because I'm not sure if I will say yes, or if I'll put on my face of outraged heterosexual and protect myself the way I've got into the habit of doing.

Another unthought-of habit. Another in an elongating list that was dragging him deeper and deeper into a rut that was becoming far too comfortable. The fire, as he let his gaze sink into it, was soothing and hypnotic, the sinuous fingers crooked at him to draw him in deeper and let himself relax, relax, relax... His head nodded with a jolt of shock as he realised that he'd been drifting off into sleep. Guiltily, he immediately began a conversation with his host, to apologise for the rudeness of his somnambulism. "The paintings in the hall are really quite excellent," he said. And noted, with extreme interest, the sudden flood of guilt, real guilt, flare over David Thomas' face.

"Yes, they are, aren't they?"

"Did you," Dalgliesh continued, driven by the same need to poke and prod that afflicts both dentists and policemen, "do them yourself?"

"No, I can't draw a straight line. A...friend did them. A long time ago."

He saw it then, the underlying grief that made the eyes seem so lifeless that even the few flickers of attraction and humour couldn't counterbalance.

"A...special friend of yours?" he enquired, delicately, the same way he was known for

QUANTUM OF SOLACE

handling witnesses and victims alike. And this man, kissed by the orange glow of the fire, had become both.

"Oh, he was very special," Thomas whispered, staring down into his drink. "He had so much talent and—" He stopped, cut himself dead and took a gulp of his drink, coughing violently after, wiping the tears from his eyes. Tears, Dalgliesh wondered, that were the result of the too-large drink, or the excuse for the too-large drink? He waited, patient as the confessional, to hear the story.

"So you're interested in art then, are you?" the supposed-confessor said instead, throwing Dalgliesh off.

"Only in things I like."

"Aren't we all? I must admit, the first time I saw what Mitch had done to the hall, I nearly killed him. I hated them at first." Another laugh, this one soft with remembering. "I couldn't imagine bringing families with hordes of squabbling children in through that hallway to show them to the guest rooms. I threatened him with either building a new door into the paying part of the house—or getting a huge tin of white emulsion!"

"But you didn't."

A pointed look, a sharply penetrating comprehension. "Part of the Spanish Inquisition in a previous life, were you? Or just a policeman keeping your hand in?" And as Dalgliesh made to demur, to say something, a wave of his hand and he went on, "No, no, don't apologise. To be honest, I've been looking for someone to talk to. And who better than a complete stranger who's going to be moving on as soon as the weather eases and the roads clear? I didn't do anything to the hall because Mitch said that the paintings were the sort that you'd have to have a dirty mind to get any idea what they were all about, because there's nothing definite, nothing really clear in them. Dirty minded and gay, that's what he said. And I am. Both."

It would be nice, Dalgliesh thought, if I could stop being a policeman long enough that people wouldn't feel they had to constantly defend themselves to me. Or if I could relax enough to stop demanding justifications for everything. "I had rather gathered that," he said, very mildly, passing no judgements,

aware that his body had tightened, that he had instinctively crossed his legs and turned slightly away from the man opposite. Not in rejection of David Thomas, oh, no, but in habitual, instinctive rejection of that part of himself that was just like Thomas. A small part, he would tell himself, often, but a far from silent part, one that clamoured loud and long for attention, for absolution. For satiation.

Thomas was smiling at him with a wryness that did nothing to hide the bitterness. "I thought you might have, going by your reaction to me. Mixed feelings, eh? Liberal ideals, reactionary gut-feelings. I had rather gathered that."

"Had you?" And the poised and practised superciliousness of that stung him, gave him the excuse that the cognac had failed to do. "And had you also gathered that my feelings of ambivalence might stem from latent homosexual tendencies?" My god, he thought in shock, I'm even talking as if I'm on a case! Alistair Burnett will be asking me a pertinent question next!

The newscaster was nowhere in sight, but David Thomas did an admirable fill-in job. "And I take it that *you* had gathered that you had latent homosexual tendencies before tonight?" he asked, the first flares of anger flashing. "Or," he went on, with a distinctly serrated edge to his voice, "are you going to lie to the both of us and say all this comes as a big surprise to you?"

"After telling you a thing like that, you accuse me of lying? Now that hardly seems fair."

"But you didn't tell me any such thing, did you? You asked *me* if that's what I thought it was. For all I know, you might be a policeman out to have his jollies and then arrest me for making indecent advances."

"In the privacy—the *legalising* privacy, I might add—of your own home? Hardly seems likely, does it, sir?"

"So you are a policeman, then." Very softly spoken, although the expression was hard now, only the firelight blunting the edges, but even that gave a Mephistophelian cast to him.

So much for anonymity, so much for being someone else for a time. "Yes." Bald, flat, lying

there.

A pause, as he was examined, and then the dawning of illumination. "I know you," Thomas said, leaning forward in his seat. "How stupid can I be? You're not Duncan, you're that big-wig they've had on telly about that murder thing. And that thing before it, what was it?"

"The child."

That brought them both up short, as unwelcome newspaper eructations filled one mind, as unforgettable nightmare truths filled another, a long line of details trudging off like soldiers to the Trenches. Dalgliesh swallowed, hastily, from his glass, needing the delusion of inner warmth. The pain of that case had receded, become more something that had merely happened instead of something he had experienced. And that cool distance frightened him more than anything else possibly could. If he could feel nothing, actually feel in his bones instead of holding it in his mind, when it had been something as horrific as that poor child, then God help him.

"You poor soul," came the words, as if his mind had been laid bare to read like a tattered second-hand book. "You poor, poor soul."

He was afraid to look up. Afraid of the sympathy, and what that sympathy would do to him. Too wound up, too distanced from his own feelings to take sympathy, because he knew, god, he knew that honest sympathy from a stranger was the key, the one thing that could unlock the stout oaken door he had between his intellect and his emotions. For now, even hearing it in the voice, he could see with perfect clarity. He had utter contempt for his own stupidity in not seeing it before, for it was all so simple, really. He was turning himself into a two-dimensional caricature of a cop, because that was easier than being himself. For if he had the depth of a TV cop, then he had an excuse for not feeling the pain that was now too much to bear. Lines from his own poetry crowded into him like ghosts at an abandoned train station, telling him how he felt, telling him what he feared.

Living. He'd brittled to the stage where he feared living, feared all of it because he was overbrimming with pain already, bound tight and tighter and all of it ready to explode from him and rip the skin from him and leave him nothing more than a seeping, weeping wound.

"Oh, you poor man, I never meant this to happen. Come on now, come on," and Thomas was there, kneeling at his feet, warm arms, human arms, feeling arms coming around him, holding him together, warm words filling in the hollow aching left by the ricocheting lines of his own misery. "It's all right, you can cry about it. I don't mind, it's nice to be needed again."

He choked a bit, swallowing the humiliating sobs, holding himself rigid, trying to straighten up in the chair and say that he was all right, really, perfectly all right, just a bit overtired and a little drunk, he was fine. But of course, his voice wouldn't work, couldn't overcome all the things he hadn't said when he'd found that small, perfect child, nor three weeks later when he'd gone into the next case, the man who had been so average until his murderers had done with him. Those two, and the months before, and the prying words of people asking him, asking him how it felt and how did he cope and what was it like...

"I hate it!" he suddenly shouted, embarrassing himself but not David Thomas. "I hate all of it and I just want it to stop, sometimes. Just for a little while. Let me bury the dead first before they make me go on to the next one..."

"That's it, bach, you tell them all. Go on, shout at them, tell them what you think of them."

But he couldn't. Not sitting here in someone else's parlour, in front of someone else's fireplace, drinking someone else's cognac. He started to ease away, felt Thomas' resistance, and allowed himself this small comfort. But if Thomas—

"It's all right, I'm not going to think you're making a pass at me or anything, so don't you worry," David said, casually reading his mind again. "It's only that I know what it's like to need someone to just hold on to for a while." Dalgliesh said nothing, but the muscles in his arms stiffened, as if to withdraw again back to the sanctity of the stiff upper lip.

"You see," Thomas began, his accent stronger with his own remembering, "I could do with a bit of a cuddle myself. I was telling you about Mitch and his bloody painting. It was his hare-brained dream to buy this house in the first place. He wanted this place so badly, and it was his inheritance money, so who was I to say no? So we took this place on, and we converted part of it for a B&B to bring in enough cash to help with the bills or give us a bit of spending money, depending on how things were. He said, you see, that we could have the place full of people all summer and then in the winter, it would just be the two of us and if we were really lucky, we'd get snowed in together and then the rest of the world wouldn't even exist. The ultimate honeymoon getaway, he called it."

Dalgliesh sat silently, listening, a small part of his mind aware that he was listening as a human being, not a note-taker out on a case, that he was actually feeling the ebb and flow of the words, imagining the never-seen Mitch and the persuading of David.

"It was perfect. We've been here—I've been here over twelve years now, eleven of them with Mitch. D'you realise we were lovers since secondary school? My family moved to Bristol the year I was doing my A-levels, and there was Mitch and there went the A-levels. Oh, I got them, but not as well as I should have. But I had Mitch, and I got a job, and we knew he had this money coming to him. There's never really been that many other people for me, you see. Not like Mitch. He always liked a bit of adventure, and he had a weakness for prostitutes. We think that might actually be where he caught it..."

He knew exactly, precisely, what David was talking about. A physical sickness washed through Dalgliesh and he felt his face ashen, sweat bead him. He'd assumed that time had split the two men up, that the translucent Mitch had simply moved on, in the way of so many men. But for it to be AIDS—

If Mitch had died from it, then chances were, surely, that David had it too. Somewhere during the monologue, the comforter had become the comforted and it was a sheer act of will that kept Dalgliesh's arms around the other man. Procedure thundered through his mind, screaming rubber gloves and no bodily-fluid contact, don't let them bite you or spit on you, wash thoroughly afterwards, rubber

gloves, never let them touch you, wear rubber gloves, don't let them too close—

And that, he thought, viciously attacking his own mindless panic, is a load of old codswallop. In sheer defiance of his own unreasoning fear, he stroked David's hair, cradling the man in closer to him, his gentleness saying far more than empty platitudes. "I'm sorry," was what he finally said, and it actually meant something. "It must have been hard..."

He let it trail off, offering to listen if Thomas needed to talk. Willing, even wanting to hear. After all, he knew what it was to watch someone you loved die slowly and painfully. And because of you.

"At first, when we found out, I actually blamed myself a bit, you know, the whole stupid guilt thing. If only I'd been a better lover, he wouldn't've had to go elsewhere. If only I'd been sexier, he wouldn't've wanted anyone else. If only I'd been able to be everything and everyone... Then I saw sense and stopped all of that. Oh, god, he went so fast! I mean, some people have years and years after they find out, but by the time he went to the doctor, it was already eating him alive. And he just...withered away. Turned into an old man overnight, almost. I kept him at home as much as we could, but we're so far from the hospital out here..."

"I'm sorry," Dalgliesh whispered again, hugging him tightly, sharing the pain because this agony of loss was almost comforting in its familiarity, something he'd lived with for over half his life. He sat back again, separating them, parting them as empathy threatened him with true unity. David glared at him, dark shadows of lines etching his forehead as the fire burned lower but Thomas' temper burned higher, made all the more consuming by the pain that was still there even though Dalgliesh had withdrawn.

"That's it?" he demanded, hands on Dalgliesh's knees. "A couple of minutes as long as you can manage? Oh, don't overwhelm me with your generosity! You're sorry, but you're too busy thinking about how embarrassing all this is—"

Again, that casual ability to see right through him, to know what was going on inside the so-called privacy of his thoughts. It was unnerving and unsettling, for this man whom no-one was allowed to truly know, this having a stranger plummet to the core of him.

"So you're going to sit there like something off the nine o'clock news with your plummy posh accent and your perfect country-casual clothes and your books of poetry. Tell me, Inspector Dalgliesh, how the hell *you*—" and the last word was emphatically underlined with a sneer, "ever managed to write those poems? Or is that another Adam Dalgliesh, no relation to anyone here tonight?"

That, oh, that was far too close to home, touching not on a nerve but his own raw, pustulating fear. Another line of a poem came to his mind, and in the fraction of a second that is all fear requires, he wondered if the words were his or merely remembered from some far off book-reading. And worse, if there were any difference at all any more. But for all his words, his gift was in putting them on paper, or using them as the police must. For this, human contact and human exchange and personal honesty, there was nothing he knew how to say, and nothing he could say. To a man who had lost his lover, what words could make it any less dreadful? And failing that, what could he, a man who kept his distance, whose own grief was so deeply entrenched that it still ruled his life, possibly say to him?

Honesty, perhaps. A taste of his own misery to leaven the darkness of another's. And freedom, perhaps. Real freedom.

"Sometimes, when I see young men walking past me," he said mildly into the fury of silence, "I wonder if that's the kind of man my son would have grown up to be. My wife..." and strange, how the words had become pat over the years and over the repeated tellings to himself in the quiet of the night, some feminine friend lying beside him needing to be kept where she couldn't pull him in too deep. "My wife died in childbirth, a long time ago."

"And that's your excuse for keeping everyone at arms' length? For being such a cold fish?" Amazement mingled with contempt, stinging him.

The question flayed him. That doubt was

not for speaking, nor for seeing, nor for hearing, not unless he were alone with nothing but himself and the protective, forgiving darkness where he could rationalise to his heart's content—or until he had his excuses well-aired as to why he was going to keep this lady friend simply friendly, nothing more than pleasant companionship and frequent romps between the sheets. And another readymade excuse for denying his own bisexuality. How could he, after all, betray his beloved, departed wife by breaking the vow he had made to her the day she agreed to marry him?

And what, a voice asked him, about the times *after* we were married?

It shocked him to the bone that it took him so long to recognise the voice. It was hers, as bright and pert and elegant as the day they met. And as ill-remembered as her face... Undying devotion? Undying cop-out, more likely. It interested him how his memory, usually so perfect at almost total recall, should fail and falter like a wonky television set, sending him nothing but squiggly pictures and snow, when every blessed detail of his job was sitting right there, ready for the viewing. Yet another symptom, he thought, of encroaching officialdom settling onto him like a suit of armour.

"But you're not a cold fish, are you?" Thomas was talking to him, insisting that he pay attention to what he was actually experiencing now, that he should put the analysis on the back burner and deal with the present. David's hands were no longer gripping his knees in bruising anger but stroking, caressing, deliberately trying to arouse. Deliberately, Dalgliesh could tell, to prove Thomas' point. "You're just a coward, that's all. Hurt once, and too scared to chance it again. Or too lazy. Or too selfish. Which one is it with you?"

"All of them." Cold, stand-offish, but at least honest. "And a few more besides." He took the warmth of David's hands in the coolness of his own, clasping them together in double prayer. "So if you're trying to get me going to make a point here, then don't bother. I already know me very well," and it a bitter freedom indeed to finally admit it before a witness. "And I'm well aware what I do. But before you get on your high horse," leaning

forward to stare all the more effectively and chillingly into David's eyes, "remember that perhaps I *need* to cut myself off just so that I can do my job without losing all trace of humanity."

Unblinking, unflinching. "And if you believe that, then you're a liar and a fool."

He had to let go then, to let go of this perspicacity that he neither wanted nor needed. All he needed was a rest, a break from all this soul-searching, from the job, from feeling, from guilt about not feeling enough. A break from people and all their demands and weaknesses that needed his strength to shore them up.

"What are you really so afraid of?" David was asking him, ethereal demand, slithering into his soul.

And he listened, and he thought about it, while he stared into grey eyes that flickered and danced with the fire. Most surprisingly of all, he answered, not David but finally, ultimately, himself. "Me. I'm afraid of what I actually am."

"You're just a man, Adam, no different from anyone else, not really."

He drank the words in, only then knowing how much he needed to hear them. "Even when I can't feel anything when I see a child that's been murdered?"

"Not feel anything? You? You know something, Adam, I think your problem is that you feel too much and then you try to pretend you're hard as nails and soooo cold. But I don't think you are."

"Trauma fatigue," he said, quoting a memorandum he had scoffed at when it had crossed his desk. Such weaknesses were not for him. Oh, no, not him. Let the lesser men suffer from job burn-out and trauma fatigue and all the other ailments of smaller men. He was made of sterner stuff. Well, perhaps his father had been, and definitely his father had demanded that he be like that, but life is usually a far cry from what we so foolishly imagine it to be.

"Is that what the trick cyclists are calling it these days? As good a name as any, I suppose. But we weren't talking about your career—at least I wasn't. And when it comes to your personal life, I think you've just been too scared to get involved again. I mean, what would you do if you gave someone yourself—and they didn't want you? That'd be too much to take, wouldn't it, Adam? So instead you cling on to the memory of your True Love and that the best way to keep everyone else at a distance."

"Voice of experience?" he asked, pleased to hear no judgement in his voice, just a small cutting edge.

"Oh, yes, absolutely. You see," and David's eyes locked with Dalgliesh's, begging with the innocent pride of a child, "sometimes I think that's what I did with Mitch. I always told myself that I loved him to distraction, that's why I never bothered with anyone else. And I knew he loved me—when he went wandering it was only a sex thing, and that's nothing. Or it used to be nothing, before. It's different, now, of course."

He had to ask. David was begging him to ask. "Are you positive?"

A wan smile, gathering courage, becoming brave and defiant. "What do you think? We've no idea how long he had it before he was even diagnosed with it, so god knows how many times we—" he adopted the lofty distaste of a Mary Whitehouse, "shared bodily fluids' before he actually fell ill. I got myself tested right off, of course." Introspection, turning his smile pallid once more. "Not that I told Mitch the truth, though. He couldn't have borne knowing that he'd killed me." Suddenly bright eyes glinted at him, filled with more desperate pain than Dalgliesh had ever felt himself. "Terrible, isn't it, that you can kill someone just because you love them. But I didn't tell him. Neither one of us ever tried to hurt the other, not really. Not like this."

He was going to say something, going to reach out, offer comfort, do—something. But David was visibly pulling himself together, retreating to the same safe bastion of stiff upper lip that Dalgliesh had hidden behind. "But as my mother was fond of saying, mustn't grumble."

Dalgliesh had to smile, to honour the courage. But he wondered what it must take to survive and actually live, knowing that your own body was a time bomb, ticking your life away every time your heart beat. David

was on his feet all of a sudden, bustling around adding coal to the fire, beginning a witty monologue on the trials and tribulations of being a Welsh city boy dwelling amidst the weird and wonderful denizens of the English countryside. And not quite strangely, it was this ruddy-faced courage, this cheerful refusal to go on living, to not waste the rest of his time in regrets that could never be reversed—it was this that reminded Dalgliesh that he'd found this man attractive. That he'd considered coming here in anonymity to be a burst of welcome freedom. That he'd thought that this might be the perfect opportunity to satisfy a need in himself usually left ignored.

But there was the not-so-small question of AIDS. Not even for the intoxication of freedom was he willing to risk his life. Of course, there were ways round it, or so the advertising and the carefully non-explicit reports all said.

"What do you do regarding sex?" he heard himself blurt out with embarrassing bluntness.

David laughed, really laughed, until he had to wipe fresh tears away. "You're the last person I thought would actually come right out and bare-faced ask that!" The fire—the one in the hearth, although there was an abruptly growing heat between the two men also—expertly stoked, David sprawled in his seat again, and this time it wasn't the way the fire lit his face that Dalgliesh noticed, nor the sound of the storm throwing a temper tantrum outside. It was the way the light emphasised the bulking curve in the gusset of David's jeans, and the way his own heart was beginning to beat faster. Which was foolish. After all, he hadn't done more than toy with the idea of sleeping with this man, so he certainly wasn't going to indulge in casual sex with a stranger he knew was HIV+. But then David smiled at him, only accidentally seductive, and he found himself wondering.

"I've become very fond of my own right hand," David was saying. "There hasn't been anyone at all since Mitch was too ill to do anything. And after he'd died, god, the last thing I could do was face having sex with someone who wasn't him. But then," and again the pallid smile that merely showed how uncowed he was most of the time, "you'd know all about being too hurt and too afraid to get involved with someone else, wouldn't you?"

"But if you met someone you actually wanted to have sex with?" he asked doggedly, wanting to know. Needing to know, for this man's lonely empathy struck deep within him, and the man's blatantly masculine good looks were drawing him in.

"Then we'd do one of the things that's safe, of course." He went on, telling Dalgliesh the things that most people were too politely discreet to mention. "Fellatio, for him, with a condom on, but not all the way to coming," he ticked off a finger in the bored manner of one delivering a lecture, sparing Dalgliesh's blushes, "frottage, mutual masturbation, anal penetration with gloved and spermicided fingers or penis but not to ejaculation. And lots of imagination."

Dalgliesh could imagine all of that, very well indeed. As for David being so obviously sensitive to Dalgliesh's sensibilities, well, that was enough to prick his pride. "What about," he said, deliberately and uncommonly crude, "if he were HIV- and fucked you?"

That made David choke on what would have been an innocuous sip of cognac. He took a good look at Dalgliesh, as if something once thought supremely familiar had turned into a mutant in the blink of an eye. "Still too risky, they say. In case the condom broke and there was some blood or...something inside me that managed to get into you somehow or other. It's not very likely, I know, but would you want to take the risk?"

And Dalgliesh wondered how long it would take David to realise exactly how he had phrased his answer. Ten seconds, fifteen, and then the penny dropped and the chin lifted in defiance of any embarrassment he might be expected to feel.

"Well," David said, "you did ask, and I assume your interest wasn't purely scientific?"

"I thought it was," Dalgliesh answered, playing for time until he could decide whether or not his interest was, indeed, less than pasteur pure.

"With the way you've been looking at me since I opened that door? Or the way you've been blowing hot and cold at me all night?"

They were staring at each other again, in this quiet womb of a room that was keeping everything but the sound of the storm outside. "It's almost unreal, sitting here," Dalgliesh said, because it was the truth, and one thing he had decided was that truth was no threat here, not tonight. There was nothing that could be revealed to him that he didn't already know about himself, whether or not he'd yet admitted it. "It's like something out of a play, isn't it? Two people sitting in front of a fire in a comfortable room, dreadful storm battering outside, while the two men debate the meaning of emotion in their lives and-what is it they're saying these days?—get to know their inner selves.

QUANTUM OF SOLACE

"But we both already know ourselves, and in a funny kind of way, we probably know each other too. And there's no audience sitting watching us, and no-one's written our lines out for us and no-one's decided how this play's going to end, have they? It's just you and me, the world doesn't even exist any more."

The ultimate honeymoon getaway, so the late Mitch had said, and the ultimate in temptation, or so Dalgliesh said. Looking around this pleasant room, looking back at David Thomas, Dalgliesh could understand why Mitch had wanted this house so desperately. This was still a home, even though one of the lovers had died. Still a home, and still filled with love, some of it flowing from David, some of it lingering on in all the memories that filled all the corners and dusted all the mementos, like the oriental bowl on the mantlepiece, and the photographs, and the primitive clay figurines. He glanced at David Thomas, and that man was watching him with a steady, patient, gaze.

"I'm very like Mitch, aren't I?" he asked, fairly sure of the answer.

"Not in looks, no. But for the rest of it... I could probably tell you what you like for breakfast."

Again, the sexual lick to the words, the open, casual acceptance of sexuality between them. But for Dalgliesh, there was nothing either open or casual about it. Too long spent mourning his wife and infant who had died together trying to give birth to his dream of a

child, and too many years in between using that as his lion tamer's whip to keep the world from coming too close. But now this man was offering him sex as if it were nothing more than a coffee after dinner. Perhaps it was, perhaps—

An instant of intuition broke the circular cycle of his thoughts. Thomas had gone through what he had, which was losing everyone you truly loved in one fell swoop, but for him, it had happened, what?, less than a year ago? Surely not longer than eighteen months, for David said that he'd been in this house twelve years, eleven of them with Mitch. So even allowing for the vagaries of human memory and possible incompetence with all subjects mathematical, then the loss must still be new, and fissuring deeper into him. So what had it cost him to make such an offer to a man who didn't have the courage to make a decision one way or another?

"It's not exactly easy for me, this, you know," David said, startling Dalgliesh. "But I can't keep on living in this house as if it's my own mausoleum." A short laugh that really tried hard at being humour-filled. "Anyway, Mitch would kill me if I did that. He honestly wanted me to go on and keep on living, but— You know what it's like, don't you? And then, after a while, you start wondering if it's really because of them that you aren't going out with other people, or if it's because of something in yourself. Or something that's not in yourself, like love these days. Or even sex. Do you realise," his stare left him wide open, utterly without defences, and peeled Dalgliesh's skin back as if he were at his own post-mortem and left his heart bare, "that you're the first person I've fancied in the slightest bit since Mitch got really ill? I was too miserable before, then it was too difficult to go out there and start all over again. And now I've got so used to being on my own and not having to think about anyone but me, I don't even know if I really did love him as much as I think I did."

"Or if that's just a convenient excuse for not getting involved and not having to let people get close to you."

"The way you do?"

Dalgliesh leaned forward, sinking into the

honesty of David's eyes. "The way I did," he said, very, very softly, voice barely carrying above the sound of the storm's wildness and the low cracking of the coal on the fire. "Or I should say, the way I hope it will be the way I did."

"Turning over a new leaf, Adam?"

So much vulnerability in that gaze, so much need, and such a depth of giving waiting to be taken, proffered to him on silver eyes that knew him so well. "Trying to. Perhaps. In here," and he hesitated, not quite sure how to say this, wishing he could wait until the words had settled themselves down into the proper pattern, "it's different, isn't it? We've created a false environment—"

"But that's the best place to find the truth in ourselves, isn't it? Does it really matter if it's three o'clock in the morning truth, or pickled as a newt, or meeting some stranger on a train? That's when we do our best honesty, isn't it, Adam, all those places where it's safe to tell the truth because then you can just walk away and it's as if the truth never existed."

There was something in his words, something in the whispering portent that made Dalgliesh shiver. And David saw, and David reached out, and it was David finally, and of course, who touched first. Breathless fingertips danced across Dalgliesh's face, the lightest of touches, so as, perhaps, not to scare him off. "It's been a long time since you were with a man, isn't it?" David whispered as his fingers found the sensitivity of an earlobe, then moved on to feel the nervous swallowing under the fine skin and faint beginnings of stubble. "Don't worry about it. I'd rather be passive anyway. Too paranoid about passing it on to someone, you see."

And that fell into the entwining mood like a mallet, shattering it. Dalgliesh began to pull away, rejecting, erecting barriers, metaphorically making the sign of the cross and hanging out the garlic. Until he saw the resignation in those grey eyes, the pain-filled expectation that this would happen, the beginnings of depression. Before his very eyes, he could see David diminish, could see the self-hate and the self-guilt begin once more. And he hated himself for it. After all, he'd read

all the reports, heard all the news on the radio, knew perfectly well that safe sex didn't mean no sex. Use your imagination, that was the slogan, wasn't it? That, and use a condom.

"Do you have any french letters?" the old-fashioned phrase from his youth slipped out, as he went back to the only times he had ever felt he had to bother with such things, modern birth control and health ignorance being what it is.

A grin for that, bright tinged with melancholy still, but David was obviously not someone to wallow in self-pity unless he thought he had good cause. "French letters? Sorry, all mine are made in Britain," he quipped, leaning back and contorting himself so that he could reach behind the cushion on his chair. Which was when Dalgliesh finally found out what had taken his host so long to put two glasses and a bottle on a tray.

"You want us to do it down *here*?" Dalgliesh asked, rather horrified.

"When the choice is getting you all the way upstairs and into bed, when you'll want to have a wash first, and brush you're teeth and all your other polite, middle-class niceties, you're bloody right I want us to do it here. How long," he knelt forward, his hands now squirrelling under Dalgliesh's pullover, "would it take you to get cold feet? Or come to your senses, I suppose you'd say, eh? How many reasons could you come up with that would keep you as far away from me as you could get? Or let you go back into your nice, safe little deep-freeze where no-one ever gets to really touch you or know you?"

He opened his mouth to answer, and was kissed instead, the inexorable thrill of a man's mouth on his, so strong and demanding, as large as his own, pressing at him, tongue sliding in to fill his mouth with desire. His groin tightened, heat pooling there as David's hand found the buttons on his shirt and parted them, exposing his chest to the prickle of Shetland wool and the tickle of fingertips around his nipples, dallying there, flirting. He heard a sound in his mouth, recognised it dimly as a sound he sometimes made, but not recently in his annals of restrained good passion, but far away, a long time ago when sex meant the lowering of barriers, the invit-

ing in of someone into his own inner sanctum of private being.

David's hair was very soft and very long in his hands, far unrulier than he would ever dream of permitting his own hair to be, and it made him think of the troubled beauty of Michaelangelo's David, all that beauty and masculinity made fragile and accessible by the misted melancholy of the eyes and the tiny droop of the lips: someone who had lost a love, or was watching it slowly wither away. Fanciful, for a policeman to think such a thing. But he was, he knew with a slow spiralling joy, more than that. He was a man, and a poet, and he still had a life inside him, piled deep under the mountain of stresses his world had become.

Quietly delighted, he kissed back, his own tongue taking possession of David's mouth, not understanding at first why the other man pulled back, just a little. But of course. Dry kissing was safe, anything else had an increasing level of risk. So be it. If his fear of himself could no longer stop him from being involved with another human being, then he'd be damned if he let a mere virus stop him. There were, after all, other parts to be kissed, other parts that could extrude no fluids but which could absorb enormous pleasure. Hurriedly, he tugged and pulled until the thick aran sweater had been removed and the thin white t-shirt underneath pushed up underarm, and then, in a blur of white skin and peaking pink nipple, he plunged, devouring flesh into his mouth, sucking and licking and nipping, his mouth roving across the firm rise of muscle to the thicket of hair pressed flat by t-shirt. David got rid of the shirt before Dalgliesh could get his hands on it, so he filled his grasp instead with smooth white skin, and laved at David, sharing in the shuddering pleasure he was giving.

Another movement, and they were separate once more, each one rather shyly taking the rest of his clothes off. Then they were looking one at the other, the final moment where they could either one of them pull back, go back to being separate and untouched and therefore safe in their respective cosy cocoons of splendid isolation.

It was, not to Dalgliesh's surprise, David

who was the first, again, to make the move, leaning forward so as to get rid of the tangle of wool and cotton that covered Dalgliesh. Torso bare, the firelight glinted on the fine dusting of hair and gilded his nipples as if with gold. David bent lower, and Dalgliesh looked down, every microsecond stretched ineluctably until there, at that precise instant, he saw when David's tongue touched his nipple, saw it the instant before the pleasure hit him, saw it for the instant before his eyes closed, red glow of firelight brightening him inside where pleasure was beginning to flicker and flare. Sharp teeth, white teeth, which he saw in his mind, knowing how it would look, nipped at him, catching at his flesh, at his chest hair, lower and lower, tongue and lips tangling in the arrow of hair that led to his groin, wetness swirling through the hair, changing the pattern, tinglingly. He expected the mouth to go lower, to descend upon him, but there were fingers there instead, stroking at him, soothing his own pre-ejaculate over the tautness of skin. And of course, his mind supplied, a thread of sanity through the mindlessness of almost forgotten pleasure, bodily fluids, he can't risk it...

He knew, obviously, not being an innocent, merely out of practice, what would happen next. And he surprised himself with how fiercely he needed to see it, of how erotic the once-distasteful idea now seemed. He was kneeling on the half-circle of hearth-rug, the pile plush beneath his shins and on the tops of his feet, his knees spread wide and David between them, right knee brushing the vulnerability of his scrotum with tender pressure, just exactly the right amount, exquisite sensation, whilst a strong sure hand held him, the other one bringing a foil package to his mouth for him to bite. He held it between his teeth, watching David all the while, unblinking, as David slowly tore the package open. The gaping foil was held in shaking fingers while the coiled latex was brought out by flicking tongue. The eroticism of it plundered Dalgliesh's groin, making him so hard he ached. Soothing coolness smoothed on to him, David's deftness making it appear that it was not his hands, but his caressing mouth that covered him with the condom.

Dalgliesh gasped for air, hips automatically thrusting, hands raging over David with the need to touch. His fingers knew soft skin and hard nipple, softness of belly and hardness of hip, softness of curling hair and hardness of prick. The sensation was overwhelming, this maleness in his hand, this maleness filling his vision. He wanted this man as he had wanted no-one before, wanted him all the more perhaps, because he was a trusted stranger who knew his truths. He wanted to suck him inside, or to cool the flush of his heat in the depths of this man's mouth, but there were hands there to refuse him, to remind him, to gentle him into something else, something that whispered words kissing his ear promised him would be just as wonderful. David shoved a chair out of the way then pulled him downwards, until they were lying on the floor, plastered together length for length, and he was rubbing his body against David's, every muscle taut and alive, every nerve singing pleasure at his brain, his mouth and hands and nostrils filled with the taste and feel and smell of man, of this man who was holding him so tightly, warmth overflowing from him to bathe Dalgliesh until he couldn't tell what was heat from the fire and what was heat from David.

He was firmly, adamantly pushed flat, and he lay very still, afloat with the burgeoning needs of his body, feasting his eyes on the vision of David standing at his feet, naked save for the caress of the fire, slowly stroking a condom on, addicting the eye to the sight of that priapism flaunting itself with such rampant pride. The other man was huge, longer and thicker than Dalgliesh, but he had enough confidence in himself to do nothing more than enjoy the sight—with a passing wonder that the very constraints they had placed upon them actually added to his own pleasure. There could be no contest to see who would be the top man, not under the circumstances, and there could be no fear on his part that he would have to take a man that size inside himself. He relaxed out of the last of his tensions, leaving only the sexual to string him tight with anticipation and adrenalin high, literally lying back to see what would happen next, putting himself in David's hands. Trusting a stranger, and with more than he usually gave to so-called lovers and friends.

David lowered himself until he was kneeling between Dalgliesh's wide-spread legs, his hands coming to rest on either side of Dalgliesh's head, his mouth lowering until there was a storm of little kisses covering Dalgliesh's face, then neck, sucking on his earlobes, flickering at his pulse. And as his face was bedecked with caresses, his body was canopied by flesh, David's weight coming down to rest on him, hot and heavy and intensely satisfying. His arms went round the other man, holding him tight, flexing his own muscles, his whole body attuned. His prick was pressed against an echoing hardness, and he groaned, arching up, rolling them over until it was he who covered David, and he who covered David with kissings and strokings. He arched his back again, pressing their groins harder together, and he felt the first sweet flooding of his balls, felt them move, felt himself harder, tighter, closer to coming.

And then David moved under him, lifting his legs. Dalgliesh opened his eyes in startlement, but David only smiled at him, whispering to him again, promising him every delight the world had ever known, distracting him thoroughly, and then Dalgliesh felt the hand on him, felt himself manipulated, then the cool wetness of spermicide slicked onto latex, onto his balls, and suddenly he was caught between gripping thighs, a tunnel as tight as any body he had ever plundered, tighter than his own fist could be. David laughed, a shout of such sheer exultation and joy that Dalgliesh knew a stab of jealousy, but then that was gone, buried under the avalanche of pleasure as David moved, hips undulating, the familiar dance of intimacy. Aroused beyond endurance, Dalgliesh drowned in the rhythm, plunging between David's thighs, wetness slapping as David's balls clung to Dalgliesh's belly, reluctant to let him go, David's prick hard and thrilling against Dalgliesh's belly with every downward plunge, sharp and needing every time he dragged himself away, only to plummet downward again, unable to bear being still.

Sweat dripped from him to plash on peaked

nipples, to land on parted lips, to dew long eyelashes, and sound rose from David to fill the silences in Dalgliesh with his pleasure. An undulation of sound, mirroring the movement of Dalgliesh's hips, of his prick clutched tight between thighs of liquid strength, and then Dalgliesh spilled over the edge, coming and coming, body straining for that last second of perfect pleasure before he collapsed, sated, on the writhing hunger of David's body, sliding half off him in his boneless satisfaction. But then a mouth fastened on his, sucking him in, devouring him, mewling sounds of agonised pleasure damming his mouth and so, filled with an overwhelming tenderness for his fellow man lost in the atavistic drive for release, he used his hand to fist David's prick, squeezing and pulling the way he liked himself, feeling the onrush of orgasm almost as if it were a refrain of his own. David arched up, back like a longbow, heels digging in to the short pile of the carpet, eyes blind and mouth wide-gaping. Fascinated, Dalgliesh watched as the clear latex became milky, stilling his hand to barely hold, gentle as he himself preferred. But David's hand came down on his, forcing him to grab tightly, to milk him hard, David's own hand going lower to knead his balls, forcing every last drop of ejaculate and every last atom of pleasure out.

Silence, then, the storm having screeched off somewhere else while they had been enraptured in each other. Dalgliesh lay there waiting for his own heart to stop pounding, half-deafened by the heart trumping beneath his ear. There was a droplet of sweat an inch from his mouth and his tongue tasted it, not knowing if it were his own or David's and that moment was, for him, somehow even more intimate than the sharing of sex. Sex was a drive basic to all people, he felt, but there were other things more difficult to share: tooth-brushes; sweat. Oneself.

Discreetly, David disposed of the messy reality of sex and settled down with him again, a huge and ancient sofa blanket keeping the draughts from them now they were aware enough to notice.

Idly stroking the longish hair, Dalgliesh sank into thought, examining what he had

done tonight and what the repercussions would be. What was that David had said? Because you can just walk away and it's as if the truth never existed. That was something he could do: something he wanted to do. But he had already done more than that tonight: he had at last been honest outside of the confines of his own head. And he had actually allowed someone else to get close to him, to see him, warts and all. He had actually done that tonight, reclaiming some of his own humanity, proving to himself that he was still more than just a policeman who put his feelings in his pockets along with his political beliefs when he went out on a case. My god, yours is a filthy trade, a woman had once said to him, and he had left it to another policeman to answer, for all he could have done was agree with her, for no-one knew better than he just how filthy a job it was. Nor how necessary, he thought, staring at the glowing coals that supported the fire, thinking about how much crime was like that: festering grievances and greeds, and no-one knew anything about it until it burst into flame and became a crime. Like the nasty messes he'd been treading in lately, sorting out the horrors that should have been weeded out before the innocent had started dying.

David stirred, reminding him of another kind of dying, and not just from a virus. From withering within, from hiding from himself in protection and doing nothing more than coddling himself until he didn't dare allow anything at all to register. Funny, he had never really counted himself a coward before, but he was, clinging on to a memory of a woman whose face had faded now more than the face of the first arrest he'd ever made.

And what did that tell him about himself? David, for better or worse, saved him from answering, turning to him with soft kisses, wrapping his warmth around Dalgliesh who lay there, accepting it, allowing himself to be cradled and cossetted and caressed, until it grew again to passion, rising between them in the last embering light of the fire. Bed then, and David had known more than Dalgliesh had. The separation to go upstairs, the sketchy wash before bed, the brushing of teeth and using of the lavatory, all of it conspired

together to form a plot of reality intruding between them. No more storm howling outside like Heathcliffe, no more primæval fire, no more time out of the flow of time.

He was himself again. Adam Dalgliesh, policeman, and sometimes poet. And a man who was more comfortable embracing close a memory of a love long dead than clinging on in open need to a living, breathing person.

A living, breathing person, he lay thinking in the feathered warmth of David and Mitch's oversized bed, a sleeping man nestled into his side, a man who might not be alive for much longer. Oh, he might have ten years, or twelve, for the scientists didn't seem to be able to make up their collective minds on the subject, but it *would* come. Possibly quickly, possibly slowly, a wasting away of mind or body, or blessedly, both, to make the end quicker and the suffering less. But it would come.

And he couldn't bear to see it.

No, he thought, with cutting clarity, he didn't want to bear to see it. He wasn't in love with this man; in fact, tonight, listening in the wee hours to David talking about his lover, he doubted he was capable, had ever been capable, of loving someone enough to go through that with them. He had done it with his wife, of course, but that hadn't taken weeks to go through. And he had had no idea of what he was going to be facing when he had gone to the hospital, nor when she had first told him, face shining, that he was going to be a daddy. That was how she had said it, like a child herself, or in the voice of the child she bore inside her. You're going to be a daddy. He had been delighted, of course, but there had been that faint, tiny little part of him, that guilty secret best forgotten, that had been relieved that he wasn't going to have to change his entire life after all, now that there wasn't going to be a child. And an even guiltier secret that told of how readily he embraced the role of devastated widower who could never get over the love and loss of his darling wife, the perfect excuse for never becoming involved without raising so much as a flicker of suspicion about himself.

But now he knew, about himself, and David knew that he honestly had loved Mitch enough to find living less than appealing. One had uncovered his own cowardice, the other his own courage in getting through each and every day.

Dalgliesh would still rather choose his brand of cowardice than David's brand of spirit: easier, pleasanter, cleaner by far. It left him free to pursue the intellect and the spirit, to remove from society those who harmed it, free to know the clear exhilaration of mind when finally a puzzle was solved and a crime dissected and laid out bare.

Very quietly, he slid out of the bed, moving with his customary silence that years in the Force had taught him, gathering clothing and looking around. David was curled up now in the patch of heat he had left behind when he had got up, only a few wayward wisps of hair peeking over the quilt to show anything of the man himself. There was a tug of regret in Dalgliesh as he stood there, watching, but the tug of his own life was stronger still. He slipped into the bathroom, dressing in yesterday's clothes with stoic indifference, easing into what would have been his bedroom, given other circumstances, other needs, stealing out suitcases that had not been opened. Almost silent, it took him only a few moments to be downstairs, opening the door and outside in the overcast dampness of the aftermath of the night before. The trees were still dripping in the greyness of the false dawn, the flowers, hidden by darkness the previous evening, lay ravaged in their beds, an analogy which he refused to permit to infiltrate him with guilt. They had both consented last night, both gone in to it knowingly and with their eyes wide open. But still, as he turned the key in the ignition, suppressing a wince as the racket juggernauted through the morning, the feeling was there, refusing to go away. Ravaged was so often another word for betrayed, or abused, or used and then abandoned.

But that wasn't, quite, what he had done. No, not quite. Tyres squawking on gravel, he started down the driveway, tossing a mental coin as he came out on to the road to decide which direction to take. Right won, and so he turned, driving along the road away from the village he had been in the day before, away

from the house and the man he had spent the night with and onwards, and although he knew himself better than he had before, there were a host of new questions arisen to take

the place of the old comfortable ignorances and so he was less sure now of where he was going than he had ever been.

Three short pieces for your delight and pleasure—no dark, heart wrenching angst and drama. The first, passed on to us by J. M., is a triple crossover: delicious, obscure, and mixing popular culture of today and yesterday. To fully comprehend the whole, you should be familiar with British TV and American newspapers of the 20th century. 'Nuff said. Write to the zine editor if you remain perplexed. The second story is rather a much of a muchness: pure fluff, but sufficient to make a ball of yarn. And finally, another absurd virgin tale from the Scot. This time out it's Red Dwarf.

TRIPLE CROSS J. M.

The following manuscript appeared on-screen while our computer was downloading from an obscure bulletin board. The author claims to be following in an arduous and venerable literary tradition but acknowledges that computers are marginally easier on the head than the typewriters which were his species' original medium.

where the hell are we, one of them said.

they'd come through the free-standing doorway and were looking around in disbelief.

i kept quiet. nobody notices us much if we're quiet. luckily i was wearing my pinstriped culottes, not the ones with the red hearts.

dunno. that was the curly haired one. he walked around the door and looked at the other side. weird, he said.

but ray, said the first one, what would hrh be doing here. and where the hell is here.

you already said that, bodie, said the one called ray.

i could have told them, but i kept quiet.

i could hear sounds in the distance, the shuffling and crashing and moaning and screaming that means my big nosed buddy is having another crisis. he's always having crises, but he's had more than usual since bill took up with princess di and started reading descartes again. he was coming toward us.

look, ray, said bodie.

opus was just coming over the hill. he was wearing his jockey shorts. he does that sometimes.

they were looking in the other direction.

a little girl, said bodie. maybe she can tell us where we are. ronald-ann was standing with her back to them. she turned around as they came up to her. that stopped them. ronald-ann in her madonna starter slut kit would stop anyone.

uh, said bodie.

but ray had looked over his shoulder. he tapped bodie on the arm.

bodie—

aaaigh, exclamation point, screamed opus pulling out his hair which he doesn't have. even the ack¹ support group doesn't understand, exclamation point. cats, exclamation point.

¹ Anxieties from Our Cats and Kitties—ed.

opus uses a lot of exclamation points. hello, opus, said ronald-ann.

ray and bodie looked at each other.

i see why special branch couldn't cope, said bodie.

special branch, hell, said ray. i can't cope. do you think the cow has any idea no. said bodie.

right, said ray. where's that description, he asked.

right here.

bodie opened up a sheet of paper. they both looked at it.

hmmm, said ray. orange. thick lips. scruffy. sounds like you, sunshine.

shut up, bodie. mismatched eyes. plays darts with frozen mice. ray looked up. plays darts with frozen mice, exclamation point, he said. bloody hell, bodie.

exclamation points must be catching.

loud scrabbling noises came from the other side of the free-standing door, the side you come in from, not the side you walk around and look at.

let me get the door for you, sir bill, said a voice.

the door opened and bill fell through. he sat up dizzily.

that's him, hissed ray.

you're out of your mind, mate, said bodie. probably, said ray.

aaaigh, exclamation point, said opus, rushing over to bill. what have you done now, exclamation point. i can't let you out of my sight, exclamation point. what's that book

you've got this time, exclamation point. oh, no, not epictetus, exclamation point.

he tore at where his hair would have been. bill leaned over, rather farther than he meant to, righted himself, and gave opus a smacking kiss on the beak.

thppft, said bill.

oh, no, exclamation point, said opus. all those women weren't enough for you. you're starting on male penguins now, exclamation point. is there no end to your excesses and depravity, exclamation point. what am i going to do, exclamation point, exclamation point, exclamation point.

let's go home, ray, said bodie.

what about him, said ray.

forget him, said bodie.

nothing i'd like better, said ray. what do we tell the cow.

anything, said bodie, as long as it's not the truth.

ray nodded. okay, he said.

they opened the door and stepped through. it closed after them.

bill had opus in a lopsided but passionate embrace. opus was sputtering exclamation points.

bill must have more of mehitable in him than we ever guessed.

when i get through regurgitating on the azaleas, i am going to rescue opus. if ronaldann is busy, maybe we can play politically incorrect space barbarians. that should take his mind off things.

FABRICATION MONA MOORE

"AH, BODIE... Your hair's so soft, just like silk."

Ray's voice was muffled, his face tucked into his lover's shoulder, fingers tangled in the longer strands at the back of Bodie's neck.

"Mmm."

Bodie, eyes closed, rolled his head against the stroking fingers, sleepily savoring the caress.

"I love your skin," the murmuring voice went on. "Satin smooth, this is."

His fingers lightly stroked high on the side of the ribs, but when Bodie gave a lazy squirm, he obligingly moved on, running his hand over the fine soft hair barely visible on Bodie's forearm.

"This is velvet, here. Oh, yeah..."

He brushed the same spot with his lips. Bodie's other arm tightened around him, and he made an inarticulate sound of enjoyment.

He eased back just far enough to look at his companion. In the soft morning sunlight, Bodie lay relaxed in a sensual sprawl, eyes shut, drowsy in the aftermath of love.

Resting on his elbow, Ray stroked his hand down Bodie's arm. He drew a fingertip gently over the clear skin of the inner wrist, admiring the blue veins that showed there.

"Transparent," he murmured. "Like chiffon."

Bodie's mouth quirked in a smile.

"And you're beautifully pale," Ray went on.
"Like linen. Makes me looks so dark."

He admired the contrast of his lightly tanned hand against Bodie-ivory.

Scooting down in the bed, he put his head back on Bodie's shoulder. Even half asleep, Bodie responded with an automatic onearmed hug.

Ray turned and briefly nuzzled into the soft hair of Bodie's armpit.

"Mohair," he crooned.

His exploring hand moved down, brushing against the almost invisible body hair centered on Bodie's chest and more darkly on his stomach.

"Umm. Soft and fuzzy, you are. Vel—" The hand paused. "No, I said that. Not velvet. Cashmere. That's it."

Ray eased his leg over Bodie's, moving further into his embrace. Lips nibbling, groin pressed against his partner's thigh, Ray revelled in the beginning of new arousal. His hand began a familiar route south to cup Bodie's genitals.

Tangling his fingers in the luxuriant pubic hair, he gave a gentle tug.

"Wool."

He resumed his exploration. Ray felt the pulse of response under his fingers as his hand roamed over and around and under.

Another texture here, another type of furriness.

"Suede," Ray muttered thoughtfully, hand caressing the wrinkled large grained skin over the balls. "Suede, or... Corduroy. That's it, Wide-wale."

Bodie was waking up—his favorite way. Beat alarm clocks all hollow, his Ray.

"Whale? You saying I'm fat?"

"Fuzzy," Ray chuckled. "Not fat, fuzzy."

"Something's getting fatter," Bodie smirked, lifting his hips slightly to encourage attention to his growing hardness. "Ah..." He gave a low moan as Ray finally gripped him. "Oh, yeah..."

Hand busy, Ray kissed his way up from the shoulder onto the muscled neck, pausing once to trail his tongue along the carotid artery. He charted an affectionate path along Bodie's hairline, and over to his eyebrow, licking against the grain.

He admired the wild miniature tangle. "Tweed. Eyebrows like herringbone tweed."

He moved down to kiss the closed eyelid, barely touching. The long dark lashes tickled his lips. Smiling, he licked at the tiny lines at the corner of Bodie's eye.

"And here... Crinkle gauze," he whispered as Bodie squeezed his eyes shut under the combined attention of busy hand and gentle lips.

Ray nibbled his way down Bodie's cheek, heading for his mouth. He dropped featherlight kisses on Bodie's jaw, then pulled back as the bristles scraped his lips.

"Now that's more like burlap," he protested mildly.

Bodie scritched his stubbled chin against Ray's equally scruffy cheek.

"Haven't shaved, have I? You wouldn't let me out of bed."

Ray could be somewhat demanding on offduty mornings.

"You know you love it," said Ray, unrepentant.

Curly hair teased Bodie's skin as Ray bent his head and licked lightly at his right nipple.

"Brocade," announced Ray, examining the resulting dimpled pattern.

"What?" Bodie was having difficulty paying attention to what Ray was on about. That hand kept distracting him.

"Seersucker," replied his beloved, stroking softly across the puckered trail of scar tissue from the old knife wound below Bodie's right collarbone.

"Ray."

Ray looked up, meeting Bodie's gaze.

"Ah, sweetheart," he said, melting. "Your eyes are the exact color of new blue denim. Did you know that, love?"

"Ray, you... You cloth-head!" sputtered his bemused lover, and shut him up by the simple expedient of rolling on top of him and kissing him soundly.

THE CAT'S MIAOW CALLY FORNIA DONIA

IF HE'D THOUGHT that being a hologram stuck on a mining ship for three millennia with Dave Lister (the ultimate slob), Kryten (the ultimately obsequious but loyal to Lister android and therefore scum beneath his feet), Holly, the ultimate snotty computer who was more interested in their private lives than she was in the running of the ship (and who liked Lister more than she liked him and was therefore obviously seriously malfunctioning on a daily basis), and Cat (the ultimate in vanity but who still thought that Lister was really sharp and was therefore obviously a complete mental defective who was in dire need of a taste-bud transplant) was the worst

thing that could ever, possibly, by any fevered stretch of the imagination be the absolute worst thing that could happen to a man—or a hologram for that matter—well, that was only because he had never had his body restored to him in the morning and by afternoon been stuck in a small cargo hold with Cat.

Who had just explained one of the major differences between real Earth domestic cats and this strange breed of creatures that Cat's ancestors had evolved into during their three million years in space.

It wasn't the females who went on heat. It was the males.

Cat was a male.

And Cat was on heat. In fact, Cat was positively boiling.

He, Arnold Rimmer, good ol' Arnie Rimmer, was the only other living being stuck in this impenetrable cargo hold with a randy tomCat. And meanwhile, with every passing second and every second pass, his bottom was beginning to feel anything but impenetrable.

"Now, Cat," he was saying, edging round the outer wall, rump positively glued to the bulkhead, "I'm sure you can hang on, just another few minutes now. I'm sure the others will be doing everything they can to get us out of here."

Cat flexed his arms, and mewed. Loudly, and painfully off-key. Showing rather frighteningly long and sharp fangs. Rimmer began to hope that it was fucking Cat had in mind: he didn't much fancy having those chompers wrapped around his pecker. But—what was that he had read about cats? The small (and a very detailed stare—well, he had to look properly to be certain, didn't he?—made sure of his, and Cat's, rather impressive facts here) and domestic variety on Earth, the ones who were nice enough to have the female, and therefore blessedly prick-free, members of the species go on heat? Oh smeg. That was it. The toms had pricks, all right. With spines. He gulped, pressing even harder against the bulkhead, which was, perhaps, not the wisest choice of adverbs.

"Now, now, Cat, nice Cat, good kitty, I'm sure Lister is—"

Actually, he knew that bastard. Lister probably wasn't even anywhere near the cargo hold, he was probably up in the officer's quarters with that bloody android Kryten, and the two of them and Holly would be sitting watching, laughing at him. Well, Kryten and Lister might be laughing at him. Well, Lister would definitely be laughing at him. But that computer—she'd be getting her knickers wet and shorting out all sorts of

Cat was prowling, weaving back and forth in front of him, pausing every now and then to tuck his breast pocket handkerchief in just so or to smooth away a faint crease on his salmon pink satin suit, the one with sequins

that Rimmer had so often admired. Rimmer shook his head: this was not the time to be admiring sequins. In fact, the only sequins he wanted to admire was the sequence that would unlock this smegging door.

He was hampered, just the tiniest little bit, by the fact that he didn't dare turn his back on Cat long enough to try keying in any new sequins—sorry, sequence.

Cat seemed to have forgotten how to speak, which was, in Rimmer's opinion, not necessarily a bad thing. Cat also seemed to be in imminent danger of bursting forth from his trousers without benefit of the unzipping of flies, which was definitely a bad thing. Or a good thing, if you were another cat, preferably one of the female persuasion. Or gay, or bi, anything, in fact, but one very virgin Arnold Rimmer, who was scared shitless. Which was probably just as well, considering what Cat had in mind.

"Now, Cat," Rimmer said again, "you wouldn't want to do anything hasty. After all, I've been sharing quarters with Lister and god knows what I might have caught from him."

Cat positively roared. "Oh, smeg, I forgot you like catching small defenceless creatures and torturing them before you eat them." A thought crossed his mind and he added, all thought of sex as being a fate worse than death throwing itself down on the deck and spreading its legs. "You're not going to eat me after, are you? Not with those fangs!"

Cat circled closer, doing peculiar things with his backside and doing some very blunt (or sharply pointed if you caught him at the right angle. Full profile was particularly interesting...) things with his hips. It seemed to have something to do with an in and out motion. Rimmer blushed. Then said, "Can you teach me how to do that for—"

Rimmer blushed again. "Actually, no, I don't think I'll bother. Won't be much point, don't suppose there are going to be too many girls at the next party, considering there's only Lister, Kryten and—" he gulped, as Cat danced closer, "you and me. Ah. Yes, well, it's been a pleasure, but I really must go now, so many things to do. You know how it is, so many Universes, so little time."

Cat came up and licked him on the chin.

Rimmer screamed and turned, hammering on the door, and screamed again, "Get me out of here! Lister, you bastard, get me out of here! Kryten, if you don't let me out, I'll give you a bath!"

Something very pointed and very, very hard was digging into the small of his back.

"Oh, smegging fucking shit," he moaned, "What a way to lose my virginity! And after saving it for so long!"

Cat leaned into him, purring.

"Now, Cat, nice kitty," he said, squirming before it dawned on him that that was not the best way to actually discourage a randy tomCat. "You'll be gentle with me, won't you?"

Cat bit him in the back of his neck.

"Obviously not," Rimmer muttered.

Cat was mewling now, not, Rimmer noted, in pleasure.

That's when he noticed he still had all his clothes on. He stood there for a minute, nothing between him and losing his virginity but a bit of cloth.

"Hang on a minute, Cat," he whispered, dislodging the teeth and turned round. Which is how he discovered how Cat's race had found a way round the old animal instincts versus clothes dilemma. Things simply ripped in rather appropriate places. "Oh, my, you are a big boy now, aren't you?"

And if a cat could get round the problem of clothing, he didn't see why he couldn't. In fact, Cat was so far gone that he didn't even notice that Rimmer ripped his salmon pink trimmed with sequins jacket off and threw it over the computer camera-cum-monitor, for if there was one thing the computer wasn't going to do, it was monitor cum.

"Now," Rimmer said, pulling his nice green Captain Emerald trousers down round his knees and wiggling over to the door again, "where were we? Oh, yes, that's right, you had just sunk your teeth in my neck and you were about sink your...em, thingy, into my...em posterior. OUCH! NO, Cat, the other way around, you stupid animal. God, you've been spending too much time with Lister, haven't you? I hadn't realised how contagious stupidity could be. There, now that's better." He settled himself comfortably against the door, shut his eyes and said, "Where was I? Oh, yes. You will be gentle with me, won't you?"

And he was most pleased to discover that something else had changed between the domestic cat and Cat. It wasn't spines. It was ridges. Lovely, delicious, oooh-all-shivery ridges.

By the time anyone noticed that Rimmer was missing, Cat was a shagged out mess on the floor, and Rimmer was walking bowlegged. But with a beatific smile all over his face, and a tendency to call, "here kitty, kitty..."

One thing hadn't changed about cats over the millennia. They still went on heat for months at a time. One other thing had changed, though. Now, it was contagious. As Rimmer found out, when he woke up with itchy teeth, from the way they were growing, and a, well, not precisely *itchy* cock, but that was definitely from the way *it* was growing.

"I'll kill you! Cat, I'm going to brush your hair the wrong way and get dog perfume all over your clothes!" He sat up in his bunk and felt his teeth. "Oh my god, they're as big as Cat's." He looked down at his cock and felt it. And grinned. "Well, well, well, it's as big as Cat's!"

And it was as thick as Cat's and just as ridged.

A thought occurred to him.

What was that they said about revenge?

He stood up, trailing his clothes as he went, calling, "Lister. Oh, Listie, oh Listie dear, I have something for you..."

Well, at least it gave them something to do for the next three thousand years...

... A N D R E B E L S

ASSAULT EMMA SCOT

No, Avon fans, our twisted favorite is not paired with either Blake or Vila. And no, this tale is not sweetness and light. The wee Scot has remained true to her vision of the *Blake's* 7 universe. She knows, as does Avon, that love never conquers all—what is needed is a brilliant mind of dark power, psychology, and intellect.

This, he was beginning to realise, might yet turn out to be an idea worthy of Vila—or even Blake, on a truly mind-wiped day. It had seemed such a good prospect at the time, an opportunity to both one-up Blake and to actually do something about this all-too abortive Rebellion they were supposedly fighting. Information, that was the carrot on the end of the stick that had lured him here, information that promised to be cuttingly effective. Information, he thought, pivoting slowly to survey the vulnerability of his position, that also promised to be nothing more than the seductiveness of wishful thinking. The atmosphere of this place was weighing in upon him, the silence the breathless peace of death. Everywhere he looked were pillars and pyres of destruction, charred memories of lives lost here, buried under tonnes of débris and decay. There was a lingering smell that taunted him, defying him to recognise it, but he could not, at first. Slowly, though, as he crunched over the tilted remains of buildings, he placed the odour.

Death. Hovering, lingering, pathetic death. Judging by the encroachment of sickly weeds into the crevices of the fallen, the fleshly remains had long since decayed into compost, but still, the smell clung, an unnerving combination of richly fertilised soil and the ashes of the dead. It was, he realised, staring around at the tortured landscape, nothing more than an enormous graveyard, where none of the dead were actually buried in graves, for there had been none of the living left to inter them.

He shuddered then, with the instinctive distaste of one who has too many of his own dead unburied, and walked on, scrabbling over crumbling piles of concrete-like slabs and cloying weeds that erupted in puffs of foul-smelling pollen or sweet smelling bouquet that dusted a bitter-sweet beauty to this long-forgotten charnel house.

There was a hill, of a sorts, just ahead of him, and that was where he would wait, specific co-ordinates be damned. He could see all he needed to from there and with such forewarning, he would be well fore-armed. Definitely an advantage he thought, cursing under his breath as he reluctantly holstered his weapon to leave both hands free for the climb, considering what it was he fully expected to meet here.

The hillock had once been a tall building, perhaps beautiful, but now it was merely a mouldering monument of rubble that slithered and slid under Avon's feet, threatening to topple him, to send him cascading back down with all the myriad clatterings of tiny pebbles that echoed his every step. But despite his year of living in a spaceship and a lifetime in the Domes before that, he managed to reach the top relatively unscathed. Weapon once more in hand, he raised his right hand to suck on the blood that was dripping from the scrape on his palm.

Slowly, with well-learned care, he systematically catalogued the room he found himself in. Faded remnants suggested that this had once been either a roof-top garden or some sort of balcony, for here and there, glittering white as skulls amidst the profusion of plants gone wild, there were carved balustrades of what might have been this planet's version of the Muses—or simply shapely female forms to prop up the façade. The paving under his feet was uneven and disintegrating, weeds and tubers thrusting up between the cracks, chunks of wall and roof tumbled as if the ground had yawed under them and thrown them, willy-nilly, to land here. There was, as far as Avon could tell from his current perilous perch on the very rim of this island of rubbled stability, no sign of his assignation.

Assignation. He smiled at the thought, thinking of how wildly inappropriate it was to use such a word when all he was here for was, hopefully, the words of a traitor which could then be used to betray an entire government. An entire society...

A crunch, there, behind him. He whirled, but not—quite—quickly enough. There was a weapon pressing into his throat with malevolent intimacy and a voice whispering softly malicious glee into his ear.

"Careless, Avon, oh, very careless. I expected better from you."

"Good afternoon, Travis," Avon said, making a show of being relaxed, body casually comfortable whilst his mind raced round looking for ways out of this and whilst his weapon was taken from him. "Didn't your mother ever tell you that it was rude to point?" he went on, mockery brightening his eyes as he stared at the gloved cybernetic hand that was jammed against his skin.

"I really do like that about you, Avon."

"What? That I know good manners when I see them—this, obviously, not being one of those times?"

"No. I admire the way you stay defiant, even when a blind man could see that death was only inches away."

Again, the look was one of mockery fed by braggadocio. "Inches? Travis, take a deep breath and I shall be wearing your jacket."

"Or you'll have my fist down your throat." Such a *déclassé* threat garnered the amused smile it deserved, and a glance down at the leather-gloved hand with its power crystal. "And what a waste of technology that would be. But then, I suppose ramming your fist down someone's throat would be more in keeping with your intellectual...gifts."

"Sneer all you want, Avon," Travis muttered at him, sneering rather offensively himself, "but I'm the one with the gun hand."

"Literally," a sudden lithe twist of sinew and Avon was free, his own gun grabbed from Travis and aimed, quite calmly, whilst Avon went on speaking, "but not, I'm afraid, figuratively. Careless, Travis, oh very careless. But then," and he grinned, wickedly, "I certainly didn't expect better from you. Life is far too short, especially if you insist on making such stupid mistakes."

There was a shiver of adrenalin tumbling through him, his heart beating faster, blood pounding harder. "Now that we have the social pleasantries out of the way," he went on, seating himself comfortably on the weather-smoothed stone of bygone people, his gun still aimed as unwaveringly as his eyes, "let's get on to business, shall we? You say you have some information for me?"

"Information? Did you actually fall for that old trick, Avon?" Dark head, thrown back in mocking laughter. "What will you do for your next trick? Sit up and beg?"

A flare of light, and there was a smear of blackness where the ground between Travis' feet had been burned. "I'm the one who has the gun hand now, and if you want to get out of here with no more spare parts than you already have, then I suggest you give me what I came here for."

"Information, you say? Is that what you came here for, Avon, or is that just a convenient excuse to hide your cowardice behind?"

He knew, of course, exactly what Travis was trying to do, knew it to the most precise millimetre. Which only made him smile ever more dangerously, eyes glittering with the excitement of the hunt. "What else would I come here for? There's nothing else you could possibly offer me." And his scorn was picture perfect, pleasing him as he watched it burn its way right into Travis' heart.

"Nothing? That's what Blake has to offer you. That's what that snivelling worm Vila has to offer you. Or perhaps you enjoy the way he squirms. Is that it? Do you like worms, Avon?"

An insolently measuring glance travelled body-warm leather, and then Avon whipped the lash of his gaze over Travis' face. "I'd have to, were I to settle for you."

"It takes a better man than you to make me lose control. And it takes—"

"More time than you're worth. Information, Travis. Now, or by the time I'm finished with you," the slightest move of his gun, sights beading, "you won't even have a worm to call your own." There was a thrill of power in him now, watching this man, this man half the Galaxy feared, standing in front of him, fighting the instinct to protect his fragile privates with his hand. He stared, licking his lips, the merest whisper of tongue whetting him. A betrayingly nervous swallow, and his attention flew up to Travis' face again. His pupils dilated, devouring the warm brown of his eyes, leaving only the hot black of arousal.

"You want me, don't you?" Travis said, his voice—touchingly, Avon thought—aquiver.

"Do I? Well now, I might just be able to find some use for your body, but you? Oh, I don't want *you* at all."

"Do you honestly expect me to believe that? Where do you think you are—still among the morons and misfits on the *Liberator*? But you're not, and you can't hide how much you want me. Your body's begging for me."

A quintessentially arched eyebrow, Avon's negligently waved hand drawing attention to strained leather at Travis' groin, and: "You betray yourself. So you want me on my knees, do you?" Another grin, his enjoyment palpable. "For a worm? I'd sooner crush you beneath my heel."

"I always knew you would enjoy pain."

The smile that greeted that was pure Avon charm. "Only that of others, Travis, so there's no need for you to look so cheerful at the prospect."

"I could make you like pain, Avon. I could give you pain so exquisite that it is pleasure. I can give you pleasure so extreme you will be in agony."

"You," Avon said, reclining a little more superciliously relaxedly, "can give me the information I came here for. And then you can run off and cry on Servalan's shoulder."

"She doesn't know I'm here."

He felt the greed consume his belly. "This information—it's something she would rather I didn't know?"

"She'd rather," Travis replied in Alphaesque echo, "know what you know. She wants the teleport, Avon, and she's willing to pay for it."

The gun was lowered, caressing, briefly, the soft leather that covered Avon's inner thigh, touching his body as he wished he had hers. "How much?"

"Five million."

"Five million wouldn't buy a third of the baubles on *Liberator*. You shall have to do better than that. And," as Travis took a step forward, "you shall have to stand exactly where you are, otherwise I will take great pleasure in making it a rather moot point whether you are a mouse," the gun nodded intimately towards Travis' groin, "or a man."

"Empty threat, Avon. If you harm me, then you have no one to negotiate with Servalan for you. No one to guarantee you safe passage out after you get your money."

Now that surprised Avon. "You're suggesting a partnership? *That's* the information you had me cross half the Galaxy for? That's why you had me lie to Blake—to make excuses, to *Blake*? To offer me a paltry five million and partnership with you? For once, Vila's actually right. You *are* insane."

"I've never been more sane. And why turn me down out of hand? Surely it's at least worththinking about. You and I, Avon, stealing Servalan's own cruiser, one of the best in the Galaxy, going after the best in the Galaxy."

Interested, the devil looked out of Avon's eyes, permitting Travis to come closer, one step, another, yet another.

"Just think, Avon. Five million to start, but the real treasure would be the ship and a crew of mutoids. Then we could go after Liberator, they'd be delighted to welcome you back on board. They needn't know anything about me, need they? And once we were on the Liberator, you could do it."

"And what, precisely, is... 'it'?" Making the pretence, playing the game, as if he had no idea of the sweet sin being proffered. His hand itched with the desire to snatch it and clench it close.

"Destroy Blake."

"Kill him?" The insidious pleasure was there in his voice, the ultimate fantasy making him lustrous in the gathering night. The ultimate fantasy, the ultimate freedom, the ultimate crime. Kill Blake. Which meant: kill his conscience. Kill his idealism, and the guilt that lived crowded in with failure. Kill every obligation he ever had to be human, or humane. The ultimate freedom. To be without a soul...

"Yes!" And now Travis was there, hovering over him, a fraction of a breath away, closing in as slowly as a glacier, but not so cold. Oh, no, not cold at all. Hot. So very hot. Even across this distance, Avon could feel the heat. But then, it was probably nothing more than the fiery temptation of his own fears. Kill Blake. And after he could go off somewhere, anywhere in the Galaxy, build himself a lab, living quarters, stock it with the best vintages, the finest foods, the rarest books. Shut himself off from the world and the pain it brought him. Somewhere all alone...

"The two of us, Avon, we could do it. You know we could. Partners. You and I."

Eyes sharp as shattered glass, Avon looked up. "Just like old times, really."

"Yes," Travis whispered, going down on one knee, one hand-the hand that was human temperature, not hot with stored energy and active circuitry—tracing the long seam from the lip of Avon's boot to the crux of Avon's legs, lingering, warmly, there.

"Just like before?" Avon whispered, as if dreaming. "Like the old days, at school. The two of us. Inseparable."

The bitter irony of that last word demanded answer. "I had no choice about ending it, you know that. My father forced me into it, else he'd have had you imprisoned on sexual deviancy and endangering a child."

"You were older than I, and we neither one of us were children. I don't think we ever were."

"But we did have dreams, didn't we? Remember in our room, after lights out? Whispering in the dark..."

"I always preferred the fucking in the dark."

"Yes, you did, didn't you, Kerr?" The hand was stroking again, easing its slow way across the litheness of leather covered thigh, across the hungry temptation of crotch, snaking sensuously towards the supple curve of Avon's right buttock. "I can still remember every single moment of you and me. I've never forgotten you. The way we felt about each other. Even University couldn't separate us, could it?"

"No. Not even that." And Avon was leaning forward to brush his mouth slowly, tentatively across Travis', his tongue laving a moist line on dry lips. "Did you know I've followed your career from the day you left?" Another kiss, this one deeper, limber tongue coming to know the sharp-edged smoothness of white teeth, searching for, finding, the one that had been chipped the day they'd almost been caught in the changing rooms by the games master. Still there, a little smoother, a little more rounded than when last he'd known it, but still there.

Then, breathed into Avon's mouth: "Nothing at all has changed, Kerr, you know that."

"Yes, I do, don't I? Which is why," he said with satin seduction, "if you don't move your right hand away from the power switch on that abomination you call an arm, I'll blow a hole in your belly." And felt the satisfaction of revenge served cold blossom through him as Travis withdrew with exaggerated care.

"I also," Avon went on in the bedroom voice, "know that your father had nothing at all to do with you transferring to the Academy instead of staying on at University with me.

You were hungry for power, and you were never going to be anything other than a very small fish in a very large pond if you stayed in academia. Anyway, looking back on it, I can see now that all you wanted was men cowering at your feet. Happy now?" he sneered, his free hand flicking negligently at Travis' leather outer skin. "Plenty of pretty little ensigns willing to lick your boots or your cock to keep you from having them cashiered? Or is it only mutoids you can get to have sex with you now?"

The poison barb hit home, Travis suddenly a bundle of dangerous fury.

"Back away, Travis," Avon whispered, voice quietly lethal with promise and desire. "Now."

There was a lick of passion in his belly, watching this former lover, now current hater, slither away from him, cautious fear lighting eyes that he remembered so very, very well. "Kill Blake and set up partnership with you?" he mocked. "Not even the joys of a Galaxy free of Blake is worth having you at my back again. In fact, I think I'd much rather set up partnership with Blake and kill you."

"Oh, very convincing," Travis answered, but his voice was too steady, a monotone that was more obvious than any stammer could be. "I'm quaking in my boots."

"Well now, you're certainly trembling. But is that fear, or is that because you're under the muzzle of a gun? Tremendously phallic things, aren't they?" Avon said, death's head grin and sultry murmur combining. "But then, I'm sure you'd know that far better than I."

"What's that supposed to mean, Avon?"

"Avon? Not Kerr? Oh, does that mean you don't love me any more? I am so heartbroken." Then the spurious humour died. "Don't try to pretend, Travis. You know perfectly well what I mean.'

"Do I?"

"Stalling? How very worrisome. Is there an entire cadre of mutoids out there? Your very own toys, how nice."

The fury in him was blinding, but Travis forced it down, backing away from it, refusing to lose this battle to Avon's expert tongue. "I've been insulted by better than you, Avon. You could take lessons from Carnell for a year

and still be nothing but a child compared to him."

"Yes, but you know what they say about the mouths of babes. Or is that something else you can base on personal experience?"

"No, I left that kind of thing to Blake." And Travis watched with satisfaction as that jibe found a soft spot. So. It might be true, what Carnell had said about the Avon/Blake relationship. There just might be more to it than a folk hero and cynic would be willing to admit. Or to have come out to the masses. Or, and he remembered back to an Avon of tender years and even more tender heart hidden under a glitteringly glamorous armour of wittiness, there might be more there than Avon would ever want to admit to himself.

"Is that why he fancies you?" he went on, lightly curious, keeping the fierce elation of hound after fox from his voice, watching as every word and every implication hit home. "You've always been pretty, almost innocent, on the outside anyway. Does he play the schoolboy and the teacher with you, Kerr? Or is it the schoolboy and his Master?"

Avon had shot before he even realised he was going to do it, and it was that agonised anger that saved Travis even as it had put him at risk. "Don't be disgusting, Travis. After all," and the sneer was back, plastering over the cracks of emotionalism, "I gave all that up when I gave up you."

"But we never did any of that, did we, Kerr?" Travis snapped, diving for the faintly visible weak spots, going for the kill. "We were too young and too sweet for that. Too much— " and the small smile was pointed enough to draw blood, "in love. Or at least you were."

"Infatuation." Snapped back, cracking like a whip, hitting nothing. "Everyone, surely, is entitled to at least one youthful folly. And you, unfortunately, were mine."

"Really? Is that how you've re-written the past? I suppose that means that you've erased all those sweet nothings you whispered to me? And all those dreams, and all those promises? And guilts, and fears." A burst of laughter, a wicked warping of something a young and rose-tinted Kerr Avon had once thought necessary for his very life, but then Travis was speaking again, voice sawing them

in half, grating on bone. "You think I don't know why you took up with that bitch right after me? Had to prove that you weren't just some little fairy, didn't you?"

And Avon grabbed that, using it to take the power back for himself. "Well now, that is yet another example of how stupid you are. After all we did, do you really think I felt I had to prove my manhood? Surely, considering our little...experiences, it would be you, not I, who would have to prove that."

"As you say," Travis said, made rapid under the sting of Avon's words, "everyone's entitled to one youthful folly, and letting you fuck me sometimes was mine."

"Sometimes? If memory serves, Travis, it was I who had to persuade you to occasionally reverse our roles. You always," he whispered, firing over Travis' head, bringing the other man instinctively to his knees, gloved hand ricocheting loudly against an outcrop of débris, "did like being on your knees to me, one way or another.

When Travis looked up, he was cradling his left arm, yellow power stone dangling chipped and useless. His eyes were starbright, full of animosity and a lust for revenge. "You bastard."

"Tut, tut, tut," Avon sneered, calmly aiming another shot over Travis' head, forcing the other man to keep on his knees, supplicant at Avon's feet. "You bastard'—is that the best they could teach you at the Academy? Or is it simply that that's all you ever heard?"

"Let me up, Avon."

"Don't judge others by yourself, Travis—I for one am not that stupid."

"I've hurt my arm."

"Hurt? Now that is far too human a word, don't you think? Damaged, perhaps. Scrambled the circuits, shunted the—"

"Shut up! Just shut up!" Outrage, hurt, fury, filling the air, bitter bile in apposition to the soft glory of the sun setting behind them in beauty. "Do you think I wanted this? Do you think I like being half a machine, half a man?"

"It never seemed to bother you before," Avon replied with devastating calm. "Why should it suddenly start now, just because a part of you is now visibly as lacking as the rest

of you?"

"What a vicious bitch you've turned into, Kerr. I can hardly recognise you."

Avon laughed at that, rich, pealing laughter. "Oh, I do hope so. I would hate to think I'm the same fool I was all those years ago. And it is so much pleasanter, meeting you once again and yet able to pretend I've never even seen you before. You did that rather well, I must admit," he went on, referring to the recent times when they had once more crossed paths, neither of them willing to admit the weakness of having known the other—nor to allow the other the weapon of their shared past. "Of course, had you not, I would simply have denied all of it as Federation propaganda—and I have Jenna and Cally to back me up."

"But," Travis said with subtle vitriol, acid etching pain on Avon's face, "I would have thought you would much rather have had Blake 'back you up'. Or back up you."

"Which is more than can be said of you. My taste," he stripped Travis with his stare and found him sorely lacking, "not to mention my...dalliances, have improved considerably since you."

"Is that supposed to make me feel inadequate?" —this, and in a tone of absolute confidence from a man who was still on his knees, still held under Avon's gun, laughing in the face of disaster— "It's nothing but pathetic. Even now, you still can't face the truth about yourself, can you?"

"Now then," Avon whispered, "what would you know about the truth? Especially when it involves me?"

"More than you want me to."

"Oh? Then go on, tell me these...truths that you claim I don't want to hear." He made a show of settling down as if for a bedtime story, reclining on a slab of rock turned turquoise and purple by the sunset, whilst his gun lazed negligently acute attention on Travis, defying him to move.

"You," Travis said, taking Avon's dare, rising slowly, staring fixedly at Avon's face, catching sight of the following gun out of the corner of his eye. Stretching the moment out, he stood there, ready to seize the opportunity his revelation would bring. "You," he repeated,

"are a homosexual."

And Avon laughed, genuinely delighted, mocking Travis and everything he represented, bringing the other man to the boil of fury. "Homosexual?" he finally gasped out, free hand wiping a tear from the corner of his eye, gun hand wavering not one atom. "Me? Oh, really, Travis, you are going to have to do better than that if you want to overcome me with surprise. I," he got to his feet, a lithe stretching of muscle and rippling of leather, "am not homosexual. I just," and he grinned, wickedly amused, "love men. Frequently, and in large amounts. I also," he lowered his voice to the confessional, "admit to liking women, also frequently and also in large amounts. You can ask both Cally and Jenna about that."

"And can I ask Blake and Vila about the other?"

"Tsk, tsk, I said I loved *men*, Travis, not misguided martyrs or Peter Pans."

"Men? Is that why you loved me?"

And the question was out before he knew it even existed and the opportunity was there in his hands before his brain had even recognised it. A flicker of the eyes, a waver of the gun, and Travis had him, bent backwards in a parody of an embrace, gun twisted from him and held to Avon's head, Avon's arm trapped between their bodies, the other trapped in Travis' hard grip, the two men locked more closely together than since they had last been lovers. "Well? Is that why you loved me?"

"You were a callow boy, Travis. And no-one can accuse you of improving with age."

"But how could you, when you haven't tried me? Hmm, Avon? Passing judgement in the face of lack of data? Surely you learned better than that at your fancy University?"

"This," and he bumped his groin against Travis', "is one time when ignorance is bliss."

But the expected sharp retort was different, banked heat, not banked fury. "But not nearly so blissful as knowledge, Kerr."

"And you want to prove the old adage."
"Which one would that be?"

Avon stretched and Travis gave him a fraction of leeway. Then Avon's hand was upon him, insolent as the tongue that whis-

pered, "That a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. But you," and that infuriating hand squeezed, filling him with equal measure lividness and lust, "aren't even up to proving that."

At that moment, at the very second those viciously seductive words pierced him, Travis knew that there was only one possible end to this. Knew, that the few other possibilities had been sealed in the sarcophagus of Avon's cutting wit and sharper tongue, had been sliced up by Avon's power play. "There is one thing you're right about," he said, half surprised by the very normalcy of his voice. With exquisite eroticism, he laved Avon's face with the barrel of the gun, nuzzling him, muzzling him in an entirely new way, shutting Avon up. "These guns really are wonderfully phallic. Perfectly proportioned, aren't they? But then, you would know all about that, wouldn't you? Or would you? You never were very keen on being fucked. Always used to lie there, stiff as a board when I tried to put it up you. And how you made me suffer afterwards."

The gun trembled through Avon's hair, tickling sweetly behind his ear, long smooth hardness pressing the nape of his neck, and all the while, Travis kept on talking, whispering, words caressing as the gun did, all threat and lust. "It was you who always wanted me to be the one who took it, and I who had to prove to *you* how much I loved you. That's why I got out, in the end."

In his hand, the gunflicked at the fastenings on Avon's tunic, the pressure-tabs parting, white skin revealing itself amidst the midnight of leather. "You never knew that, did you? You see, I wanted more for myself than just being Kerr Avon's catamite, Kerr Avon's perverted little toy, brought out and laughed at whenever there was a party." Now the muzzle was pressing into Avon's groin, hard as a cock, rubbing and rubbing until Avon was just as hard, just as ready to shoot. "I wanted to have some kind of life for myself. Can you understand that? I wanted the freedom to do what I wanted, when I wanted to."

"As if I ever stopped you!"

"No, you never did. Not in so many words. But then you'd look at me with those brown eyes, making me feel like a bastard for hurting someone who loved me as much as you did. I ended up almost hating you for that."

"Only almost? I suppose that is why you came up with that pitiful excuse to get me here. You had to have me alone and away from prying eyes, because you knew that was the only way I'd ever admit to having seen you before. So that's what this whole pathetic charade was all about." And despite the gun—or, perhaps, because of it—he slid the last words out as lethal as a knife between the ribs, "Puppy love. Nothing but—"

Before another word could be said, Travis pulled him tighter, putting pressure on his arm, arching his back painfully, almost overbalancing them both together. "It was puppy love only because you're such a bitch, Kerr. And I'm going to prove that tonight. I'm going to fuck you, Kerr, whether you want it or not."

"Rape? Well now, no-one's going to be surprised by that."

"No, they're not, not that you're going to tell them. What would you say, Kerr? Oh, by the way, Blake, whilst I was down there, I met Travis and he raped me. I can see the picture on his face now, Kerr. And then what would you have to say? That Blake's going to have to do better than he has been, because being raped by me was better than the best fucking he's ever given you? Because you do let him fuck you, don't you, Kerr? Big fellow like him, you'd be on your knees in a second."

"I wish you'd make up your mind," Avon said tightly, and that the only betrayal of any feelings he might have had. "First of all, you whine like a child because I did not go on my knees—or my back—often enough for you, a fact which you erroneously put down to me being far too concerned with my own ma*chismo.* And now you try to infuriate me by implying that I will go on all fours for any man who is still warm and breathing. If we are to explain this, Travis old friend, then either I have changed beyond all recognition," and he used the distraction of his words to ease himself a fraction more upright, taking some of the pressure off his spine, "or you were a dreadful lover."

The gun, instead of wavering under the

onslaught of insult, moved with steady certainty, roving Avon's body with an onslaught of insult of its own, coming at last to Avon's face, to the beautiful lips which had uttered the pain-stinging words. "Or it could be," Travis whispered, and Avon's eyes widened with the first sign of real fear at the violent caress of that voice, "that you lied to me all those years ago. That you had me on a leash and you knew it, tugging me this way or that, treating me as if I were your personal pet. Now I think that sounds much more like the truth, don't you? It has nothing to do with my abilities as a lover. After all, I had no complaints from you and none since."

With the danger frissoning through him, Avon was aglow, grinning, mind racing as quickly as his heart. "But then," he purred, "mutoids are hardly known for their good taste, are they now?"

And the gun slid across his face, Travis staring down at him in a fire of fury and echoing pain. Slowly, the muzzle pressed against Avon's lips and Travis had the thrill of seeing terror replace mockery in those brown eyes. Power and revenge surged through him, and he saw their counterparts reflected in Avon, saw the raw fear, saw the second when it dawned on Avon that Avon might die here, in a travesty of passion, the phallic length of a gun in his mouth. Travis increased the pressure, gloating and glutting himself on Avon's fear, his cock growing harder and more potent than the gun as Avon's mouth that beautiful mouth, never forgotten, always coming back to him in dreams, to whisper words and promise kisses—finally was forced open, portcullis no longer protecting, and Travis' gun slid home, past the whiteness of teeth and into the softly vulnerable wet heat of Avon.

"I could kill you," he murmured, moving the gun in and out. "All I have to do is fire it, and you would be dead, your brain charred to nothing. But I don't believe I shall. Well," he said, in conscious parody of a voice he'd never forgotten, "not quite at the moment. Wonderfully phallic things, guns," he went on, voice and arms trembling now under the strain and arousal tripping through him. "You never liked it when I fucked you. I

wonder if you'd like it better if it were my gun?"

And Avon, mouth stoppered by the weapon of his own destruction, couldn't say a word, his own best self-defence aborted. But he was not, quite, helpless. Shoving the panic into the back of his mind where it could simper harmlessly, he put everything he had into survival. Eyes seductive, he started sucking on the gun, wet noises suddenly reverberating around the plateau where night had fallen without either of them noticing. Stars glittered overhead, an enormous gibbous moon strobed through the clouds, and zephyr rose to breeze, dust and pebbles skittering away from it. But Avon stood stock still, back arched over Travis' arm, as if they had been dancing, or seducing, together. And he sucked, tongue flickering out to caress the gun, throat swallowing, setting Travis on fire. Making Travis lose control to his lust.

"You think that's going to work?" Husky, rusty from rampant arousal, but still in perfect control, the tremble all but gone now. "Oh, no, my lovely Kerr, you won't win this one. Not this time. But if you want to turn this into a charade of lovemaking, then you've come to the right man, haven't you? After all, I had the best teacher," he snarled, wrenching the gun from Avon's suckling mouth and shoving him, hard, to land sprawled on the moon-stippled slabs, "didn't I?"

The gun was pointed at Avon's belly, promising a lingering and vile death if he pushed Travis too far. "Get your clothes off."

Avon opened his mouth to speak, took another look at the expression in Travis' eyes and changed his mind. In total silence with only the slither of leather on flesh to punctuate his obedience, he stripped, skin white as virginity in the dark night, all muscles and planes and secret shadows when the moon showed its face. Perhaps the moon heard the indrawn hiss of breath that came from Travis, but Avon didn't. All Avon knew was that which should have turned to plain lust by now was still a corruption of violence and pleasure. And that, he knew, left only one possible path. Unless, of course, he were able to either overpower Travis or get hold of the gun.

Travis grinned at him, devouringly, overwhelmingly. He was going to have Avon, was going to possess him, was going to show him who was in control here. And prove who was in control over Travis' entire life. He transferred the gun to his left hand knowing that Avon would appreciate the irony of his gun replacing the weaponry in Travis' damaged arm. A minor damage, to the controls rather than the arm, but even that would have to be paid for. Just as, it slithered through his mind, this new thought, he could make Blake pay for the original ruination of his arm. And the deformity of his face. He had been handsome, once. Beautiful enough to be a match for Kerr Avon, the two of them strolling around the quads, causing heads to turn and sighs to be sighed, entrancing enough that even those who should have reported them used the Avon and Travis families' power as an excuse not to.

But he had lost that, all of that, power and family and control, because of this man and later, because of Blake. And now, he could almost see the two of them, Avon on his knees under Blake, Blake's prick pounding into him. He knew what Blake looked like, knew how big Blake was when aroused, knew what talents Blake had in the bedroom—although he had made those discoveries in a cell. Not that Blake would remember it, not after the mindwipe and the conditioning and the planting of new memories. It had been Travis' idea, sweet vengeance, to make the crime one of abusing little boys, marking Blake with eternal stigmata. Now he had Blake's new love, Blake's new hope right here in front of him, in the body and form of a man whom Travis himself had once loved.

There is, perhaps, nothing so cruel as love turned to hate, of hope turned to despair. So now there was Avon, spread out before him, a cornucopia of revenge. And he was going to take it. One handed, he undid the fastenings on his trousers, tugging the leather open, pushing the clinging skin down and out of his way, silken briefs ripping under his scrabbling, desperate hands. All of a sudden, he was free, cock kissed by the coolness of night air and the chill fear in Avon's eyes.

Avon stared up at him from his bed of

concrete, swallowing hard. "Perhaps," he said, admirably steadily, "in the interests of protecting your knees," and, it was obvious, his own body, "we should move over there. You see the area that is covered by what looks like some kind of moss?"

"How considerate of you," Travis said, low and deep, softer than the moss, harder than the gun. "Why not? But you, dear chap, can go first."

Walking across those few feet, Avon cursed himself for allowing his fear to rule him. Now, he was leading himself to an area where the lee of the wall had protected spores and seeds until the entire area was overgrown—and thus, not a single loose stone to be used as a weapon. His boots, even, were now out of reach, and he was utterly naked, more aware of Travis' eyes staring at his backside than he was of his overall predicament. He knew what was coming: subliminally, he had known what was probably coming from the second he had seen that message and told his lies to Blake. But it was here, and now, and he was shivering, and the knowledge that Travis could see and feed upon that shiver made him tremble all the more. Head held high, he settled himself with all the pride of a sultan in his seraglio, and his very superiority, his exquisite control, fuelled the vicious need in Travis. He heard the gun cycle up to full power, heard the safety clip go on, and only then did he look up.

"I'll put it here, shall I?" Travis said to him, carefully placing the gun on a ledge, the eye of the muzzle staring Avon straight in the face. "And don't forget, Kerr old boy, I didn't spend most of my life sitting behind a desk. The most you've done is prance around the Galaxy for a few months playing at pirates, but I've spent years being trained to kill bastards like you. So don't even try it, Avon, because I," and suddenly he was there, on the ground, hands wrenching Avon's legs apart, one hand rampaging upwards to grab Avon's cock and balls, pulling and tugging and twisting. Making Avon hard. "Oh, you like that, do you? Then perhaps I should stop. Why should you enjoy my revenge, hmm, Kerr? But as I was saying," his hand closed into a vice over Avon's vitals, trapping the blood,

enpurpling Avon's cock, "if you try one stupid move, then I'll kill you. But slowly, old love. I'll shove my gun hand up you, Avon, and that will rip your insides apart. And then I'll tell Blake where to find you. Would you like that, Kerr? Would you like Blake to find you because your lover—his enemy—got a bit too rough in one of your kinky, sick little games? No, don't speak. I don't want to hear you speak. I want to hear you scream!"

And he was there, hard cock pressing at tender skin, strong muscle fighting to keep him out, flesh stretching, feeling as if it would sunder any second now, pulling on the fragile sensitivity of cock. "Damn it, Kerr, you're hurting me!"

But before Avon could respond to this outrageousness, a leather gloved hand slapped across his face, drawing a tendril of blood from the corner of his mouth. He lay on his back, legs spreadeagled over Travis' thighs, moonlight glinting on his own body and glimmering on the seeping tip of Travis' reddened cock. An abrupt coolness, a slimy slickness on his body, sliding inside him, and his mind rebelled from the thought of what it might be, of what Travis might carry in his pockets that would be concentrated and viscid enough to double as a lubricant. He shut those thoughts away, forcing his attention to what was happening, looking for an opening, finding it as Travis loomed over him, all of the other man's attention focussed on the small, tight hole he was going to invade.

Avon twisted, grappling Travis, feeling the heavy erection graze his thigh instead of ripping into him, feeling strong arms encircle him, the inhuman smoothness of that eyepatch brushing his face. Then the moment of surprise was over, and Travis was fighting him back, ruthless, bruising, using every trick in the book. But Avon hadn't spent all those years doing nothing more than sitting behind a desk and he certainly hadn't been playing pirates. He struggled back, biting and kicking and gouging, muscles rippling.

But Travis was driven by more than mere survival; for him it was a chip on his shoulder so deep it reached all the way to his soul. Inexorable, he pushed and pulled and shoved, manhandling Avon until they were tangled together in a heap, all one pile of entwined limbs and grappling hands. Underneath the stifling weight of the other man, Avon lay, winded, catching his breath and gathering his wits, one part of him always, always, intensely and intently aware of what was happening to him, of what was being done to him. One last surge, one last burst of his strength, and then he heard Travis laughing, raucous in the soft shimmer of moonlight. "Is that the best you can do? You're softer than my mother."

"So you don't limit yourself when it comes to rape then."

The jibe flowed off Travis as the tears and blood of his victim would. The only response Avon got was a hand gripping his cock, using that as threat to turn him, until his knees were pressed into pungent moss and a cock was pressing into his arse, piercing him, thrusting into him, too much, too fast, too tight, the slipperiness of the lubricant dulled, like the blunted blade that was reaving him.

"Oh, you like this, don't you?" Travis was muttering in his ear, big hand fondling Avon's cock and balls, manipulating him with oft-practised skill, none of the old knowledge lost, each touch perfectly in tune with what Avon's body had always loved best. "So that's where I went wrong with you, is it, Kerr my old love? It wasn't a catamite you wanted, but a big strong man to make you take it and make you love it. You didn't want a lover, you wanted a daddy."

His cock was thrusting into Avon as viciously as his words were fucking Avon's mind, ripping him in two. Avon was gasping and heaving under him, body arching, pushing, pulling away, sweat slicked with the heat of his own body and Travis', so heavy over him. "Oh, my Kerr," and a biting on his shoulders followed the words, warning him of the bitter pain to come, "if you'd only told me, I could have made you love me enough."

And then Travis was kissing where he had bitten, undulating sensuously where before he had plundered. All the while, there were words again, sweet, soft words, the self-same thing that had been whispered in the secret dark of the room they had shared before it had gone so badly wrong between them.

Words that Avon didn't want to hear, words that had no place in this time between them. He had known perfectly well what he was getting into when he had agreed to meet Travis here, had known it when he'd arranged to be picked up by *Liberator*, no matter what, attacks by Federation vessels included. And these simpering declarations of paradise found and love reborn were not, as far as he was concerned, part of the package. Not at all. Ever again.

He pushed upwards, welcoming the pain of Travis' cock pulling free of him, finally using his full strength, taking Travis by surprise, displaying some of the combat skills he'd picked up over the years. Before either one of them could catch his breath, he was over Travis, forearm pressed across tender throat, Travis' breath caught and held. "You," Avon hissed, left hand grabbing Travis' erection, nails raking delicate skin and more sensitive nerves, "are supposed to be raping me. That's what I came here for, you twisted, sadistic bastard. Not some shilly-shallying lovesick boy!" And he twisted round, ripping Travis' shirt away, sharp teeth tugging at Travis' nipple, a small blossoming of red in his wake. "Now, Travis, are you going to prove that you're a man? Or was I right all those years ago, my stupid, effete, pretty baby?"

It was enough. With an atavistic roar, Travis was upon Avon, over him, around him, suffocating him with the smell of male musk, animal in rut, heat rising and rippling between them. Avon was shoved and pulled, onto his knees, his arse displayed whitely in the moonlight, and Travis salivated at the sight, spitting on his hand, smearing it onto his cock to complete the half-hearted lubricant that was left. He didn't want to rip himself raw, not now, not with this man. He wanted this one to last. A lifetime, an eternity, with his cock up Avon's arse, showing him who was the man around here, who it was who held the power and the control. Forgotten was that this was precisely what Avon had ordered: all that remained was animal lust and human violence, and his cock, red heat cauterising white cheeks. He screamed his pleasure, echoing Avon, the two voices rising together, a union as unholy as their youthful

one had been self-deceptive. Pounding and pounding, he thrust hard and was thrust into, fucker and fucked, both taken, both controlling, power and fear and pain and pleasure coiling them together.

Avon was devouring Travis, the heavy weight slamming into him, hard hands leaving bruises, thick cock stretching him to the very limits of his endurance. There was cum pooling in him, orgasm imminent, but they were so commingled that neither could tell one from the other. Travis was pulling on a cock, fingers digging into delicately balls, skin satin and warm, but it could have been himself, as it could have been Avon rending the tight hole where Travis' cock was thudding into him. On and on they went, forever for them, moments for the rest of the world, sweat dripping in the light, breath gasping in the air, cries rising to the sky. Then a second of stillness, the two men a tableau, as still as the other statues on the plateau, and then movement again, juddering thrust, convulsive orgasm, coming and coming, Avon's seed staining the moss, colour fading as his body was collapsed on top of it, Travis collapsed on him, both of them adrift, mindless in the aftermath.

It was, not surprisingly, Avon who recovered first. With a fastidious grimace that freed him from having to actually acknowledge any feelings that might linger in him, he struggled out from under Travis' weight, taking his gun back and crossing over to where his clothes had been abandoned so shortly before. He picked up the wisp of silken cloth that had been Travis' and with another grimace of fastidiousness, he sopped up the seeping wetness from between his cheeks. Only then did he begin dressing, movements as deft and gracefully controlled as always, nothing betraying the lingering languor of his limbs. Covered once more, he strolled over to where Travis still lay, standing legs akimbo like Colossus over the Straits, waiting until Travis' eyes finally opened.

"I see you are still insensate after sex. Hardly a good survival skill for someone who works so...intimately with Servalan." The gun was raised until it was in perfect alignment with Travis' face, and they could both feel the power pulsating in the weapon. "I could kill you," Avon said, quite conversationally. "But quite honestly, you're not worth the effort." A toe, nudging the flaccid softness of Travis' cock. "In fact, you're not worth the effort for anything at all."

He turned away, going over to the parapet where he had climbed up here in the first place, but he stopped, listening to Travis.

"And what shall you do when I tell Blake?"

At that, Avon turned, stalking back to tower over the recumbent man, paying little attention as Travis slowly began tugging his clothes back into place. "Unlike you," he purred, "I outgrew telling tales a long time ago. However, you can run tattling to Blake if you choose to. I shall, of course, deny it, and he'll believe me. You see, he has no idea about my...predilections, and I want it to stay that way. And you will play into my hands if you tell him, for then I am automatically innocent. Do you honestly think Blake would ever believe a word said by the man who proved Blake guilty of child rape?"

"You're bluffing. Blake has no idea—"

"The holding cells in the Justice Treatment Centre. You, and two mutoids, Servalan in a red suit, watching."

The words were chains, immobilising Travis, rendering him impotent and aware of his own weakened nakedness. His damaged hand crept over to cover the only part of him left bare.

"Oh, Blake remembers far more than you ever want him to. Which is, by the way, why I agreed to meet you here. You see, Blake is unfortunately moral in his sexuality, Gan is an unimaginative lump and Vila is too much of a victim for a masochist like me. Which leaves me...shall we say, high and dry? You, Travis, sounded like rather a pleasant divertissement or at the very least, a source of information that would make it possible for me to actually do something about this farce I'm forced to live. But," and this time, the foot kicked Travis' hand out of the way and then nudged, far from gently, the eggshell balls, "you weren't even that. Were you? I suggest," and suddenly he had leaned down, gun pressing between Travis' thighs, digging into his arse, the tip penetrating him, promising

or threatening a fucking, "you ask Servalan for some lessons, and come back when you're of some use to me."

Footsteps crunched across débris, rocks and pebbles gurgled down the hill of rubble, marking Avon's passing, leaving behind only the silence of the dead and the bitter hatred of the living.

"Don't think this is over!" echoed over the sarcophagus land. "You'll pay for this! I shall make you pay for this!"

And the rapist, walking away into the night, laughed at the raped.

For the Tartlet. May she one day be a fullfledged Tart!

C I V I L SERVANTS

NANNY'S TEDDY TALES AND OTHER BEDTIME STORIES: BEDTIME STORY EDI N. BURGH

Two *Professionals* tales and both with upbeat endings. Well 'Bedtime Story' is #4 in the Nanny's Teddy Tales collection, so there's certain to be just a 'wee' twist, but 'Wrong End of the Stick' is sweet and humorous, everything that a romantic could want.

THERE WERE TIMES when the cost of this job was higher than the wages of sin. Today, for starters. God, what a day. Getting there too late and finding the Ambassador's kid bound and gagged, suffocated in the airless heat of the stair cupboard... And Ray's face. You could see the guilt on him the second he opened that door, could see it get worse as he brought out the small body and tried mouth-to-mouth. Standing in the corridor, at the bottom of the stairs, all Bodie had been able to do was stand there, helpless, and watch while Doyle knelt in a patch of light, trying to breathe his life into a child who obviously, so painfully obviously, was far beyond any help. To make matters worse, they hadn't been even close, off searching all the bastards' known haunts in London, taking an eternity to even find out about this place, thinking that the kid would be all right, kept alive as a bargaining chip. But to look at those tiny wrists, and the way the ropes had cut in, and to look at the sodden and soiled trousers, it was overwhelmingly clear that the child had been tied up and left in there from the beginning, near enough.

Bodie couldn't get it out of his mind, all of it brought into ever sharpening focus with every line of the report he'd typed out and with every line of stress that had appeared round Ray's eyes and framed his mouth. Oh, his mate was hurting, more than even Bodie was, and it was tearing them apart. Doyle on a guilt trip was all pugnacious fury to stave off tears, all sharp words and sharper digs to leech off some of his own pain.

"But who is it who gets to be on the receiving end, eh? You're a mug, Bodie," he said to himself, even as he got the teabags out of the caddy and lifted the tea pot down from the shelf, listening with half an ear for signs of Doyle finally being finished with his bath. He was still, ruefully, with a wry twist of self-deprecation, calling himself for every kind of fool, and all the time knowing, as if it had been bred in his bones, that he'd be whipping boy again, for Doyle. That he'd be whipping boy for Doyle at his own funeral, if it would ease his friend's pain. The last of the custard creams were lying at the bottom of the biscuit barrel, the sunshine-yellow packet crumpled on top of crumbs and broken bits an inch deep and a month old. Domesticity wasn't exactly high on his list of priorities, so he didn't even bother dumping the débris out, just grabbed the packet and dumped a new packet of chocolate digestives on the tray, busying the cups and biscuits and

teapot all together.

The living room next, newspapers shoved aside on the coffee table to leave room for the tea, a quick backtrack to the kitchen for the new bottle of milk and the sugar, cubes this time, the box torn open, some of the white lumps spilling out like childhood's memories. Poor brat hadn't even been missed at first, not with all the running around to give the kids their routine polio drops, the bitter taste disguised in sugar cubes...

He shook himself then, trying to make it all water off a duck's back. Switch the telly on, get laughing at "Some Mother's do 'ave 'em", shove it all to the back of his mind, let today bury itself under years of dust until he wouldn't even remember it. Get rid of the sting of seeing that kid, push it all aside. Ignore the pain, because pain made him angry, and he couldn't be angry. Ray would need to let it out, would need to shout and yell and rail against the unfairness of the world. And if Bodie allowed himself his own anger, then it'd be another fight, more bruises and another agony of separation, no quick spat the way they were both feeling today, no chance of that. Not worth it, not worth it all, to let the job rip them apart the way it had over that bomb cock-up at Christmas. He began, methodically and with concentration, to cram biscuits into his mouth, chewing energetically, arrowing on that simple luxury. If it weren't for Doyle needing to go through his usual catharsis, he'd crawl into a bottle tonight and stay there until morning, but Bodie knew how stroppy he got when he'd been drinking like that, and he'd already decided that this would be another of those nights when he'd be there like the Berlin Wall, big, solid and dumb, something for Doyle to scream his outrage at, something for Doyle to mark with his protests for freedom and decency.

The bathroom door clicked, the faintest shuss of bare feet on carpet, then Doyle was there, and if it had been any other day, if they'd found anything but that poor kid today, Bodie would have made a cheerfully cheeky comment about copper's instincts never failing—always there the second the pot had brewed. But it wasn't one of their better days, where the worst they'd had to do

was rough someone up or shoot someone. It had been the kind of day that not even all Bodie's good intentions were letting slip from him. He was too tense, and he knew it, not turning to look at Doyle, but gesturing instead, dark head nodding, to the tea things on the table, the ritual objects of British life. No matter what, the kettle went on, Bodie thought to himself, didn't make any difference whether or not it was a christening or a funeral, the end of a day at the seaside or the end of a day where Doyle had to bring a small body out of that dark cupboard...

Doyle didn't speak either, not berating Bodie for his choice of television viewing, not uttering a single word that was outwardly to prick Bodie's conscience but was never meant as anything more than a way for Doyle to beat himself with his own stick. He just sat down, there on the settee beside Bodie, poured them both tea, adding milk and sugar as required, passing the mug over as if this were nothing out of the usual, as if they did this every day. And they did, which was what made the hairs on the back of Bodie's neck rise: this was what they did after a day spent going through files, or giving evidence in Court, or working on the bikes. This was not what they did on the days when Doyle's guilt would be working overtime. He wondered, looking at the closed profile with its frown of concentration, when the explosion was going to come, when the vitriol was going to start. Nothing. Not a word, nothing but the slurp of Doyle drinking tea, the crunch of biscuits being chewed, the chattering fun on the television. He could, he fancied, even hear the beating of his own heart, picking up speed, brump, barrump, getting faster, waiting for the axe to fall, for the anger to spill over.

And that was when he noticed: no anger. No caged fury, no coiled temper waiting to strike with all the venom of the cobra. Just... He stared at that profile again, at the bruise under the eye, nestling there like a pillow between the spike of lashes and the bump of cheek implant. But Doyle hadn't been hit. They hadn't come close enough to any of the bastards, the sods slipping through the net and slinking off to Spain when Customs weren't looking. It was darkling in the living

room, dusk outside, the television screen dark with nothing but the BBC spinning globe giving off light. Without taking his stare off Doyle, Bodie reached out and flicked the switch on the lamp.

A huge sigh, then, and Doyle turned towards him, the slow humour in his eyes ironic contrast to the bruised look of his eyes. "Yeh," he said, "big, tough CI5 man, exDetective Constable Doyle, blubbering in the bath. Funny, innit?"

But Bodie couldn't face that honesty, couldn't face that vulnerability. Not from Ray. Doyle was tough, had to be hard as nails just to survive his own idealism, it just wasn't...right...for Doyle to be like this, not when Bodie had been expecting the usual temper and the usual fury to cover the vulnerability up until it went away. He fiddled with his mug, reached out and argued with the chocolate digestives until the packet was ripped open, lying gutted on the table, spilling its contents for Bodie to pick over. Doyle was restless beside him, and he could feel that too, too honest gaze on him, could feel it grazing his own profile, could feel it stumble when it came to the tightly disapproving shutness of his mouth.

"Christ, Bodie, I don't need this!" Voice shaky, watery, as if there were tears just waiting to be spilled, waiting to burn Bodie like acid. Couldn't handle it when people cried, not when it was people he loved. He still remembered that day when they'd been after the Greek assassin, chasing round looking for the high-power rifle, finally twigging what was going on. Doyle's voice had broken that day, when Bodie had lambasted him for not shooting from the doorway, and Doyle had said, helplessly, hopelessly, 'yeh, and who was standing in the window if I'd missed?'. He hadn't known how to handle it then, knew even less now. Beside him, into Bodie's silence, Doyle exploded into movement, erupting from the couch, almost flying across the room, a flash of white shirt as muscular arm reached for jacket, grabbing keys, running...

Running out of his own home, Bodie realised. And all because of him. All because he was terrified that Doyle might cry.

"Ray..." Small, tentative, half-warning, but

it was enough. Doyle stopped, jacket shrugged half on, head bowed, chest heaving as Bodie got to his feet and turned to look. All the sinews of Doyle's neck were standing out in stark relief, the muscles on his forearm rippling strong, the fabric of his jeans strained by the tensed clenching of thigh. No, Bodie thought, watching Doyle, cataloguing his strengths, it had bugger-all to do with Doyle crying. It was all about Doyle being weak. It was all about Doyle needing him. Cos when someone needed you, if you gave them what they needed, then you were tied to them. You were attached, they belonged to you, in an odd kind of way. At least, that was how he had always felt. Let someone need you, let yourself fill the empty spaces in their life, let your strength be pollyfilla for all their weak spots, and where were you?

Committed. Attached. Tied down, belonging, settled, shackled, freedom flown out the window and responsibility steamrollered in through the front door. He should be running by now, he knew that. Only, this was Doyle. The old panic was struggling to lift wings left dormant too long to give him flight. He *should* be running. But this was Ray, and he didn't.

"Should've run a long time ago, mate," he said, making Doyle whip round to look at him, the green eyes narrowing, temper flushing the pallid cheeks, hiding some of the redness of the eyes.

"An' what the fuck's that supposed to mean, Bodie?" Doyle asked in that so quiet voice that even Cowley listened to. "I should've run out on you before? You been tryin' to get rid of me, is that it, an' me just too fuckin' stupid to notice?" The jacket was hauled on all the way, while Doyle glared at Bodie, impaling him, all the weakness blessedly hidden behind the tempest. "What is it, *mate*, don't you like bringin' your work home with you any more, eh? Or don't you like it when I want somethin' a bit more special than a great dumb ox to shout at?"

Now this was something Bodie could deal with, nice familiar ground, good and steady, as well-known as the back of his hand. "Is that how you see me, Ray?" he asked, his voice mild at this point, as it always was in these cathartic spats.

Another pause, another moment when it would either be the pattern of ages—an explosive, nasty comment from Doyle, the perfect comeback uttered by Bodie to feed the release of anger—or it would be those stumbling first steps that come to all relationships. If they are to survive...

"Is that how I see you?" Doyle asked himself, right hand running through his hair, his bracelet glinting in the light. Bodie had wished that it had been he who'd bought Doyle that, but standing there in the jeweller's, standing there beside Doyle who was all sharp tongue and aggro, he hadn't had the balls—and hadn't wanted to, when all was said and done, not when he stopped and really considered the end results from a gift like that. A bangle? As close to a wedding ring as two blokes could get. And for Bodie, that made it first cousin to a handcuff to chain them together. But Doyle was separate from him, his mind and his words still on the birthing argument. "Is that how I see you?"

The question was repeated in a voice that was vague, and weary, so weary that it made Bodie uneasy. He was used to seeing Doyle tired—had to be, given their line of work—he was even used to seeing Doyle depressed—had to be, given Doyle's nature—but he wasn't used to this...defeated world-weariness.

"Ray?"

"Nah, Bodie, that's not how I see you—that's how you want me to see you, innit? Play the big stupid lummox, do the ex-Army hard man, and that way, I'll never expect much from you, will I? Never expect anything other than all mates together, never expect much past a bit of a tumble, never expect you to give up your birds, or your disappearing off on me, or your keeping your great trap shut about anything that really matters. Nah, it's not me that sees you like that, Bodie. Not me at all."

"Oh, so now you think I go out of my way to be an insensitive bastard. Oh, that's great, that is. What's the matter, diddums? Is Uncle Bodie not being Father Christmas to you?"

He was shocked when he heard the anger in his own voice, shocked even more when he heard Doyle laugh. "This is a right turn up for the books, Bodie, a right turn up. Here we are, going through the motions, the same fucking routine we go through every time the job turns sour, 'cept this time, this time, it's not me doing the ranting and raving and spoiling for a fight. What's the matter, Bodie? I'm good enough to guard your back, I'm good enough to fuck, but only if I keep it nice and butch? What is it? Scared I'm going to turn into a fucking nancy boy, cos I got upset about that kid?"

Too, too close to the truth, and too, too soon for him to adapt, to come to terms with the changes that had been happening inside him while he had been looking in the opposite direction. Panic flexed those wings, and more of the buried anger and the banked fear seeped from him, hissing, words his mind was trying to catch even as they spilled between them. "Don't be so soddin' stupid. You're the butchest little bitch I've ever met."

"And you've met quite a few, haven't you, Bodie-boy?"

It was, after all, despite Doyle's words and Bodie's intentions, turning into one of the usual fights, although nastier than normal, vicious enough to make Bodie's palms sweat and his throat dry. "Was wondering when you were going to throw that back at me."

"What, that you're a flaming queer? That you've had more men than I've had hot dinners? Well, I wouldn't let it worry you, mate. You've had more women than I've had hot dinners as well. Proper little slag, you are."

"Tut-tut, Doyle, your jealousy is showing, and all because you lack my sex drive," he sneered, defending himself with the best offense he could muster. "Pull the claws in, petal, they don't suit you."

"Oh, I wasn't being bitchy, Bodie, just honest." Bodie eyed him warily, involuntarily backing off a step, then two, as Doyle stalked closer, the whole situation transmuting itself again, leaving him dizzily off balance. "Want to know what I was getting at, Bodie?" Doyle asked, silken voice, steely eyed.

Bodie didn't answer, glaring at him instead with the sullen insolence that drove Cowley right round the twist and did nothing but egg Doyle on, voice chill with the heat of temper.

"Do you, Bodie? I'm sayin' that you're not oversexed, I'm sayin' that you're not God's gift

to woman, and man and anything else that's still warm." A measured pace forward, all the more threatening for the ostentation of its calm. "I'm sayin' that you're a coward. I'm sayin' that you run through people the way Cowley goes through whisky." Green eyes agleam with cutting knowledge, slicing Bodie's defences to pieces. "I'm sayin' you fuck your way through the phone book because that's safer than havin' to stay with someone." And now he was close, so terribly, terrifyingly close, his mouth overflowing with Bodie's most fiercely guarded secrets, his words bringing all of Bodie's most intimate shames out to lie, bleeding, on the floor between them. "It's easier than havin' to work at a relationship. It's easier, Bodie," and Bodie gulped, feeling the heat from Doyle's body all down his front, "than tryin' lovin' someone and fucking the whole thing up. Isn't it petal?"

He simply stood there for a moment, gathering his wits, guddling around in his mind for the smart alec come-back that would get him off the hook, that would get Doyle off his back and let him scoop all those dark little secrets back up and stuff them into the back of his mind where they belonged, not all out in the open like this, as shoddy and as tawdry as used condoms littering the back close. "Bit of the pot calling the kettle black there, Doyle?" The narrowed eyes simply stared at him, giving him time to speak his peace—giving him time, Bodie understood, to gather up enough rope to hang himself with. Even so, he blundered on, attacking in selfprotection, going for the jugular because if Doyle were to bleed, then Bodie would be so busy patching him up that neither of them would even notice that the whole issue of Bodie's cowardice had been shelved. And the knowledge of that cowardice was what was shaking Bodie so hard his brain was rattling round in his head, common sense tumbled into dizzy uselessness. "I mean, look who's talking! You're gettin' at me for fuckin' anythin' that moves—least that's better than being fucked by anythin' that moves."

"Oh, Bodie, Bodie, Bodie. You 'aven't got a fuckin' clue, 'ave you?" And there was, to Bodie's horror, genuine pity in that voice, and

in those perceptive eyes. Eyes that had always been a mirror, of sorts for him. As long as he looked okay to Doyle, then he knew he was doing all right in this life. But Doyle was looking at him with such pity now, such condescending comprehension, that it set Bodie's teeth on edge. "D'you honestly think I give a monkey's who ends up on top, as long as I get what I'm after? An' I s'pose this means you've you been countin'?" He grinned up at Bodie then, and Bodie felt the sting of that sharp-toothed smile. "So who's winnin' so far, eh?" And as Bodie opened his mouth to deliver a facetiously vicious retort, Doyle slid the stiletto home with deft ease, skewering him right through the heart, doing more damage than Mai Li had ever done Doyle. "Me, Bodie. I'm the one who's winnin', cos I know what I want an' I'm not afraid of gettin' it. I'm not the one fuckin' up the only good thing in his soddin' life just cos I'm too scared to face 'ow I feel 'bout someone."

And it blurted out, racing down the path that years with this man had been leading up to, just blurted out and was said, baldly. "Not afraid of lovin' you, Ray. Scared of losin' you. Scared of drivin' you away."

The eyes staring at him were wide and bright, piercing him with their knowingness. "An' scared of needin' me, an' me needin' you. That's the bottom line, innit, Bodie? Terrified shitless of being tied down to someone."

Bodie didn't need to speak, saw his own answer in that unblinking gaze, felt the momentary relief as the eyes blinked, slowly, stayed closed, Doyle letting out a puff of breath, too forceful to be called a sigh, too miserable to be called anything else. "What the fuck am I goin' to do with you, mate? Christ, Bodie, we've been together over five years now, livin' together as near as spit for four years, an' you're still scared you won't come up to snuff? You are a fool, aren't you?"

He could have taken anger, could even have taken contempt, but this patient understanding could well be his undoing. There were no defences against this, nothing he could hurl at Doyle. Not without causing serious hurt, and even as his mouth opened to spear Doyle with the cutting edge of his defence, he discovered that the words had

fled, crowded out by the ridiculous lump in his throat.

"Cat got your tongue," Ray was saying to him, in something akin to the old manner between them. Bodie watched in fascination the way the curls tumbled back into place in the wake of Doyle's hand, watched as Ray watched him, watched himself in Ray's eyes. "Oh, sit down," and he did as he was told, arms stretching out along the back of the sofa, making a point of displaying his easefilled confidence, even if he felt nothing of the sort.

"Got nothing to say? Since when 'ave you done the silent sufferin' bit?"

"Since when 'aven't I?" There. He'd said it. or part of it, part of what was between them, holding them together, keeping them apart. "Never get a chance to do anything else, do I?" And it was easier, now that he'd started, now that he'd dared to go beyond the usual carping that was second nature and first mask to them both. "Never get a word in edgewise, do I? It's always how you're feeling, it's always all about how we can get you over whatever the fuck's gone wrong.

And those eyes were staring at him again, Doyle's mouth soft and half-smiling as he spoke. "An' when 'ave you ever tried to make it any different? D'you realise this is the first time you've ever talked to me like this? Honest, no holds barred, lettin' me in to how you're feelin'? You'd make the Pope feel guilty for Easter, you would."

A begrudging smile for that, the truth stinging not half as badly as he had thought it would. "Always thought you'd be all over me if I started complaining."

"Started complainin? When did you ever stop? 'Bout the stupid little things, anyroad."

"No time like the present." He looked away, watching something on the television that didn't even register with him, just that there was noise and colour and movement. Hadn't been enough of that today when Doyle'd gone into that cupboard under the stairs. "Don't mind when you take it out on me, Ray, when the job gets to you, but I hate it when you get the fight you want an' then go and bear a grudge on me for what I said."

"Like Christmas, you mean? Told you I

was sorry about that."

"When? When did you even *mention* it, tell me that?" He was shouting again, he recognised, saw it in the way Ray's face tightened. "Told me you were sorry? Oh, and how did you do that? Roll over and let me fuck you, did you?" Too late, too, too late, he saw the wounding truth. Oh, fuck it, he thought to himself, it was after Christmas Ray'd started doing all those little things, all the small touches that made the difference between friends fucking each other and two people... He closed his eyes, groaning in dismay at his own blinkered blindness. It was after Christmas, at the beginning of January, when Doyle had started speaking to him again, that was when Ray'd started letting on to a very few, select mates what was going on between them. It was after Christmas that Ray'd relaxed again about letting Bodie touch him in public, it was after Christmas that Ray'd stopped bristling and denying everything when someone made the usual comments about 'better halfs' and 'share everything, do you?'. After Christmas...

"Penny finally drop, did it?"

"Fuck, Ray, I'm sorry, didn't realise..."

"Yeh, well, can't really say anything, can I?" Bodie's look of disbelief and the incipient words were forestalled with: "Thought you'd twigged, didn't I? Thought that was why you didn't throw a fit when I organised the holiday and bought you that new duvet..."

They sat, looking at each other, all the years coming together at last, and Bodie started to laugh. "We're a pair, aren't we? Here I am, expecting it to be red roses when the time comes—"

"Red roses? Why would I—"

"It's what you did with Ann."

"Yeh, and Ann was a woman, an' in case you 'aven't looked between your legs recently, you're not. Get off it, Bodie, you'd've knocked me into next week if I'd come at you with roses."

"Look who's talkin'. You expectin' me to settle down with someone just cos he's bought me a new cover for my bed—specially since you were the one always complaining about the old bedspread."

"So do you want roses instead then?"

Panic slammed into him, knocking the breath from him. He hadn't, honestly hadn't seen this coming, and he should know better by now. Conversations with Doyle never seemed to follow any of the usual scripts people went by, never seemed to follow on a single discernable path of logic, but jumped hither and yon, seesawing intent with the same speed as Doyle could switch emotions on him. He jumped to his feet, felt a hand on his arm, lost his balance as he was tugged, hard, back down onto the sofa.

He looked, then, at Doyle, at this man who always reflected him back so clearly. "I'm not lettin' you run away, Bodie, not now. We're goin' to see this through, sort this out between us for once and for all. D'you want roses from me?"

And Bodie knew the real question: do you want commitment, do you want it just to be the two of us forever, do you want to admit that this is love, real love, and nothing else will ever come close. Do you want to try, for the first time ever, at actually having a real relationship?

He said the first thing that came to mind, anything to give him a second's cover, a moment to regroup his routed thoughts. "Roses make me sneeze."

The green eyes shuttered over, shutting him out, and it was then that he realised what else had been said, and actually in so many words. We're going to sort this out between us, once and for all. He wanted to shout at Ray, when did it turn into an all-or-nothing situation? When did it get to be the turn of the screw, when did it get to be give in and get tied down or get out?

When did it get to be hand yourself to me on a silver platter, heart and soul and mind, or watch me walk out of your life?

When had it ever been anything else? When?

They'd been partners first, forced to trust each other to survive, thrown together, sometimes day and night, usually at least twelve hours a day, a minimum of five days a week. They'd had no choice in that, but they'd both had a choice when it came to the partnership outside of work. And he'd chosen that, going into it with his eyes wide open.

Even though he'd known before he'd ever slept with Ray that this one could hook him, that this one could nail his hide to the wall and all he'd do would be hand him the hammer. He'd known, from the start, the very start. Had known, and still gone in there. Fighting and kicking and screaming all the way, covering it up with mateyness and girlfriends, bringing home the occasional boyfriend for a really mind-boggling session of three-way sex. But it had always been Ray, hadn't it? Everything he'd done, every woman or man he'd had, he'd always had to see how Ray reacted, what Ray thought of them. How Ray always came after him with more wiles and ever-more beguiling ways: a flexing of his spine, a twitch of that delectable arse, an arch to show off the heavy bulge in his jeans...

Pity, Bodie thought, watching his life turn itself inside out, that he didn't believe in God. He could have used someone to pray to at that particular moment of revelation. But there was nothing for him, nothing but himself, and the people he believed in. One of whom, the most important of whom, was sitting not ten inches away from him, showing no weakness now, no, not one iota. Funny, it occurred to him, that it was Ray showing how vulnerable he is that got me crucified like this. Small wonder he always wanted either fight or flight when Ray got all worked up and broken inside like today. Better that than this, surely.

Oh yeh? reality sneered at him cataloguing all the things he'd done, all the things he'd accepted. So he was afraid of losing his freedom: and just how much freedom did he actually, honestly and truly and no selfdeception, just how much freedom did he still have? When was the last time he'd gone off and done something wild, without doing it to get at Doyle? When was the last time he'd done anything, without Doyle crossing his mind at least once?

Probably not since before he ever knew that Raymond Doyle existed.

And Ray, never the soul of patience, was rising again, preparing to leave as he had started to earlier, but slower this time, so much more slowly. It occurred to Bodie to think how Ray must be feeling, after a day like today, laying all his cards—and his heart, don't forget his heart, he whispered in the privacy of his own thoughts, a small warmth growing in him at the thought, the soft-blooming knowledge beginning its slow permeation of his being—to do all that, and to have it rejected by silence, by a man Doyle had begun to think of as his, as the one person who would finally stick with him.

A memory, mingling with the soft sounds of Doyle gathering up chequebook, keys, wallet, the leaving more measured this time, more permanent. A memory, of a bitterly cold night, breath frosting the air as they sat in the car, waiting for their mark to venture the January night. Doyle, eyes glued to the binocs, voice so steady, so without pity.

Never had someone want to stay with me without changing me into someone else. Never been good enough for anyone before, not really.

But what was he, Bodie, doing right now? Telling him without saying a single word, that Ray wasn't good enough. That Ray would have to change, again, if he wanted to keep a lover.

Then the rest of the memory.

Was always lonely before I met you.

And what did Bodie know, if not being alone?

Belonging.

He knew belonging. He knew what it was to have a place, a spot carved out to fit him and no-one else. A perfect match, for him to this one part of the world.

Doyle. He fitted Doyle, the two of them a pair, a matching set.

Belonging.

And a freedom long since gone, just not yet lamented, not yet officially bidden farewell.

Doyle—going through the living room door, heading down the corridor. Many things, was his Doyle, but a fool wasn't one of them. Let him leave now, and there'd be no path back to trust, no path back to belonging. Probably no sex either, nor kisses, nor jokes chuckled over in the giddy darkness after an oppo was finally over. No exchanged knowing glances, no wordless conversations, no neatly portioned pleasure to keep them both going when the days were long and miserable. Like

today. If it were such a day tomorrow, he'd have to go through it on his own, even if Doyle were standing right beside him. Working partners. That's all they'd be, working partners, guarding each other's back because that's what the job needed.

Working partners.

The thought made his skin crawl. Go back to that—just so he could refuse to admit to something that was already true?

He bolted from the couch, suddenly realising that time waits for no man and Doyle wasn't waiting for him to finish his ruminating. Through the doorway, pelting down the hall, front door open—and Doyle standing there, waiting, after all. Slowing his pace, he strolled the last few feet, leaning himself, all Maurice Chevalier nonchalance, on the open door jamb. He smiled, quite sweetly, one eyebrow lifting, inviting Doyle to join in a joke that hadn't been told yet. Lazily, the smile heating to a grin, he reached out, shutting the door, turning the mortise lock, snibbing the snib, putting the chain on, enjoying as the waiting silence on Doyle's face warily changed to dawning cheer.

One finger drawing a line along the broken cheekbone down to the parting lips, he whispered in his best cockney, "It's a fair cop, guv."

"You what?"

"You got me, Detective Constable. Got me fair han' square."

He was pleased to the soles of his feet at the way that lit up Doyle's face, the meaning sinking in to fill up the eroded hollows. "Come along now, sir," Doyle said, doing a credible Dixon of Dock Green. "If you'll just come quietly..."

"If I just come quietly," Bodie said, still whispering, bedroom warmth dripping from his voice, "you'll wonder who the strange man in your bed is, won't you?"

"Wonder that anyway, don't I? You daft bugger, Bodie," but it was said with indulgence, the way Doyle always spoke to him when fondness overcame whatever thoughtless thing Bodie had done—or not done. "I take it this means yes?"

"Not much point in saying no, is there?" And at the sudden festering of suspicion in green eyes, "No, I'm not saying that you've trapped me into this. Too good a cop for entrapment," he said, playing the game again for a second, discovering that open commitment didn't spoil what they had, that the sweetness of humour was still there to make it possible to say things that would embarrass them no end if they used the words scrolled on Valentine cards. "I'm saying yes because it's finally dawned on me that I said yes a long time ago, didn't I? First time I laid eyes on you, I warrant. Been a long time coming, pet."

And it was nice to come home, to feel Doyle's familiar caress, hard hand snaking down to cup his balls, a breath of sheer pleasure hissing through Bodie. "Can make you come fast, Bodie," he heard, as he gathered Doyle in close to himself, hugging him, trapping that wonderful hand tight against the plush of his cords.

"Make it last tonight, Ray. Make it special. Make you," and a kiss, open mouthed and lush, tongue tasting tongue, "feel better after today. Get rid of all the shadows for you..."

"Standing up against the front door? C'mon, bedroom, mate. Want you in my bed, where you belong."

He felt the pause, felt the tension flare briefly in Doyle's body, as the forbidden word hung in the air, like the second shoe waiting to be dropped. Bodie buried his face in luxuriant hair and his hands in luscious arse. "Sounds wonderful, Ray," he murmured, finding out that he meant it, finding out that he didn't even care enough to wave goodbye as his spurious freedom danced off into the distance. "Do it all, eh? All the things you like to do and I always pretended I hated."

"All the stuff you put up with just to keep my face straight?"

"Yeh. Candles, music, cuddling up under the covers, reading that bloody story of yours..."

Doyle said nothing, and Bodie's grin matched his as he was led, by a slender hand slid down his belt, along the hall to the bedroom. Neither one of them spoke again, no words needed, as curtains were drawn, as the bedside lamp was switched on, candles lit, portable cassette whispering Prokofiev. Opposite sides of the bed, they faced each

other across the familiar expanse, Bodie smiling a little ruefully as he took part in the romantic ritual he had so earnestly eschewed, remembering his own loud protests that he was only doing it to keep Doyle happy. Well, he could admit to himself tonight that it was to keep them both happy, that it was to make up for the day and to celebrate tomorrow. That it was to allow him to savour this belonging, and to give Doyle all the metred pattern of romance that he needed. He opened his arms, and Doyle walked towards him until they melted together in a long kiss, hands languorously sliding clothing from firm flesh, fingers moulding and shaping, palms cupping and caressing. Doyle was hard, rampant, tamed only by the press of Bodie's hand, and that pleased him, that Ray was so willing to let all the angst evaporate. It was wonderful, to have this easeful acceptance, to have all this love after so many friezes when it had seemed inevitable that this would have to come to an end. His arms were filled to overflowing with Doyle, his heart spilling over with the joy of being, finally, free enough to admit that he was forever joined to another human being. They were on the bed now, both of them pulling back, neither one wanting to let all this pass too quickly.

"Make it last, Bodie," Ray said to him, clear eyes watching him, asking and promising at the same time.

"Oh, I will," he answered, meaning both the sex of this night and the relationship of tomorrow. "Come here, pet."

Together under the blankets, slow slide of skin on skin, lingering kisses of fingers on flesh, then a moment, a pause, as Bodie cradled Doyle's face in his hands. Unyielding, unashamed, Doyle stared back at him, and Bodie saw the misery that still lay underneath the happiness.

The child. Jesus Christ, he'd forgotten all about the child. He looked at Doyle's mouth, at the Michaelangelo perfection of the lips, remembering how pale they'd been after Doyle had pressed them to a child who would never breathe again, no matter what Doyle willed, no matter what Doyle was willing to give to make it different. A flicker of a glance, and he caught sight of the haunted, hungry need in

Doyle's gaze, caught sight of the aching hurting needs that needed to be sated tonight. Oh, yes, they'd read one of Doyle's stories, as they always did, but it would take something very special to take away the chill sting of pain in those eyes. Something deep, something that would stir Doyle to the profoundest core. Something very personal, something secret that only the one man closest to Ray was ever trusted to know. And that was Bodie himself. There was a bittersweet thrill in knowing that, in knowing that he was so desperately needed, so deeply tied to this man. Then the bitterness passed, as unmourned as the freedom he no longer wanted, leaving only the sweetness behind.

"It's all right, Ray," he whispered against Doyle's parted mouth, his words taking the place of the words Doyle had almost spoken. "You don't even need to ask. Know what you want, know what you need. And you've got it, mate. Got me now, and that's everything you'll ever need in your life, isn't it?"

So Doyle didn't speak, didn't ask, which made Bodie wallow in self-satisfaction that it was all going to be so easy now that he had stopped running and caught up to Doyle at long last. He settled Ray in closer, propping him just so, until the curly hair nestled under his chin and the whisper of chest hair caressed his own smooth chest. One handed, he reached into the bedside unit, taking out the unassuming grey book, holding it whilst Doyle flipped through to the well-worn pages,

to the story that he knew Ray usually read alone, on afternoons or nights when Bodie was unwilling to be so open, when Bodie was unwilling to share so intimate a fantasy. The page found, Bodie smiled as Ray settled against him again, pressing a kiss on tumbled curls as Doyle's strong fingers found his right nipple and pressed it, flickering nail surging delight through him. He knew, at that moment, that neither all the good intentions nor all the skillful control in the world was going to be enough to make it last long enough tonight. Skipping through the tale, he found the part Doyle would love most. The hot sweetness of arousal rekindled, he turned to the muchloved lines and began to read. And as he spoke, he felt the jolting heat of Doyle's cock against his thigh, heard the sudden, fierce intake of breath, felt his own heat rise to match Ray's, his heart full of love, his body full of passion, both ready to seal them together forever. A fiery kiss, a fist tight on his balls, pulling them tight, promising, promising both himself and Doyle what they loved most and so rarely had had the open trust and love to share. He gulped in a deep breath, spread his legs all the farther for Doyle to delve and explore and take possession as he willed. Voice trembling with passion, he continued their bedtime story...

"And he drew the whip between his legs obscenely, like a lover, a deviant caress rich with subtle eroticism...

WRONG END OF THE STICK GAFL X. II F

HE COULDN'T REMEMBER being so tired in his entire life before. His back ached, his head ached, his stomach was killing him and the only thing they'd give him—in a hospital, for Christ's sake-was bloody Alka-Seltzer. And when he'd complained, the Sister had offered him Disprin. Disprin! That was for kids, not hard-headed CI5 agents. And when he'd complained to her, then Matron had offered him the bus fare home.

So he had shut up. He'd face Cowley any day of the week, but Matrons were a different kettle of fish. His watch glinted, greenly luminous, 3:23 a.m. He sighed, shifting his backside to a slightly less uncomfortable position on the plastic chair. The figure in the bed shifted, marginal movement of the left foot and he was there, waiting, hovering over him, straining to hear anything that might be whispered. But-nothing. Only that movement of the foot, and then the same, deathly stillness as before.

He settled himself on the chair again and spent some of the time working out what the hell he was going to tell Cowley. 'Excuse me, sir, but I'm falling asleep on the job because I spent the night at the hospital watching my partner.' There wasn't much doubt about the kind of response that would get. If he was lucky, he'd get a dressing down, one of Cowley's military specials. If he was unlucky, then he'd be ordered to stay at home and get his rest.

And he wasn't sure what he'd say to that. All right, so he knew what he'd want to say to that, but it boiled down to whether or not he'd be willing to chuck his job in. He stretched again, easing some of the cramp, starting some of the pain going all over again. The flood of blood into knotted muscle needled painfully, but he kept stretching, knowing that it would be worse if he gave in now. Christ, he wouldn't be able to move in the morning if he stayed on that bloody chair.

His hand was inside his jacket before his mind had registered what his ears had heard. Creaking footsteps: the nurse on her rounds. Watchful, he stood aside as she came in, automatically checking the corridor quickly, relaxing only when she was doing pulses and catheters and soothing ointment into pressure points. Much though he tried, he couldn't keep entirely out of the way, and it wasn't until he realised that she was watching him with such sympathy that he noticed he was hovering like a pregnant father. He smiled at her, blissfully unaware of how he looked.

"It must be so hard on you," she whispered, brash Irish brogue softened down to a lullaby.

"Yeh," he whispered back, a conspiracy of quiet, something to ease the loneliness of his vigil without disturbing her patient. "Not getting any sleep like this..."

"Oh, aye, that an' all."

He flickered a sharp glance at her, not quite sure what that odd, underlying tone meant. "Well," he shrugged, "he's my partner. Been my partner for about three years now."

"Partner? Oh, that's a lovely way to put it! It's so much nicer than just 'friend', isn't it?"

He frowned at that, glimmering notion dawning on him. "We work together. For the Government." Revealing more than he usually would, protecting—he wasn't really sure what.

"You work together?" So surprised that she almost forget herself, voice tailoring down to a stifled squeak at the very last moment, then she recovered, and an grin of impish delight lit her face and her eyes twinkled at him, and it was as if he were looking in a mirror, his own green giggling back at him. "How'd you finagle a thing like that, you little devil you!"

"We didn't finagle anything. Our boss put us together..."

She giggled out loud then, a chuckle fully

as filthy as his own. "In service of the Queen, is it then? Jack the lad, you lucky boy you." Clinically polite, her hands did their job, while her wicked little smile invited him to share her humour. She nodded down at Bodie's exposed body and winked, saying, "Definitely a lucky man, aren't you?"

"It's not like that," blushing to hear him stutter, the rising red and the stumbling words convincing her that he was lying.

"You don't have to pretend, not to me. I've got a cousin who's the same. I've spent years, absolute years," she whispered confidingly, "trying to persuade him to let me have a gander at the sort of thing he gets up to, but he's too bloody shy by half. The great tragedy of my life, that is."

He looked at her askance, at the perfect prettiness of her, at her delicate bones and flawless skin, at her wide green eyes, canted like his own, her whole face alive with prurient and carnal curiosity. "You don't mean what I think you mean, do you?"

"Oh, now, and that would depend on what you were thinking I was meaning, wouldn't it?" Then she laughed again, that same filthy chuckle, and Doyle knew that she really did mean what he had been shocked to think she meant. Not the kind of thing you expect to come from the mouth of a tiny doll of a woman, especially one who fitted the image of a nun or a mother.

"You, eh," he grinned at her, the implications of such honesty hitting him like a ton of bricks and putting him into automatic chatup overdrive, "like that kind of thing, do you?"

"Like it? Holy Mary, I've got books and books on it, and every last one of them from the Continent." The laugh again, and Doyle couldn't help but chuckle in sympathy with that infectious sound. "Hear, you'll never believe what this lot," a toss of her head to indicate the hospital, "and my family think about all my little trips across the water to Holland and France and all those sorts of place."

"Go on, tell me. What *do* your family and all this lot think about all your little trips?" he whispered in his best music-hall joke-telling voice.

"They think I'm off on retreats and holy

visits!"

He laughed out loud at that, shushing himself almost as quickly as her hand clamped over his mouth. "SHHH!" she hissed, glancing quickly over her shoulder to make sure the door was still shut and then looking at her patient to make sure he was still out like the proverbial light. "Honest, it's the God's honest truth. It was the only excuse I could come up with to explain what a decent young girl would be doing going over to the Continent."

From what she had said, it was obvious that she was Catholic, and Doyle had more than a passing acquaintance with what some Catholic mothers and brothers thought of young, *unmarried* girls going off on their own to the sinful Continent. "How'd you manage to get them to let you travel on your own and not with one of the tour groups?"

"Oh, that's easy," she said, with a smile that was easier still. "I left them all behind in Antrim!" Bodie moved, again, the barest glimmer of motion, again, the left foot.

All thought of chatting her up evaporated, and Doyle was bent over Bodie, face very close, whispering his name, trying to make his partner wake up.

Nothing.

Across the bed, he heard a heavy sigh and looked up, startled, because he had forgotten there was anyone else there.

"What a lovely sight the two of you are. So much in love, it's a joy to see. I'm only sorry that it's him in that bed so ill that's been the needing to let me see this."

He didn't hear the last of it, stubbing his mental toe over something and stumbling. "In love?" he said, voice up an octave or two. "In love? Me and Bodie? That's a bloody stupid thing to say."

"It's all right, you don't have to get all defensive with me—?"

Ingrained habit of years had him supplying his name to fill the unvoiced blank. "Doyle. Ray Doyle."

"Well now, Ray, there's no need for you to be so upset, not with me. You can be honest, when it's just the two of us in here. An' your...partner won't mind, will he?"

He was as breathless as if he were under a million fathoms of water, chest compressed,

lungs flattened and useless, everything distorted, and then he recovered, shoving the shock behind himself, blinking once and coming back to being himself, a weary CI5 man standing in a hospital room, discussing his partner with a sympathetic nurse. Who had, somehow, got hold of the wrong end of the stick completely. "Actually, I think he would—more than I do, anyway. If you weren't so pretty, he'd probably clout you one for saying a thing like that."

"Don't be so daft! I've told you, you don't have to pretend with me. I'm not about to be telling your boss that the two of you are that way inclined, am I now? So don't be so—"

The alarm went off. Beeping and beeping and beeping, and he was thrust aside, doctor and nurses and machines pushing him away. They did things to Bodie, and he stood pressed against the wall, watching as they did those things to Bodie, and he thought of how terrible it was, that they should do all those things and not think twice about the man they were sticking and cutting and shocking. Bodie didn't mean anything to them: only his body was important. Only his heart, his lungs, blood pressure, pulse, those were the things that mattered to these angels of mercy, with their ugly machines and their cruelties. Cruel to be kind: he knew that, had heard it often enough when they'd fixed his face for him at the hospital. He hadn't mattered then, either; they would have been much happier if they could have taken his face off and worked on it and brought it back when they had mended it properly.

They had finished with Bodie, the little nurse left sitting with him. Doyle barely looked at her, but she looked at him then.

"We almost lost him that time," she whispered, and he felt ashamed of himself that he had been so uncharitable to her. "We caught him by the skin of our teeth. If I hadn't actually been in here checking him, mother of god, we'd have lost him."

We? he thought. We would have lost him? But he's just your patient, he wanted to shout, but he's my partner. You wouldn't've lost him, I would have. It's me who would've lost him. He considered that, for a second, what it would be like to have no Bodie in his life. But there was nothing to think about, because every flash of image, every activity he could imagine, was accompanied by the knowledge that he'd tell Bodie all about it at work the next morning, or over the phone, if he got home before two.

He almost crept over to the bedside, like a child with a new baby brother: wanting to see it, afraid to see it, hating it and loving it and altogether confused by it. At the bedside, there was nowhere for him to sit, the single chair in the room being filled by the starched rustle of the nurse. So he sat on the edge of the bed, on that incredible smoothness of blanket that only hospitals seemed capable of—or desirous of—achieving.

"Bodie?" he whispered it, the crinkle of the sheets almost louder than his voice. "Bodieyou in there, mate?"

Of course, there was no answer. Across the bed, the nurse sat impassive, effacing herself, bestowing a privacy he accepted without even knowing it was a gift. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to stroke the one unmarred arm, the one where there were no tubes or needles to be avoided, the one that was pale as china, but for that bruise—and his fingers found it, touched it gently-he'd given Bodie the day before he'd gone into hospital. Stupid, really: he'd stumbled, almost fallen, on one of those bloody ladders that clung to the sides of gasworks, and he'd grabbed Bodie—not the railing, Bodie—who'd steadied him, set him back on his feet with a quick grin and a pat to his bum. Only later, once the danger was over and the nervousness about going into hospital had started, had Bodie moaned at him, complaining on and on about the bruise as if it were a mortal wound. And god help him, he'd teased him, telling him that the bruise was nothing, just wait until they got Bodie into hospital, he'd know mortal wounds then. Teased him with bedpans and enemas, of waking up and finding that it was his cock they'd cut off instead of his grumbling appendix, and Sisters with moustaches and rubber hoses, keeping it going until they'd both ended up weak with laughter and faces running with tears.

Didn't seem so funny now, did it? Not with

Bodie lying there with peritonitis and a bloody great scar over where his appendix used to be.

Christ, to think what they went through in their jobs, and here was Bodie lying here in a hospital bed, in 'critical' condition, which was a nice way of saying that he was going to snuff it if the staff couldn't work a few miracles. Like tonight. He'd almost lost him, tonight. If he'd gone home to his bed, the way Cowley would've ordered him to, then the nurse would've come in, done her checks, been on her way, instead of hanging around chatting to him.

He almost smiled at that, wondering what Bodie would say when he told him what had been so bloody fascinating that the nurse was still fussing over him instead of doing her rounds! Oh, he could just see it now. Bodie sitting propped up in bed, those horrible hard white pillows up behind him, popping black grapes into his mouth, spitting the seeds out to see if he could make them ping! into the bedpan.

There was a clattering in the corridor, the usual unmelodic morning welcome of hospital, tepid tea swimming in the saucer under the thick china of the cup, the distasteful noises of a wardful of people awakening to the distasteful cuppa.

Time for him to go, get back to work, fill himself with enough tea to keep him going through the day until he could grab a few hours' sleep in the evening, and then back here, to keep his eye on Bodie.

"See you later, mate," he said, chucking Bodie lightly under the chin, not noticing that he had stolen one of Bodie's gestures of affection lightly veiled as camaraderie. A moment of embarrassment as he saw the nurse watching him with bright-eyed speculation, but then he shrugged that off and was on his way to his car.

It was a disgusting day outside. Rain sheeting down, forcing him to keep both hands on the wheel and his shaver in the glove compartment, making him take a few minutes in the loo when he got to work, so that he was at least clean-shaven when he appeared at the briefing, but four minutes late, a fact which was not unobserved by Cowley. The lecture didn't pause for so much as a second, but the glower from those blue eyes warned him that he was about to step over the line as far as Cowley was concerned. Oh, well, he sighed to himself, leaning back in a chair that was the same unforgiving torment as the one in the hospital, at least he knew that Bodie had made it through another night.

He went through his day in a daze, doing all the right things at all the right times, but noticing none of it, living none of it, merely reacting to whichever circumstances presented themselves. Cowley was watching him, but that only counted as something to be avoided, worth nothing more to him right now, worth nothing at all, like everything else, until he could get to the hospital, and Bodie.

"Well, how is he?" Cowley, asked him, which was really stupid, considering that Cowley would be the first one the hospital would tell anything to anyway.

"Unconscious," was the tersely accurate reply, car keys bouncing in the palm of his hand, the closest thing to an outright protest he could make. He'd been kept late by bloody Jax, and now he hardly had enough time to get home and into clean clothes before he was due at the hospital.

"Recovering unconscious or comatose?"

As if the wily old bastard needed to ask him that! Of course, this mini-interrogation wasn't to find out about Bodie, it was to find out about Doyle, and he knew that. "Not comatose, not quite recovering. He's not responding the way they think he should, the antibiotics aren't being as effective as they think they should be, but they think he should come out of it soon. With their record of what they think should happen, I'm not holding my breath." Cowley seemed to be waiting for something, and Doyle's tired mind provided it like a kick to the rear. "Sir."

"And how is your girlfriend—Deborah, is it still?—taking you spending every waking second with your partner?"

Oh, Christ, not another one! It didn't take a single second for him to see what Cowley was getting at: too much time at the hospital, neglecting everything else, getting too close to your partner, have the pair of you gone queer.

"Deborah dumped me after I stood her up once too often—because of the job, not Bodie. Sir. And it's not every waking second."

"No, it's most of what should be your sleeping seconds. You've got three days to pull yourself together, Doyle, and if you haven't, I'll do it for you. D'you understand me?"

"Perfectly." And this time, he didn't add the 'sir', turning on his heel and walking away from Cowley, too tired to much care what his boss thought. His job wasn't seriously on the line yet, and until it was, he was going to keep right on seeing Bodie. Three days. They had three days to get Bodie out of the woods and on the road to recovery.

It was still pissing down, huge great puddles pooling in the car-park, his feet getting unnoticedly wet on his way to his car. He knew he was being completely unreasonable, but he put his foot to the floor anyway, careening through streets faster than was safe, but with a sick feeling in his stomach that told him he had to get to Bodie before night fell. Every time he closed his eyes, even if he were simply resting for a second, the same picture filled his mind. Bodie, left alone, in the dark, night falling, Death coming to claim him.

He was sure that was what would happen. Knew it in his bones, knew that if he left Bodie to face the night alone, then his partner wouldn't see morning. And last night simply reinforced that, etching the certainty into him with ragged nails of corpses. Bodie would die without him. And he wasn't too sure that he would live without Bodie. They were too close, they both knew that—had talked about it, in a carefully off-handed kind of way—so close that he couldn't quite mesh with any other partner at work, and that was nothing short of suicide for their bunch.

In the hospital room again, and this time, there were no nurses making awkward comments that could come back to haunt him at odd hours of the day. There was Bodie, and as far as Doyle could see, not only were there fewer tubes going into and coming out of his body, but the skin seemed closer to his normal colour. Doyle grinned at him and parked himself on the plastic chair that

immediately found all the residual aches from the night before. God, he was exhausted, but it was worth it, just to see Bodie looking less dead, just to be able to stay with Bodie and make sure the stubborn bastard saw the light of day.

He dug into his pocket, pulling out the battered sandwich he had stuck in there at lunch-time, knowing that he would need it, cooking or eating hot food something that seemed to have gone by the wayside. Well, time enough for that later on, wouldn't there be? In fact, he'd twist Bodie's arm, get the bugger to take him out, a night on the town—

He chewed very slowly then, meditating, literally ruminative, as he considered how he had phrased that thought in his own mind. He'd made it sound like a date, the kind of special date that he always expected to end up in bed. Not the way one was supposed to think about one's partner, was it? But everyone else seemed to think he thought about Bodie that way anyway: everyone from Cowley to the nurse to the entire squad, always referring to Bodie as his 'better half'. The last of the sandwich was consumed with him sitting there, watching Bodie, thinking about him in an entirely new light. One thing for moments of passing fancy in the shower, something else entirely to think of having a 'better half'.

He must have dozed off, the click of the door waking him. It was her again, and she tossed him a wink and a grin, shooing him back into his seat.

"According to his chart, he's going to be fine. Woke up today, for all of ten seconds."

"Woke up? You mean, he woke up?"

"Well, that's what I usually mean when I say a patient woke up. Apparently, not long before you came in," and her cheek dimpled and her obvious delight was almost as great as his, "he opened his eyes long enough to say 'Ray', then shut them again. They left him to it, and here he is, Sleeping Beauty."

He knew what she was going to say before she said it, and he knew he should be offended, or at least pretend to be.

She said it: "So will you be waking him with a kiss, will you?"

"Oh, leave it out," but he was half laughing when he said it, too busy being delighted that Bodie had come round to much care about any ribbing he might get.

"Oh, you want me to leave it out," she said, and that's when he noticed what she was doing: rather intimate things in the region of Bodie's thoroughly exposed groin. "But if I left it out, would you be willing to let me see you put it away?"

That shocked him. He was used to bold women, but not one who'd say things like that to him—at least not without it being flirtation. "Listen, love," he said, "even if I was willing to let you see, I don't think old stick in the mud in there would let me."

Her face went very still. "You're serious, aren't you? You mean, you and him, you've

"Well, Ihave, but not with him." He couldn't believe he'd actually said that. That was one of those things you kept mum about, unless you were in the right kind of private club, or with someone you knew a hell of a lot more intimately than a nurse you'd met four times and spoken to the grand total of twice.

"You're not trying to tell me he's straight, are vou?'

He had to laugh at that. "Christ, don't let Bodie hear you sounding so shocked. Rotten bugger's straight as a die."

"Ah, well, if he's straight as a die, I suppose he would be a rotten bugger." She busied herself with a number of things, and Doyle ruefully noted that she made bloody sure that the blankets were left folded out of the way long after she had finished with all his various bits and pieces. The decent thing to do, of course, was keep his eyes front and centre, but Bodie was the military man, so that was out. Plus, he consoled himself, he'd gone to art school, so front and centre to him was literal, and you couldn't get much more front and centre than Bodie's groin. And very nice it was, too. Lax, of course, clean as a whistle after the nurse's attentions, pale pink flesh nestled in curling black hair. He wanted to touch, but that was hardly something new, and he resisted the temptation with the strictures of long practice. But still, it would be nice to touch Bodie like that. Lick him and suck him, feel him inside...

"Sorry, but I've got to cover him up now, be

more than my job's worth if I let him catch a cold on top of everything else."

He blushed at that, then blushed even brighter when she winked at him and said, "Course, I'm the only one who'll be coming in here tonight, and now that he's off the critical, I'll be knocking before I come in, won't I now?"

He knew he shouldn't ask, but knowing better had never stopped him before. "Have they given him stuff to make him sleep?"

"Oh, it'll be morning before he'll be rousing." That filthy chuckle again, the one that could be him, laughing at one of Bodie's filthier jokes. "Unless you decide to take matters into your own hand!"

Another wink, another giggle, and she was gone, leaving Doyle to Bodie, and temptation. He sat down. He stood up. He went to the window. He sat down again. He stood up again. "Bad as a bloody jack-in-the-box," he muttered to himself, sitting down and determined that he was going to stay put. His eyes were gritty with tiredness, reminding him that bed was the place he should be, at which, his cock jumped up and agreed. "Down, boy," he told it, adjusting himself in jeans that were too tight—unless you like the constant, comforting pressure at your groin. Almost as reassuring as thumb sucking, but a hell of a lot more pleasant.

Legs sprawled, leaning back staring at Bodie, he forgot that he was supposed to just be getting his cock free of that crinkle of cotton, and stroked at himself instead. Even through his jeans, he could feel the heat of his hand on his cock and the heat of his cock on his hand. Lovely. He sighed, eyes narrowing, gaze lingering on Bodie's beautiful mouth and what he'd like to do to it—and what he'd like to feed to it. Without conscious thought, he unzipped himself, tugging the denims open far enough to free his cock, smiling to himself in uncomplicated happiness as his cock nuzzled into his palm, a sweet slickness at the head, satin-smoothing down the length of him. He traced the veins, feeling the pulse from without through the tips of his fingers, feeling the pulse from within as blood gorged him, making him hard.

His V-neck shirt was shoved up out of the way, exposing his nipples to his own pinching

fingers, fingernails scraping, pleasure singing, arrows of delight shooting straight to his cock. He looked down at himself, up flat against his belly, the hairs on his groin tingling against the flange, wishing he could have Bodie's mouth around him. Now it was Bodie he looked at, tucked up in bed like Christopher Robin. All that was missing was Pooh-Bear cuddled up beside him. And a shave, now that he had moved a little and seen that the shadow was actually the beginnings of stubble, framing that beautiful, delectable mouth. Christ, but he wanted to fuck that! Yeh, and I can just imagine Bodie's reaction to that, he thought to himself.

But if he were drugged, there was nothing to say that Bodie would wake up if he were to pull the blankets down. Not to touch, of course, couldn't do a thing like that to a mate. But just to look. No harm in looking, was there?

Absolutely not, was his cock's opinion, tapping against his belly.

"Want to see him, do you?" he asked it, voice sibilant whisper. "All right, we'll have a look, eh?"

Very quietly, he folded the blankets down, pleased that the staff-he owed his Irish nurse a lovely bunch of roses for this—had left Bodie naked. The scar from the appendix operation was still ugly as sin, but that didn't bother him: it wasn't there he was looking. He'd promised himself he wouldn't touch, but he leant over Bodie, coming within an inch of Bodie's cock, getting a closer look than any chance glimpse in the loo or changing rooms had ever offered him. He promised himself he wasn't going to touch, even though he licked his lips in temptation. No, couldn't do a thing like that, not when it was his mate, and his mate was out of it and had no say in the matter. Completely out of it.

Which meant that there was no-one to know but him, didn't it?

But he'd promised he wouldn't touch.

Promised who? his cock wanted to know, rubbing against the edge of the bed, desperate for a bit of attention.

Promised Bodie.

Who was out of it. Who didn't know any-

thing about the promise.

Who wouldn't know anything about being touched either, would he?

Sleep till morning, that's what she'd said. No harm in touching him, surely? No harm at all, and so much pleasure. The tip of his tongue flickered out, touching briefly, so briefly, the warm dry skin. Then his eyes closed, and he swooped down, taking Bodie into his mouth, taking his own cock into his hand, and it was quick, so quick, sucking Bodie hard and hot and wonderful; pumping his own cock, equally hard and hot and wonderful. He indulged himself, using every skill long years of practice had taught him, taking his partner inside himself, intoxicating himself on the taste and feel and size of him. He felt Bodie come, felt the splash in his throat, and came, shuddering, over his own

Eyes closed, he lapped at Bodie, cleaning him of every last droplet of cum. And then his heart stopped, for a hand touched his hair, and as he looked up, looked up and up, along Bodie's torso, he met sleepy blue eyes that were overbrimming with affection. "Mmm," the slurred voice mumbled, "that was lovely..." Then the blueness was gone, and Bodie was sound asleep again.

Shaken, terrified, if truth be told, by what he had done, by almost getting caught—and there was a sudden, truly horrifying wondering, if that odd little noise he had heard but ignored had been the door, if the nurse had come back, and seen. And then the next wave hit him: shocked fear by how he had reacted to the simple taste and touch of Bodie. He zipped himself up, pulling his shirt down, in too much of a hurry to tuck it in, grabbing his jacket and what was left of his wits and then he was running, white-trainered feet flying down the corridor and out into his car.

And was it really so surprising that he threw himself into his work so severely that there was no time left to visit the recovering Bodie? At least that's what he told himself, and that's how he made it look, and that's what everyone else told Bodie. Everyone, that is, apart from Cowley, who kept his own

counsel and said not a word, but watched, oh. how he watched.

And how that made Doyle itch. He was in trouble, he knew he was. With Cowley, with Bodie (if Bodie remembered or if Bodie found out he'd been avoiding him), but mostly with

Pottering around his kitchen, making himself a cup of tea, he ran through it in his mind again, all of it made all the more pointed by the simple fact that Bodie was back on duty tomorrow. No more avoiding either Bodie, or the issue. He hadn't been prepared to fall in love. Perhaps that's why it had happened. Perhaps that's why it was able to creep up behind him and press-gang him, carrying him off before he'd had any notion what was going on. Christ, he'd been prepared for lust—was used to that, lived with it every day—but love? Being in love? Okay, so he'd always liked men, but he'd also always imagined himself, in the vaguest kind of way, falling in love and settling down with a woman. Not a man. Not his partner. Not Bodie. Definitely not Bodie, who wasn't his usual type at all. He liked his men blond, graceful, a bit on the artistic side, flexible when it came to sex. Big, butch men with militarily short black hair were not his usual cup of tea at all.

But then, falling in love wasn't his usual cup of tea either.

There was something else he had to think about. Working with Bodie. They were already too close, everyone knew that, just like everybody knew that it was only a matter of time before they were split up because of that. Couldn't continue as partners with someone when you couldn't do your job for protecting them, could you? They'd both seen that coming, although neither one of them wanted to split up. Something would happen on the job, and then they'd split up a bit off work: cutting out the double dates, hanging around with other blokes from the squad instead of each other, carefully rationing the number of phone calls they allowed themselves to each other. Then they'd be fine on the job again, the rapport intact, but the self-destructive desire to put the partner first would be under control again.

They were used to that particular tension,

dealt with it on a daily basis. But love? Love wasn't in the book, was probably against all those rules in the small print. Definitely wasn't in Bodie's book, he knew that from experience. Up to now, their partnership was what had saved him from Bodie's usual pattern: the minute Bodie started getting too attached to someone—or something, for that matter—then that person or thing simply disappeared, and woe to anyone who was stupid enough to ask Bodie about it. He'd only done it himself a handful of times, loving from the start watching Bodie get all worked up about something. That pulled him up short. Loved it from the start? Christ, he had, hadn't he? From the word go, he'd pushed and prodded and niggled, until he could get Bodie to let rip. Because after Bodie let rip, Bodie was always extra affectionate after, wasn't he?

"Fucking hell!" he said out loud. He hadn't even realised he'd been doing it, but it had been there all along. Have a fight, kiss and make up. Well, make up—there hadn't been any kissing, although Bodie was always quick with a pat on his arse or an arm around his shoulder, would even sit on the couch and let Doyle put his head in his lap if the fight had been loud enough and Bodie nasty enough.

He spent the rest of that night oscillating between squirming and dreading as he reviewed what he'd been up to with Bodie and what was coming his way tomorrow.

Tomorrow was almost over; the work part was definitely finished, he had actually made it home in one piece. He headed straight for his sideboard, taking an almost full bottle of blended Scotch out, settling himself down on the settee to drink and think and relax. He went through the day again, looking at it as objectively as he could. Doyle had half expected them to be tense with each other, he from a twisted mixture of guilt and newfangled emotions, Bodie from sullen resentment that Doyle hadn't come near him. Instead, he'd got sympathy for having to work 'so fucking hard' and great good humour because Bodie was so delighted to see him again.

Which, of course, only made him feel worse. He didn't know which was the worst of his guilty secrets: that he had lied to Bodie, that he was in love with Bodie, or that he couldn't keep the picture from his mind—Bodie, naked, beautiful, filling his mouth, filling him...

They'd been almost their usual selves, but it was like a car with the engine imprecisely tuned. Everything ticked over, but there was an off-note, something not quite right, something that would get worse and worse until the entire engine clapped out. Unless he fixed it first. Or got a new one.

That last was rejected without a second thought. He wasn't—couldn't—just get rid of Bodie, even if he had to leave CI5 to give himself enough safe distance so that he could keep it as a friendship and not bollocks everything up by trying to bring sex and love in. But in the meantime, he'd manage. By the time he slid sideways on the settee, drunk as a pug, he'd made up his mind and even found himself a mantra or two. Take it day by day, like an alcoholic. Today I will not grope Bodie. Today I will not go down on one knee and propose...

It lasted a week. Until—"Fancy coming out for a drink tonight? I could set you up with this luscious," hands making an exaggerated hourglass of extremely unlikely and topheavy proportions, "blonde who's desperate for some handsome young man to sweep her off her feet and make mad, passionate love to her. But as I said, she's desperate, so she'd settle for you."

"Oh, thanks very much," he responded to the sarcasm, for that was safe and easy and would keep Bodie from seeing that the temptation that leapt through him wasn't for the blonde, but for the prospect of a foursome, and maybe being able to get all four of them into the same bed together, where no-one would notice if he brushed against Bodie, or think twice if he were understandably fascinated by another bloke's technique, or if he'd worn his girl out and went to 'help' Bodie with his—he slammed the brakes on himself, backing off, furious with himself for letting his balls run away with his brain. "Actually, mate, got something on myself tonight already. Tell you what, you handle both of them, and then come in and tell me all about it in the

morning, all right?"

"You sure? She's really gorgeous. Do you the power of good—"

Christ, that was the last thing he needed! Bodie going all nurturing and thoughtful on him-enough to make a man's heart melt and his resolve right along with it. "Look, Bodie," he snapped, covering his temptation with bad temper, "I've already told you. I've got something else on tonight and I don't need you fixing me up with birds!"

"All right, all right, keep your shirt on. Just trying to do you a favour. Or get her to do you a favour, if you know what I mean. So I'll see you in the morning then, shall I? Pick you up?"

"Knowing you and the ladies, Bodie, it'll be me having to pick you up."

"Nah, no worry about that. She's a nurse, she'll take good care of me."

Bodie was walking away from him, waving an abstract good-bye over his shoulder. A sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, that morbid curiosity for which he was so rightly infamous, made him ask: "A nurse? The night nurse from the hospital?"

"Yeh," Bodie had turned round, walking backwards along the familiar corridor, voice rising as he got farther away. "All those catheters and sponge baths, she just couldn't resist my manly charms, could she?"

He didn't bother getting ready for bed, beyond brushing his teeth and shaving, in case Bodie got him in the face when they had their fight later on and his face was too sore to shave in the morning. Because the fight was coming, no doubt whatsoever about it. There was no chance at all that the nurse he was shocked to realise he didn't even know her name—would keep her mouth shut. None whatsoever. Even if he had heard something else entirely, and it hadn't been someone her—closing the room door, then she'd still let something slip about the way he was about Bodie. He was willing to bet she didn't have a single discreet bone in her body. And once she'd told Bodie...

Not quite eleven, far earlier than he'd actually expected, there it was: the usual signal at the door, announcing Bodie. Well, he thought to himself, getting up to let Bodie in, might as well get it over with.

Bodie, dark, frowning, Heathcliffe in smart suit and tie pulled off, hair gleaming, temper simmering.

"Come in," Doyle said, stepping aside, bracing himself for the attack that was looming.

"Nice to know you've got some manners left."

Doyle looked at him sharply, something in the voice not quite right.

"Had a very interesting chat with our Siobhan tonight, Doyle. In fact, it was so fucking interesting, I thought you'd want to hear all about it tonight and not have to wait until morning."

"Yeh, thought you might. Fancy a lager?" And winced, knowing that he shouldn't have left himself wide open like that.

"Fancy a lager? Not half as much as you fancy me, mate. Not from what I've just heard."

"Look, do you want one or not? I'm having—

"What? A good long pull?"

He stopped stock still. She'd told Bodie. It had been the door he'd heard, she'd seen him and told Bodie...

"D'you know what she told me, Doyle? You see, we were getting on like a house on fire," and he paused, just long enough to glare at Doyle, "getting on really well, romance, sweet music, candles. And in the spirit of the moment, I thanked her for what she did for me at the hospital."

Doyle looked at him in utter shock. It had never crossed his mind that Bodie would, that Bodie might think—

"And she told me she was just doing her job. Well, I'm sure you can imagine how taken aback by that I was. So I said to her, oh, we get blow-jobs on the NHS now do we? And she looked at me, Doyle, as if I'd grown an extra head, and not one that she'd sucked, either. Because she hadn't given me head, had she, Doyle?"

He could, of course, lie. But that was the one thing that Bodie hated above all else. While he might eventually be forgiven for a momentary aberration—he immediately started running convincing excuses through his mind—he'd never be forgiven for a deliberate lie told out of cowardice. "No, she hadn't," he finally said.

"Who did?"

"What're you after, Bodie? Your pound of fucking flesh?"

"Why not? You already got yours."

"You're big, Bodie, but it doesn't weigh a pound," he said, and his own temper was rising now, and with it, the vicious tongue he depended upon for his defence. "Or is a pound what you usually charge for it?"

"To let poofters suck it? Oh, I'd charge them more than a pound for that privilege."

It was going to get ugly, really ugly, and that was when Doyle realised that he was prepared to take his lumps—literally—for what he'd done, but he was damned if he was going to let it get nasty and vicious and destroy all the good that they'd had. But he doubted that Bodie felt the same way, going by what his partner—ex-partner? Would there be a quiet conference with Cowley, then them split up, maybe him kicked out?—was saying to him. He turned away, not knowing how much his misery showed on his face. "Sorry," he muttered, going for the whisky instead of the lager. "Should never have done it, I know, but... Why don't you go ahead and thump me, get it over with?"

"You want me to hit you?"

"Course I don't want you to fucking hit me! But it'll still be better than having to hear what you've got to say."

"Can't face it? Can't face that you gave in to your curiosity and tried a walk on the wild side to see what it was like with someone safely unconscious?"

He should have grabbed the chance, but surprise got the better of him, and he'd spoken before he'd thought, the instinctive protest of the male. "Trying it out? Christ, Bodie, are you blind? I'm bi, and in case you hadn't noticed, that was no beginner sucking his first cock!"

Of course, the instant he'd said it, he wished he'd let himself be labelled as inexperienced, unskilled and rotten at sex. Better than alienating Bodie completely.

"So it's not the first cock you've sucked,

No point in denying it now, and at least Bodie hadn't hit him for it. "No."

"How many?"

"How the hell should I know? D'you know how many cunts you've eaten?"

"Actually," Bodie said, shocking Doyle by sitting down on the settee with every appearance of complete relaxation, "I do. All written down in my big black book. I could check for you, if you really want the actual number."

Doyle stared at him, waiting, just waiting. He knew Bodie, knew there was something else coming, probably something that was going to cut him off at the knees.

"Could also tell you how many cocks I've sucked."

There it was, the first of the quick one-two to flatten him. Oh, he knew his Bodie.

"Course, there's not as many of those, but you'd know all about having to be discreet and careful and acting like straight trade, wouldn't you?"

It seemed that maybe, just maybe, he didn't know his Bodie at all.

"What?" His mind was whirling, racing, but all his mouth was capable of was either hanging slack with shock or asking stupid questions. "You've sucked cock?"

"And been sucked—but I don't need to tell you that, do I? Done my share of sodomy and buggery as well."

"In the Army?"

"No, in the arse, stupid."

He couldn't believe it. Bodie, sitting here, making his usual puerile jokes, with that stupid grin on his face, canary got the cat and all puffed up with pride after the mindboggling feat. "You're having me on," was all he could say.

"Yeh, I am. Or maybe *taking* you on says it better, eh, mate?"

Wary, not quite sure what Bodie's game was, he snapped, "What the hell are you getting at, sunshine?"

"Oh, come on, you're not that thick, Doyle. You and me. Look, in the hospital, I couldn't really see who sucked me, right? So it was natural, wasn't it, when this night nurse comes in after her time off, and she's got big

slanted green eyes, and a filthy chuckle and gobs of curls, that I think that she's the one who did me. But when I find out she's a nice girl who doesn't go around blowing strange men, I put two and two together and say to myself, now, who else do I know who could get into the room of a CI5 agent at night, has weird green eyes, hair that you could lose a brush set in and a laugh as filthy as a clogged drain."

He kept his mouth shut, with some difficulty, because it was wanting to babble all sorts of crap, none of it anything he would want to admit to in the cold light of day.

"And d'you know who I came up with? Give you three guesses."

He hadn't expected a playful, gleeful Bodie. Not a bit of it. "Are you drunk?" he demanded.

"Stone cold sober. Same as you were that night. Got a good mouth, Doyle. Wouldn't mind letting you have a go at me again."

He swallowed, and watched in fascination as Bodie grew visibly hard at the thought, cock stretching against fine black wool trousers. Not the reaction he'd been expecting at all. But one he wanted. God, one he'd wanted so fucking much he hadn't dared think about it.

"Is that an offer?"

"I was hoping that you'd offer me."

"To suck you off?"

"And let me fuck you, if you're into that."

"Oh, yeh," he heard himself saying, feeling as if he were stumbling in a dream. This was the kind of conversation he had with someone he'd picked up at one of the clubs, not his partner, not Bodie. "I'm not into pain, though."

"Okay, so I won't do any of that to you. Bit of the rough all right though?"

"Yeh, I like that. As long as it doesn't go over the top. You?" He still couldn't quite believe he was having this conversation with Bodie jesuschrist, Bodie!—but his cock was listening avidly, and it was obviously having no problems at all.

"I like it rough sometimes. Like giving a bit of pain, if the other bloke's into it, but you're not, so I won't. Never do it that often anyway, so it's no great loss. I don't get fucked, though. Never."

Now that was intriguing, the way Bodie

said it. The way Bodie meant it... "And when've I ever fucked you, Bodie?" he asked, understanding that Bodie was talking about more than sex, more than the insertion of phallus into rectum. He was talking about being fucked over, betrayed, hurt, and although nothing had ever been said, Doyle knew Bodie had been fucked over more than once, and by experts. "Go on, tell me. When've I ever fucked you over?"

"I'm not going to let you start, Doyle, just you remember that, and we'll get on fine."

He'd never seen Bodie either so defensive or so scared. Which meant that big, tough, butch Bodie was vulnerable to him, emotionally. Which meant that there had to be feelings in there somewhere. Now this, this was the kind of conversation he expected to be having with Bodie: all blinds and parries and carefully concealed emotions. He went back to the language that Bodie always conversed in best: sex. "You fuck me over, Bodie, and I'll kill you, but I'll let you fuck me, when I'm in the mood."

Bodie's voice was almost a whisper and Doyle grinned in feral delight as his partner had to lick his lips and clear his throat before he could speak. It made him feel ten feet tall and lord of all he surveyed to have Bodie so succumbed to lust that he could barely speak. "So you like being fucked, do you?"

"Like it? If the bloke's not up to much, then yeah, I like it. But if he's good, oh, if he's good, Bodie," his own voice deep and husky, deliberately seductive, weaving a spell all around Bodie, "then I love it. I love a cock up my arse, Bodie, and I love it when he's big enough to split me in two."

And they both knew how big Bodie was, and how he would stretch Doyle.

"You big enough to fuck me, Bodie?"

"You know I am."

"Oh, no," and he started stripping, casually dropping his clothes as he went past Bodie on his way to the bedroom, talking over one naked shoulder, eyes glinting as he saw Bodie's reaction when he dropped his jeans and the tight globes of his arse were exposed to that devouring stare, "I know you're big enough for me to suck on, but so's a lolly. I want," and he turned at last, fully naked, fully

hard, eyes wide and pupils black, deep enough for him to drown Bodie in them, "you to fuck me into next week. And if you're a good boy," said he, making the final adjustment in their new balance of power, "I'll even let you do it again."

He walked on, pausing in the doorway to turn and say to the motionless Bodie, "You coming?"

"In your arse," was the hoarse response, and then Bodie was lunging at him, flinging him onto the bed, Bodie's clothes and shoes being tossed aside with fine disregard.

"C'mon, Bodie, I want you," Doyle said to him, spreading himself across the bed, legs so wide that the cleft of his arse could be seen behind the tautness of his balls. "Get the stuff from the drawer." He lay there in an agony of anticipation watching the glory of Bodie's body. Bodie was gorgeous, and huge, and a drop of pre-cum glistening at the tip caught the light and Doyle's breath, so that his mouth watered with the desire to take it in his mouth again and suck them both into oblivion, his own cock rammed down Bodie's throat, fucking in harmony with Bodie down his throat and—

He groaned, then lunged up far enough to grab Bodie, pulling him down, guttural noises in his throat as he slicked Bodie up, slathering him in cream, making him so wet, because he didn't want any other preparations. He wanted his hole to be tight when Bodie went into him for the first time, wanted to feel as if he were being split on that glorious cock. Wanted to be driven to the edge by that hardness. No, he didn't like pain of the serious sort, but it wasn't real pain, not to him, to be stretched to his limit. He'd been fucked more times than he could remember, loved fucking more than anything else, and he never tired of that spreading feeling, of taking someone else inside, of being man enough to always take the other man, no matter how big. And the bigger the man was, the more of a man Doyle felt himself to be, by proving that he could take it, and the man.

But Bodie, oh, with Bodie it was different. All that was still there, but this was Bodie, his partner and his love, and he was going to own him. He was going to make this so fucking spectacular that Bodie would come back again and again, until he stopped being scared of his own feelings and could let Doyle love him. And could love Doyle back.

Well worth waiting for, and the waiting would be such a pleasure. His hands were trembling so much, he could barely get the cap back on the tube, finally abandoning the effort as pointless and wasting time that would be better spent with Bodie inside him. He went onto his knees, judging that Bodie would be more comfortable, psychologically speaking, to be in such a dominant position at first—'I don't get fucked, Doyle', so give him the illusion of complete control. It didn't cost Doyle anything, completely secure in his own masculinity, so he knelt there, and let a lush groan escape him as Bodie pressed the head of his cock to Doyle's hole. He pushed outwards, the muscle dilating, then drew Bodie in, laughing in sheer exhilaration when he heard Bodie shout, knowing then that Bodie had never had it this good before, and that Bodie was going to be his.

His. That shot through him, even as Bodie's cock fucked his arse, stretching him, making him feel incredibly full. Then Bodie was moving in him, and he was pushing back to meet him, taking Bodie in completely, staking his claim, possessing him in the best way possible: from the passive position, allowing Bodie his pride, shoring up Bodie's insecurities, showing him what a real man he was. It wasn't often Doyle was willing to go with a butch man, for they were too much work, needing too much reassurance and too much game playing, but it was different with Bodie. This was no effort at all, this was heaven taking up residence in his arse. Every time Bodie fucked him, cock thrusting into him, he felt as if it touched his heart, as if it filled him to the tips of his toes and the top of his head, leaving no part of him untouched, unfucked, unloved.

Because he knew love when he felt it, and this was it, the genuine article, no two ways about it. It was there in the way Bodie was almost crying with the pleasure of it, it was there in the way Bodie was clutching him as if his life depended on it. It was there in the way Bodie was saying his name over and over and over again, and Doyle could hear the

words of love just behind it, held in by either self-delusion or fear. Whichever, it made no difference: he knew, and it was only a matter of time before Bodie would be able to say it out loud, over the breakfast table.

Or here, in bed, with Bodie in him. Or him in Bodie, fucking that delectable arse that begged to have a cock shoved into it, even if its owner didn't know it yet. But for now, it was more than enough to possess Bodie inside him, to have that plundering cock up him, Bodie's voice rough in his ear, teeth sharp on his nape, belly clinging to his back every time Bodie thrust deep into him, Bodie's hand on his own cock, squeezing him, giving him a fist to fuck, until he was fucking and fucked, all of it flowing together into a mindless rhythm of love and lust.

Bodie was juddering in him now, pistoning into him fast and hard, and then jolting his hips forward in orgasm, cum streaming from Bodie into him and out of his own cock, spilling over their joined hands as Bodie spilled inside their joined bodies. Abruptly, Bodie was heavy on top of him, weighing him down, so he shoved him, made him move, settled them together. He reached to kiss Bodie—and Bodie turned away.

"Oh no you don't," he snarled, grabbing Bodie's face between his own strong hands, forcing him to be still, to look at him. "Your rules: you don't get fucked over. My rules: the same thing, Bodie, and you're not going to play rough trade with me, got that? I like to kiss my lovers, Bodie, and you're my lover and you're mine, Bodie. So you kiss me, and if that makes you scared, tough, because you're just going to have to get used to it, aren't you?"

"I don't kiss, Doyle." Warning, voice hard, eyes harder.

But Doyle knew what he wanted, and a fuck-mate wasn't it. There were plenty of lesscomplicated men he could have for that, and even more with whom he didn't run the risk of being hurt. But he wanted Bodie, he had had Bodie, and by god, he was going to keep Bodie. And the sooner the stupid bastard gave in and enjoyed it, the better. "You said you don't get fucked. I gave you that, I let you fuck me. But you agreed not to fuck me over

in return, and now you're going to keep your word, aren't you, Bodie?"

And he leaned forward, long fingers threading into the feather of soft black hair at Bodie's temples, mouth caressing, so gently, so terribly gently, Bodie's tightly closed lips. Then tongue, the very tip, tracing the wellloved shape so tenderly, pressing, with such sweet passion, at the tensely guarded mouth. And Bodie, opening to him, tentative, with all the fear of a man who was terrified of being too vulnerable, of giving in and letting someone else take command. Doyle took over, took command, his tongue laving the silken insides of Bodie's mouth, showing him love, showing him how wonderful it could be to let someone else breach his body. To let someone else in. To let someone pass the barriers he had so carefully erected. Doyle kissed him for a long time, until Bodie started kissing him back, until he felt Bodie's arms come round him to hold him tight, until passion started its slow spiral upwards once more.

Morning. Bright shafting light, cutting his head open, alarm screeching, phone ringing, Bodie wrapped around him, octopus armed, the rank smell of spent semen and anal sex, the aching of his body telling him that he was far too old to spend an entire night on sex and not sleep. He flustered his way clear of Bodie's arms, and then the sheet, and the duvet, flailing hand knocking the lamp half off the bedside table before he could get the alarm switched off. Then the phone, Bodie groaning into the pillow, and Doyle was blinking, trying to convince himself that he could survive on—a glance at the clock and he was groaning like Bodie—an hour's sleep and seven hours of sex and talk.

"4.5, shipment has been brought forward, you and 3.7 are needed in the office in fifteen minutes. Sorry we're late notifying, you were last on the list and we thought you needed your beauty sleep."

"Oh, thanks, Control, just what I wanted to hear," he muttered as he hung the phone up. "Up, Bodie!"

'Give us a break, Ray, I don't think I'll be able to get it up for a month!"

"Not that bit, the rest of you. Shipment's on

early, Cowley wants us there as of now."

"What? Shit, here, toss me my clothes—" Doyle stared at him in total disbelief, before disappearing off towards the bathroom, shouting as he went, "If you want to go in to see Cowley looking and smelling like a brothel, that's your business, mate, but I intend him to see me before he smells me coming."

And then, of course, the filthy chuckle as the double entendre registered. He heard Bodie groan again, but all he could do was laugh, still buoyant after the night before. Right now, he didn't give a shit what was going to happen: last night had been incredible, and if they had that—the sex, Bodie willing to trust him, the kernel of love on Bodie's side that just needed a bit of time for Bodie to come to terms with—then he'd make bloody certain they never lost it. But he still had a job to do, so he was under the shower, racing through the morning routine, shoving Bodie in after him, the two of them in such a hurry that they were back to being partners before either one of them could slip into awkwardness. It wasn't until they went diving into the briefing room, a second before Cowley, that Bodie came over all odd, and Doyle looked at him, hissing, "What? Don't you go having regrets on me, Bodie."

Bodie uttered not a mutter, and it was only when Doyle had shifted uncomfortably for what felt like the millionth time, that it dawned on him what had made Bodie go peculiar. It was him, unable to sit comfortably because Bodie had fucked him so thoroughly and so well. He grinned to himself, an evil little imp, and started making a point of being uncomfortable, playing it up for all he was worth: peeking inside his shirt (Bodie's actually borrowed at some point and never returned) and then rubbing his chest with an expression of mingled discomfort and satisfaction, grinning knowingly when Bodie became as embarrassed as hell—and as pleased as punch with it.

It took an inordinate amount of time, but the briefing was finally finished, and the group of agents rose en masse, Bodie and Doyle getting shuffled apart in the goodnatured mêlée.

"Doyle!"

Oh, shit, he'd forgotten about Cowley, never a wise thing to do, and considering what he—Doyle—had been like this month past, it could be labelled as positively stupid. "Sir?"

"A word, if I may?"

Such courtesy: he was in serious, serious trouble. He winced as he did a quick action replay of his behaviour this morning: Outer Mongolia in winter began to look very attractive. Either that, or time to get used to the Outer Hebrides.

"You and Bodie have been in the A Squad for how long now? Three years, is it?"

"Yes, sir," going through the motions, confirming what Cowley already knew, wondering how he was going to get Bodie out of the very fine mess he'd got him into.

"And you've become very...close?"

"Best way to do the job, sir."

"Aye...aye, I can see that. But tell me, Doyle, when I partnered you with Bodie, did you think I was being literal when I said a good CI5 partnership was like a marriage?"

Christ, he hadn't expected the old bastard to be that blunt! "No, sir. I assumed you were being purely metaphorical in meaning, sir. Course, if you want us to take you literally, you'd have to give me someone better looking with—"

"That's enough, Doyle, I'm well aware of your preferences and tastes. Knew them before I employed you, but I assumed that I could trust you to be as discreet over certain...predilections of yours as you had been whilst in the police.'

This was serious. Properly serious, not piss-taking serious. "Yes, sir. You definitely can, sir. I promise."

"If this morning's little dumb-show was an indication of your idea of discretion, then I hardly think your promise is much reassurance. Now, you listen to me, and you listen carefully, Doyle. I want you and Bodie in my office tomorrow morning, nine sharp. And I want an answer from you."

"Well, can't do that, sir."

"Doyle!"

"Haven't told me the question. Sir."

"The question, Doyle, is whether or not you and Bodie remain with this department."

That shocked him. "Sir?"

"Och, don't come the deafie with me, Doyle. I need to know if I can trust the pair of you to be discreet, or if I'm going to have to toss the pair of you out on your ears as security risks."

"But we're not security risks, you know that! No-one could blackmail or buy us—"

"I'm not talking about that! I swear, Doyle, I sometimes wonder why I ever took you on. Think, man. Not blackmail to reveal what you know. But drawing attention, negative attention, to CI5. Are we a nest of homosexuals? Do we harbour security risks within one of Her Majesty's own security departments? I need to know if I can depend on you two to be suitably restrained and keep your noses clean."

"I don't see the problem, sir. Surely, if we slip—" he stumbled over the words, losing his train of thought, it having just hit him like a ton of bricks that he was standing in the briefing room, discussing his and Bodie's sex life—homosexual sex life, with each other, no less—with Cowley. Cowley, his boss.

"D'you think I give two hoots for you and Bodie's sake? It's the department, Doyle, the department. If we were investigated for homosexual security risks, just how many people do you think CI5 would have left?"

He did it again: he opened his mouth and let his belly rumble. "Why? Who else is queer?" He looked at Cowley. Added: "Sir."

It didn't help.

"Sorry, sir," he mumbled, hoping the hung head and drooping curls would get him off the hook, even as he frantically tried to work out who the hell else was gay.

"Tomorrow, Doyle," was what Cowley finally said, shaking his head ruefully. "Nine sharp."

Doyle lifted his head, watched his boss walk away.

"And don't forget your better half!"

And Doyle grinned as he watched Cowley realise what he'd just said.

Better half. Oh, he definitely liked that. He went off to find him, to discuss just how the hell they were going to manage to 'be discreet'.

Especially since he had a feeling—that if he was lucky—it was going to be several weeks before he'd be left alone long enough to sit down comfortably.

ENGLISH **DETECTIVES**

CARPE DIEM M. FAF GLASGOW

The last of the English Detective trio, 'Carpe Diem', is based on *Inspector Morse* as portrayed in the television series and not in the books. Funny how a filmed version can sometimes surpass the written word. However, bits and pieces have been drawn from the novels: the initials of Morse's one true love and at least one of Morse's nicknames, plus other facts about his life and career. This story is the most optimistic of the three.

PALLID SUNLIGHT ON DARK DESK, the compulsory motes of dust doing the required dance upon the shafts of light, distant church bells tolling the languid hour from even more distant dreaming spires, a melodic thread of classical music carried through the open window by a zephyr of pleasant air and with it, the delicate faintness of aroma that marked the end of an English summer. Idyllic, really, but that wasn't quite what the man seated behind the desk called it. Boring was the word that sprang to his mind with all the resilience of a yo-yo. Boring, boring, boring. And to make matters worse, the pubs were open, and today was the day that one of his favourite watering holes began selling a brand new ale, one reputed to be the finest brew made since Shakespeare's day. Hyperbole of course, especially considering the kind of ale Shakespeare and his lot had available to them, but the mere thought of a new ale, carefully nurtured by hands that had sixty years of experience, made his mouth water and his backside hurt from being stuck here sitting too long. He wanted out. Capital O, U, T, out. And a good two hours ago at that.

But instead of skiving off the way he normally would (wonderful things, ongoing investigations and possiblewitness interviews), he was still sitting here, one ear cocked for the longed-for sound of the Chief Constable's car pulling out of the car park like an unwelcome headmaster at the end of term. The Chief had been here over two hours already: surely it couldn't be long now before everything of any possible interest had been dutifully examined?

Sighing, regretting the fact that he currently inhabited the Chief's bad books, he licked his forefinger and turned another page, skimming the inelegant typing with half his attention, whilst the other half wondered what the hell had ever possessed him to become a policeman in the first place. Masochism, judging by the way today was going. He sighed again, managing this time to make it sound so truly longsuffering that even Lewis would have been moved to sympathy. But the office was empty apart from himself and those bloody dancing dust motes, so he simply kept on, licking his finger, turning a page, initialing the appropriate dotted line, placing it in his out tray, picking up the next waste of time, licking his finger, and trying very hard not to think about the ale this afternoon nor the opera tonight that he was missing—the same bloody opera, he might add, that he had missed the night before and every night before that, the entire length of its entire engagement. The best new production in years, the best tenor in years and as for the soprano—well! Heaven on earth, she was. Heaven on earth. Which explained why he felt like Pilgrim's Progress mired down in Purgatory.

But he had promised himself, not to mention his blood pressure, that he wasn't going to think about what he was missing. It didn't matter that tonight was the last night, that the final encore would be the very last time that the best singers in the world sang together. There'd be other operas, other special moments.

"Who am I trying to kid?" he muttered under his breath, slamming a paper down with a very unsatisfying lack of noise. It was a once in a lifetime, never to be repeated experience, the performance tonight the gala to dwarf every other gala event ever imagined, and he hadn't even been able to see a ticket, never mind buy one.

Stoically, he put thoughts of Dame Vera Milne from his mind—don't even think about this being her farewell performance in her farewell tour, performed here in Oxford in honour of the opera group who had persuaded her to sing in the first place—and concentrated instead on the papers in front of him. He picked up the next report, licked his finger, scanned the pages, initialled on the dotted line. Picked up the next report, licked his finger, turned the pages, scanned the pages, initialled the pages, and so on, ad nauseam. Well, at least he still had his Times crossword to look forward to, carefully hoarded for later, when the Chief was gone and he could put his feet up and experience a new ale. In the meantime, there was still the soul-destroying repetition to endure: files. Limæ laborindeed.

It was times like these that the feared boredom of retirement began to look too exciting for words. "Tempus," he muttered under his breath, reading a two page report that was a supreme waste of time, "should bloody-well hurry up and fugit." But another glance at his watch showed him that tempus wasn't fugitting at all: as a matter of fact, it was crawling, very, very slowly. Another re-

port, another scribbling of initials, another lump to add to his out tray.

It was when he looked at his In tray and realised that it was still fuller than his Out tray that he decided to sod the lot of them, the Chief Constable especially, jack it all in and go out for a pint anyway. His local was awash in the new licensing laws and his consolatory new ale. And that, he thought, is where I'm going to be.

By the time he got there, he was delightfully thirsty after having walked the entire distance, and not quite so delightfully badtempered at the thought of his other current disaster: his belovèd Lancia's moribund clutch and the ascending bank balance of his mechanic. But at least when he got to the pub, there was hardly another soul there, so he parked himself at his favourite table, the one farthest away from that modern abomination, the juke box. As far as Morse was concerned, this new-fangled thing of having CDs in there for people to waste their money and their hearing on had only made matters worse. After all, now instead of there being thirty or a hundred songs, there were thirty or a hundred CDs in there, and every one of them filled to its tawdry little heart with more and more appalling caterwauling. Dreadful. That's what it was, he said to himself, bringing out the crossword he had saved to give himself something to look for—and some incentive to actually wade his way through the stultifying boredom of routine paperwork.

Sadly, not even the new ale could distract him from thoughts of the finest soprano in the world performing not half an hour's distance from here, tonight, when he'd be sitting at home with the news on or some typically stupid BBC production about the private lives of badgers or something equally disgusting. And she'd be singing her heart out, voice soaring up to the vaulted ceiling, and all he'd have would be a can of beer, a Chinese take-away and fornicating badgers. Given the circumstances, it was hardly surprising that all was not well in Morse's little world. Scowling, he tried to persuade himself that things could be a lot worse: the Chief Constable could walk in looking for him, or he could have tickets for tonight and some stupid twit could pick this afternoon to get himself murdered and the Chief Constable could lay it at his doorstep with that disgustingly avuncular grin he had been known to inflict on his victims.

But, as yet unthought of by Morse, there were two things that could make life even more reprehensible, and they both happened together, in perfect unison if not in harmony. Some yobbo fed a fortune into the jukebox and a mindless thumping and wailing ensued, and even as the first off-key screech began, Lewis poked his head in round the door.

Morse tried very hard not to be there. In fact, he leant his head on his hand, face in shadow, turned half away from the door, pulling his paper up to hide any part of his face the shadow might have missed. When the scurrying, squabbling bus-run group came in, he thought he'd been saved, and leant back a bit and had a sip of his wonderful new ale and allowed a small nub of satisfaction to creep in over his dismay about his opera. But then, after a minute, when he looked up a little to read 6 across, he recognised something heaving to at the lip of his table: Lewis' ubiquitous grey suit.

"Suppose I should buy you one of your flaming orange squashes, then," he said, nowhere near gracious, really resenting that anyone should come here and spoil his selfpity. "Even better, you can buy me a decent pint as penance for turning up here like the proverbial bad penny."

"I'm not staying, sir," Lewis replied, managing to make that simple statement sound like a question. "I'm off to see the wife as soon as I'm finished here. Brought this...ahm...gentleman to see you. Says he's a friend of yours."

Morse looked up and his face went as prematurely white as his hair. "Jesus Christ!"

"Oh, and I thought I would be God at least by now."

"So you do know him, then, do you, sir?" Lewis was asking him, not that Morse was paying him the blindest bit of attention, his whole body turned now towards the tall man Lewis had brought in with him. Nothing about this man suggested why Morse should be so transfixed and with such a startled—

and startling—expression on his face. The man was the kind of person that other people would call a chap, or a fellow, but never a punter or a bloke, his only distinguishing feature the centuries of breeding that showed on every inch of him. This, obviously, was the kind of man whose family had been around for such a long time that there had been several spelling changes of the old family name and even more changes in the old family allegiances. He could even be labelled as debonair—but there was a touch too much impish liveliness to him for sincere suavity. Yet nothing else was remarkable, or even noticeable about this man. Until he smiled, and then his average eyes twinkled with a wickedly amused wit, and his cheek dimpled with his smile, and so much charm poured from him, he could have greased the palms of half the House of Commons and still have had enough left to bring world peace.

"Well, well," Morse's visitor was saying, "fancy meeting you here!" And coming from this man, even that old chestnut was made mildly funny by the man's genuine delight at seeing Morse. "Nice to see you again, Cody."

"Cody?" Lewis said, his voice seemingly stuck in that peculiar tone he used when questioning or puzzling. "Oh, I get it," he went on, now sounding as if he'd cracked the riddle of the Rosetta Stone, "Codey, as in Morse Code."

Neither of the other two men even glanced at him. "Well, I shall be off home to the wife and the kiddies then, shall I, sir?"

No answer.

"You know, get off home, leave, like, if that's all right with you, sir?" Morse didn't even let on whether or not he'd heard. So, Lewis thought to himself, this strange man turns up out of old Morse's past and he's so fascinated he can't even tell me if he wants help or what! "I'll get going then," he tried again, so that his conscience would let him enjoy his eggs and chips in peace. "Taking them all to the cinema tonight. To see the new Walt Disney film. Well, it's not new, not really, but it's new to the kids, them not having seen it before..."

It was when he trailed off like that that

Morse seemed to finally notice he was there. Without sparing poor, concerned Lewis a glance, Morse waved him off, saying, "Yes, that's fine, off you go, see you—whenever it is you're supposed to pick me up."

"If you're sure then?" Last chance, Lewis thought to himself, last chance if you want a hand to deal with whatever someone from your secret past is going to throw at you. Morse's distracted nod was enough though, to set him on the road home. Morse had been a big boy for too many years, and Lewis wasn't about to start forcing help where it wasn't needed, nor passing judgement either.

Morse didn't even notice him go. The wellbred gentleman sat down at his table, his elbows propped on the edge, leaning forward to whisper conspiratorially, "Codey as in Morse? Oh, I wonder what your good Sergeant would have done if I'd told him it was Cody as in Buffalo Bill Cody, because you had the biggest 'hump' any of us had ever seen." The small gesture of humour fell on absolutely rock-solid ground, Morse not so much as lowering his scowl a notch or two. "It's been too long, hasn't it?" the Honourable William Symington said, picking up Morse's glass and taking a sip from it in seductive intimacy. "But surely, even if you don't feel like indulging in a protracted session of catching-up, you could certainly see your way to at least saying hello to me?"

"Hello, Symie," Morse said, "Goodbye, Symie." And he went back to his crossword, although his fingers were shaking almost as much as his brain, so even if he had been able to come up with one of the solutions, he couldn't have written it down. But still, it gave him something to do, something apart from drowning in green eyes he had adored more than half his life, or thinking beyond the numbing shock of seeing Symington after all this time. After all this pain, and suffering, and rage-

"Oh, come now, come now! Goodbye so soon? When you've not said more than half a dozen words to me? And not," his voice became a paragon of disbelief and his smile twinkled seductively, "before you've wangled at least one drink out of me? And certainly not before you've agreed to spend the evening with me?"

Morse, never one to be pushed where he didn't want to go, pursed his lips and continued, pen making neat blue marks against the completed clues, to defeat the crossword, and, he was pleased to see, defeating the strong allure of this old friend of his.

"Now this really does take me back a few years, Morse. Me, having sinned against you, and you sitting there, primmer than the Virgin Mary herself, sulking. And I," he said, getting to his feet with the fluid grace men half his age would envy, "know how to cure that, don't I?"

When he left, Morse heaved a sigh of relief, wiping his forehead with trembling fingertips, paying attention to the fact that the almost ethereal elegance of the clues had just been trod upon by bovver boots, not one single answer filled in with enough care or coherency to even come close to fitting in. Still, misdoing a crossword was better than actually facing W. Michael Symington. He could resist the voice, he could resist the handsomeness that had improved with age, he could even resist the lure of a nostalgic rewriting of the past. But he knew, knew in his bones, that even after this many years—especially after this many years—that one glance of lost and lonely needing from that man, and he'd be in like Flynn, whilst making a complete fool of himself. Man is, he thought to himself, destined to repeat his past. And if he let himself look at Symie, he'd end up redoing his past bloody verbatim. Ave, Symington, morituri te salutant.

"There," a satisfied voice said to the top of his head, "that should put a smile back on your face. Or at least, it should lessen the scowl a trifle?"

Morse, needless to say, thought it wisest to neither answer nor actually look at Symington.

"Oh, come on, Pagan," the melodic voice poured over him like cream, twice as rich and three times as smooth, and delicious enough to make Morse want to lick his lips. Or lick Symington's lips. "Don't be like this! I've come a long way to see you, and—"

"No-one asked you to."

Mistake that, he told himself. Shouldn't have spoken to him at all, freeze him out,

that's the only way. Give him an inch and it won't be a yard he'll take—it'll be one of our beloved Chief Superintendent Rennie's lang Scots miles. Or kilometres, probably. Symie always had been one for the latest and the newest and the smartest. And in distracting himself enough to not hear Symington's answer, he had managed to fill in 'lover' to a clue that seemed to have something to do with fishes and bread...

But Symie was still talking, irresistibly, although the man was always so persuasive that before you knew where you were, you'd find yourself doing what he had wanted in the first place whilst taking credit for the idea yourself. And enjoying it to boot.

"Look, Pagan, I know you've got every reason in the world to cold-shoulder me, I really don't blame you one ounce. But not even looking at me and not talking to me isn't the most helpful thing you can do, now is it? Why don't you come out with me tonight, and give me the chance to talk to you?"

The sincerity in that made Morse bite his inner lip to keep his mouth shut and Symie out of his life.

"The simple fact of the matter is this: there've been too many years of silence between us," a pause, but Morse did nothing to alleviate the silence, so Symington went on, the strain cracking into the plumminess of his voice, "and I think it's time that you let me make up to you for what I did when we were both a hell of a lot younger and I was infinitely more foolish."

"Bury the hatchet?" he heard himself say. "Only if it's right in the middle of your forehead."

That shut them both up, for all of thirty seconds, until Symington neatly stepped over the hostility of Morse's defensiveness. "You know," and Morse felt that affectionate, forgiving whimsicalness right down to his toes, "bitterness doesn't become you nearly so well as the white hair does, does it, Cody old chum?"

"Oh, compliments and insults and old-fashioned nick-names all in the one sentence? Mr. Dowling will be *so* disappointed that you still overdo the dramatic bit so badly."

"What's wrong with old nicknames— Bunny?" And to his horror, Morse felt himself blush for the first time in years, as images and memories almost tactile in their brilliance flooded him.

"Remember that?" Symington was speaking as quietly as humanly possible while still being heard above the giant-label pseudo Indie music on the CD. "We use to lie together in the quiet and make up stories about Raffles and Bunny, and you always insisted that I play Raffles because you said I sounded just the way you imagined him. The adventures we used to have! Don't you remember the thrill of it, Pagan? Lying there together like that, and you would have smuggled your torch in with you and we'd turn the bed into a perfectly wonderful little tent. And—" another second, and another flash-flood of memories, coloured by the squirming embarrassment of the adult coming across his excessively youthful self. "-Uncas. You used to love being Uncas." Morse learned that Symington hadn't forgotten a single trick of the debating society when he began declaiming, "Man of mystery and integrity, the civilised savage. And you would make me La Longue Carabine, although I always said that you were much better fitted to the name. You'd always blush then, and d'you remember what you'd do then?"

Newspaper held up high in front of his red face, Morse remembered it all too, too well. Second adolescence, behaving like thirteen-year-olds instead of the nineteen-going-on-ninety that a Classics scholar was supposed to be.

Symington seemed to be completely undeterred by either the embarrassment of the past or the paper battlements of the present. "I remember, I remember it very well. I'd always get a kiss for saying that. So tell me, *ma chère* Longue Carabine, would I still get a kiss were I to call you that today?"

"You'd get a kick up the behind, that's what you'd get."

It was supposed to come out as a flat statement of uncompromising fact, but he was horrified to hear his own uncertainty bleating from his voice as Symie leaned closer and reminded him of those most precious nights of his life. He had thought they would

last forever and that the two of them would never ever part, not until Death got them. Hephaiston and Alexander, that had always been his secret, private dream, until Symie had found him writing in his diary and seen nothing more than the names. "Hephaiston and Alexander!" he'd almost shouted, the sound carrying out the window and down into the Quad. "Is old Reid letting you study them? Oh, God, I wish I could have been one of them. The ultimate love story, isn't it, Pagan?" And then he'd dropped to one knee in front of Morse, taken Morse's hand in his own and simply looked at him, until Morse had been afloat in feeling, in pride, in simple joy. "That's you and me," Symie had whispered, "lovers forever, and not even death could keep us apart for long. You know that, don't you?"

And sitting in that small room with the cacophonous racket of his first year at an allmale College reverberating around him, he had known that. He'd known it enough that he'd put his books on the floor, clearing his bed to pull his lover down to share it with him, love and lust and promise meeting and mixing and forging a bond he'd thought invincible.

Until the telegramme. He'd hated the damn things for years afterwards and had been gladder than anyone else in the entire Commonwealth to see the near-demise of the vile things.

"What are you thinking of?"

It slid in so quietly and easily that he answered before he'd had a second's thought. "About how much I hated you for answering that bloody telegramme."

He didn't dare look, but he could still sense the discomfort his comment had wrought. "That's why I'm here, actually. And if you're going to ignore all my invitations to dine with me tonight, I shall have to see if I can intrigue you with a taste of what I have to say."

Morse heard the settling-in of the voice, the preparation to discourse, which in Symie's case of course, meant the preparation to convince completely and utterly. The agony of separation and failure as strong as ammonia salts, Morse tensed himself to deflect all of it, every last word, every last excuse for the inexcusable, every last atom of appeal.

"You see, the reason I'm here is that I was sent a telegramme one day, completely unexpectedly. A relation of mine had simply upped and died, heart attack. Here one minute, gone the next. I went to the funeral, of course, and I couldn't believe how many of my own age group weren't there any more. And I was appalled by how many of what I would have called my contemporaries were now the respected elders of the family."

"So because you were feeling old," Morse said with carefully aimed vitriol, attacking in self-defence and gazing in rapt attention at 26 Down, "you decided to look up an old flame to see if you'd lasted better than he had. Well, you can go home happy now, back to your little wife and your little house and your 2.4 kids and leave me to enjoy my ale in peace." That was satisfyingly firm, and in his opinion, he had struck the perfect formula of contempt, dismissiveness and hostility.

Perhaps it was that Bill Symington simply heard with different hearing, but he didn't seem to have grasped the fineness of Morse's performance. "My poor Pagan. You must have been in a dreadful state if this is how hurt you still are now. Is that..." For the first time, there was a crack in the perfectly groomed façade, uncertainty and uneasiness peeping out. "Is that why you left the College?"

He almost looked at the oblivious bastard then. Instead of courting disaster—and Symington, which made the two synonymous in Morse's experience—he ground out, barely keeping it below a shout, "I didn't so much leave the College as was sent down from it for falling so far below standards that they said there was no point in me continuing. And unless your mind has failed you as much as your ethics in allowing you to come back here to torment me, then you'll remember that it was because of you that I ended up missing lectures and classes and even an exam or two, if you should happen to recall a certain week spent in a caravan in Wales."

"I didn't ask you to stop working," Symington said in all fairness. And in all fairness still, added, "But I made it damned difficult for you to actually get anything done, didn't I? At the time, it was just...work seemed so unimportant, compared to—"

"Compared to what? Compared to the fact that unlike me, poor sod that I am, you knew you'd never have to work for a living? Or compared to that wonderful, lifelong romance you convinced me we were having?" He was proud that he managed to say that at all, but prouder still that he hadn't looked up to see the satisfying moment when the barb drew blood.

"Isn't it a lifelong romance, Pagan?"

He managed a sound of perfect disbelief, although the words plummeted to the pit of his stomach and his stupid emotions went leaping off in ecstasy.

"If it isn't, then why do we both still love each other?" Symington was asking him, painfully, clearly, with utter honesty. "Why was it all still there the second we laid eyes on each other again today? Hmm? Go on, you were always exceptional at finding answers—and you'd probably do a better job of it than you are of that crossword!"

That almost—almost—got him, but he knew Symie, oh, how he knew the man. Right up until the moment the bastard had walked out on him to go back to Mater and Pater, he had known him. And a challenge like that from Symington to Morse should have had the latter staring at him in defiance to prove that he didn't give a damn any more. Which would, of course, have been his downfall. They both knew perfectly well that Morse had never once been able to resist Symie when that expression of helpless longing was turned to bear on him. Morse, with a further sinking in his stomach that had nothing to do with the four pints of real ale he'd just sunk himself, was beginning to feel the path under his feet grow decidedly slippery, and all because of the remembered promise of what had been the happiest time he had ever known.

But he wasn't going to give in, he told himself, refolding his paper to the letters page, abandoning his cherished and sadly disfigured crossword to its ignoble grave of incompletion. He wasn't going to give in, he wasn't going to go through all that again. Absolutely not, not under any conditions. He reminded himself that it was thanks to his affair with Symie, his enrapturement with

the man, that he had lost his College and ultimately, his chosen career. Did he really want, the cross of boredom duly taken into consideration, to lose this second choice of career? To need to start all over again, and at his age? Because they might no longer throw you out of the police for being queer and it might no longer stop your promotion chances dead in their tracks—and all due praise going to John Major for what little encouragement towards equality he had given—but they did still throw you out for not doing your job at all. Which is what he was afraid he would end up doing, if Symie came back into his world, with enough love for Morse to throw himself into it completely and enough money on Symington's side to make the mundanity of work a mere indulgence that wasted time better spent with each other.

No. He liked this life of his, even if it were far from perfect. At least it was his own and independent of anyone else's whims and needs. And even if he were willing to give it all up for love—oh, yes, definitely, absolutely, immediately! a traitor inside him screamed then he why the hell would he want to do it with the man who had walked out on him before and left him in tatters? Even if Symie had changed, for whatever reason, and was ready to make a go of it this time... There was still the minor detail of the real world to deal with, and he really didn't want to have to deal with colleagues asking him what queers actually did in bed and all the other, more major crap that he'd have to put up with. For if he and Symie ended up together again, he'd come out. He wasn't going to waste half the time skulking around in the dark and pretending. Christ, for starters, he was too old!

And then there was the question of whether or not Symie even wanted anything beyond a fling, and whether or not this bastion of trueblue Toryism would dream of coming out at all. Or if Symie was going to conduct every last bit of their lives in public like this, without so much as a thought for what such public discussion of private homosexuality could do to a career policeman.

Fear faced off with hope, and fear won.

"This is my final word on all this and your so-kind offers to dine," he said, grating the last word to shreds whilst humming in the back of his mind his favourite aria from tonight's opera as some small comforting warmth against throwing this man out of his life. "You may feel that *si quis* is the way to live your life, but I don't. So bugger off and leave me alone."

There was a profound satisfaction in him, the surety that he had just restored his world to perfect order despite the threat of euphoria and despair brought in by Symington and the complexity of emotions that still simmered. The profound satisfaction lasted at least fourteen seconds, and then Morse started thinking about how much it had hurt when Symie had gone running off home simply because they had told him to: Symie, who never gave in without a pitched battle.

"And this," Symie said softly, faint shuffling noises followed by something vaguely rectangular being waved at Morse out on the fringes of unfocussed vision, "is *my* last word on the subject."

Almost against his will, drawn by the glimmering of light on the wavering shapes, Morse narrowed in on what Symie was holding in front of him. In a V for Victory, there they were. Two tickets. Best seats in the house. For tonight. For his soprano, and his aria, tonight. With Symie.

V for Victory for Symington, and as Morse finally looked up into that warm and affectionate smile, he knew he had lost. And was lost. Absolutely and utterly.

The opera, he decided as they walked along streets glittering with past-fallen rain, was worth it. The 'it' in question was the rapid melting of all his resolves, the almost instantaneousness of his complete capitulation to the wit and warmth and pure delight of this man walking beside him, furled umbrella clicking with rhythmic precision on the smooth flags of the pavement. Conversation had never been exactly necessary between them both of them preferring, with the voracity of youth, the more tactile forms of communication—and they were both quite comfortable with the silence. If only because it delayed the moment of decision, when offers would be made, or not, and accepted, or not. His hand

in his pocket fingered the torn perforations of his ticket stub, while the cut-crystal perfection of his Diva's voice filled his mind with limpid song. A bus lurched past, a sheet of filthy puddle water threatening him, and as he jumped aside, it was Symie's hand that steadied him—Symie's hand that made him shiver with the unexpectedness of the pleasure. Christ, but he had got it bad, hadn't he? Just a touch, and that through leather glove and jacket.

Disconcerted, he turned away from the peculiar gentleness on Symie's face and discovered, instead, the heady perfume of the gardenia boutonnière that had been given him. "Pity I couldn't get green," Symie had muttered, deftly weaving it through Morse's button hole, the old familiar glint of humour making his eyes wicked. But it was the uncertainty, the near pleading that Morse could neither quite forget nor completely understand. There was something going on here, with Symie, something more than had been admitted thus far. Which was typical of Symie and which meant that there was a secret that Symie was quite sure would either a) upset Morse or b) influence Morse's decision. And that, naturally, made the hairs of curiosity on the back of his neck stand up in alert attention. He wanted to know what was going on behind the charm and the entertaining anecdotes.

The door of his flat. Both of them, standing there, a toss up to see which one was the more nervous.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Symie asked him, and quite remarkably, Symie was the one who was keeping his face averted, as if it were he who was afraid of succumbing to something in the other person's eyes.

"I wasn't sure if you'd want me to."

Symie's attention snapped on to him, disbelief flushing his face. "Don't you think I've come rather a long way and gone to rather a lot of bother just to say good night at the door and go sloping of into the night, tail between my legs? Pagan, I freely admit I was a proper bastard to you. But that's why I'm here. I've told you: I want to make amends and do something to make you happy."

It was the perfect moment to tell him to sod

off, and flounce off inside alone to sit in solitary splendour and gloat over his victory. But what he said instead was, "I've got nothing in for supper, but you can have a coffee or another drink if you want it?"

Key turning in lock, opening the door, smelling the familiar, indescribable security of the odours of his own house wisping faintly out to meet him. With a nod, he ushered Symie in, walking past him, doffing his damp jacket as he went, not looking at Symington, not daring, because he needed to keep his wits about him now. Needed to, because if he didn't, he'd end up in bed with the man, rolling about in absolute clover without a thought for anything else: such as his job, his future, his career. Or his past, and why Symie had done what he'd done and why he'd come back.

He needed a beer. Even one of the bottled ones he kept at home in case of emergencies such as these would probably do, so he put Die Walküre on the turn-table as he went past on his way to the kitchen and the cool cupboard where he kept his emergency rations. The old rapport so firmly re-established by one evening of music and the usual amusing repartée they had once indulged in, he didn't even need to ask what Symie would want, carefully pouring both of them their drink. Symie, not surprisingly, had parked himself on the settee, in the precise place and precise sprawl that Morse himself favoured. The table lamp cast luxurious shadows into the light brown hair, highlighting the faint wave, glimmering on the paler blond highlights that had always marked Symie at the end of summer.

Morse sat as far away as was possible on the small sofa, staring into his beer, pondering thoughts and carefully carving theorems.

"It wasn't because I didn't love you," Symie suddenly spoke into the low-volumed fury of *Die Walküre* throwing away all Morse's expectations of how they would proceed. "I'm serious, if it had been down to love and nothing else, I would have stayed with you without a second thought."

"Let me get this straight," Morse murmured, in a voice Lewis would have recognised as meaning there were going to be at least two hours spent dissecting a question over several pints. "You say that you came back, out the blue without so much as a by-your-leave, because you came face to face with your own mortality. Then you say you came back here to make up to me what you did to me then. What's more, you claim that you loved me then and that we still have the same feelings for each other. Does that mean," he allowed his voice to become as whimsical as barbed wire over exposed flesh, "that I can expect you to deceive me, lie to me, hurt me and then leave me all over again? Or do I have to wait until you've helped me ruin my career first?"

"I deserved that, didn't I?" Symie asked him, an air of self-deprecation surrounding him. "Actually, after what I did, there are those who would say I deserved a lot worse than that."

They were quiet again, that particular round being won, to his own regret, with a points victory going to Symington. The music strutted around them, as unsettled as they themselves were, crescending voices mimic to the cresting sense of urgency within.

One of them was going to have to say something, that much was obvious.

Morse, acclimatised to asking questions and hearing the meaning behind the answers, was the first to find the lack of knowledge unbearable.

"Why *did* you come back? And don't give me any crap about telegrams and funerals either," he said, to the books above his stereo.

"Because..." and Morse could almost hear the insecurity building, the one thing that could convince him that this time, he was actually going to get the truth. That he might even, after more than half a lifetime, get the truth about what happened that Christmas vac, when all his happinesses had shown themselves up as castles in the air. "Because, if you want to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, Pagan my dear, it's that I'm getting old. Because I went to that funeral and there they all were, boring middleaged men with boring middle-aged wives or empty-headed young floozies on their arms. I could tell with a glance which of them had surrendered to growing old and dying and which of them were trying to pretend that it wasn't going to happen, not to them. They were all telling lies too, Morse, absolute whoppers. Sitting around the parlour afterwards, drinking tooth-rotting sherry and silently congratulating themselves that they were lasting better than everyone else there and not thinking a thing about my poor cousin, apart from the occasional moment of gratitude that it was him under all that wet ground and not them..."

Morse could see it in his own mind, could even imagine the faces and the expressions, precisely the kinds of things he was beginning to find in his own life, at funerals, and remarriages and the retirement wakes for colleagues. Even Lewis, young, young Lewis was getting old these days, lines appearing on his face, the first of the insidious grey hairs, that thickening of paunch around his middle...

"And I was there with my middle-aged wife and my elderly father-in-law, and all the relations on that side of the family, and it suddenly dawned on me that I was just exactly the same as all of them. Every last one of them, that was me. Not, you can imagine, a very pleasant thought, hmm, Pagan?"

A brief touch then, the single flutter of a single finger across the back of his hand, brief heat, brief caress, briefer hope mingled with unease and then gone.

"I mean, there I was sitting there, on one of those mahogany seats I swear our grandfathers bought as punishment, you know the kind I mean—"

And Morse did, almost able to feel the carved back digging in between his shoulder-blades and the thin, horse-hair stuffed, leather-bound seats unyielding and lumpy under his buttocks. And the smell, that old smell of pourable furniture polish and beeswax, of old people, violets and camphor.

"My wife was drawing me veritable daggers because I wasn't over chatting to dear old Uncle Philip—who is an unmitigated, immoral bastard I would love you to meet, old chap, but only in your official capacity—who is worth a bucket of money and whom we need to...'suck up to' to make sure we're well remembered in his will, a much-coveted byproduct of which is that dear old Cousin Michael—the strange one, one of the

'unnaturals' as my father-in-law calls them—won't be able to get a finger on a single penny."

Morse felt pity begin to stir as he, for the very first time, looked past his own bias and imagined what life had actually been like for a man as prone to honesty as Symington but forced to lie about his most basic of truths.

"And, to be perfectly honest, I simply couldn't take it for another second. I wanted to stand up on the table, just kick the buffet meal right off and shout at all of them."

A fragment of laughter, and then the voice continued, more sober than before. "One of our nephews would come and stay during term-time—couldn't bear boarding at school, but it was decreed, of course, that he simply had to go to his father's old billet—and he used to watch an inordinate amount of television. Some of it rather good, I might add."

Symington was so engrossed in the telling that Morse dared look at him, quick, caressing glances, then looking away lest he give in to the temptation to gaze in mindless bliss.

"He and I fell into the habit of watching Reginald Perrin together. Perceptive little bastard used to say that I was another Reggie Perrin just waiting to fall."

"Hence the desire to leap up onto a table and make a complete spectacle of yourself?"

"Oh, absolutely. You see, I wanted to jump up there, and tell them all, use the dreaded 'h' word out in public, shout 'I am a homosexual' from the roof-tops. Or the table-top, actually! You know how it is, Morse—everyone knows about Cousin Michael, but no-one ever talks about it. His 'friends' are politely ignored and never, ever brought to family gatherings. Interestingly enough, I found out—after the main event, of course, but I'll get to that in a moment—that he's had the same 'friend' for over seventeen years. Perhaps not longer than all of the family marriages, but I can guarantee that he's certainly been happier."

The pause invited comment, but Morse knew Symie too well to fall into the role of asking sympathetic questions. If he did that, he'd soon find himself so far under the blanketing charm that he'd be in bed with Symie and in him before he could blink. That was how it had always been, he thought into the bottom of his beer glass, swirling his

drink around until froth billowed up the sides of the clear crystal. He'd been so deeply in love that nothing else had mattered, but him, and Symie. And look, my lad, he told himself sternly and with all the good intentions in the world, where that led you. A relatively poorlypaid copper when you could have been a Don at the finest University in the world and a visiting lecturer at all the richest. Good intentions, however, are proof against very little, and against temptation least of all, and his own desire to rekindle what had been the halcyon days of his youth nipped at him.

"I went home that night with a wife whom I knew perfectly well I didn't love and whom I knew didn't love me and then, I lay in bed, thinking about the one person I *had* ever loved." A pause, not entirely for the dramatic effect, then Symington's hand covered Morse's, fingers entwining the way they had when they had sat side by side during the fewer and fewer lectures either one of them attended. "You, Morse, my dearest friend. I thought of you."

Good intentions may not be able to resist temptation, but hurt and distrust can work wonders. Morse had expected rather better than the selfishness of Symington's mid-life crisis as the reason for this attempt to completely upheave his life. More than that, he needed more than self-centred reasons underlying the altruism. He pulled his hand free from Symington and erupted to his feet, taking the couple of steps that put him out of harm's way, changing one record for another. Bach. That was what he needed right now, portentous music with interweaving melodies of the deepest sort, full of pain and the sorrow of the human spirit.

The strains of music commingled with the strain between the two men.

"Well," Symington finally said, not entirely sure of a silent and subdued Morse, "at least you didn't simply fell me with your very solid right hook. I half expected that, you know. Either that, or this, your very understandable disbelief. Or if you were to believe me, an unwillingness to chance trusting me again. Well..." he repeated, for once in his life obviously at a loss for words, a fact which Morse found severely amazing. "Well," once more,

and then the fumbling mind apparently stumbled across something to say. Morse listened, stiffening his resolve, knowing the seductive, good-natured persuasiveness of old and knowing how little resort he had against it even now. But it seemed that Symington was full of surprises these days.

"There's nothing else for me to say then, is there? No point in dragging it all out in front of you in all its sorry little details."

A cough of laughter, then the shuffle of movement behind him, of jacket being picked up and put on, of leather being eased back on to fingers made damp by the day's end heat in the room—and perhaps nervousness, Morse thought, suddenly remembering that endearing flaw in an otherwise impenetrable cloak of good breeding and iron-willed good nature.

"I'm sorry that what I did hurt you so badly, Pagan, my—" the endearment was cut off before it could embarrass Morse, swallowed down and stifled. "I apologise if I've stirred up a lot of unpleasant memories for you, Morse, but—"

Again, that biting off of a comment. And that, of course, inveigled its way through Morse's determined, protective disinterest. Symington was hiding something, something that he would sooner walk out of here misunderstood than reveal. Something that made him...vulnerable. Morse wanted, suddenly, fiercely, to find that out; and anyway, why else had he invited his old 'friend' up to his flat, if not for that? He carefully stomped on the carnal impulse that leapt up to give answer to what was supposed to be a rhetorical question.

"All right," he began, using his best policeman's voice, turning round to stare at Symington with the objective eyes of a policeman, yearning after his lost youth and his lost love with the heart of a fool, "let's suppose that I believe you. We'll say that you had this mid-life crisis of yours, and came sneaking down here to see me. Now, you're telling me that all this is actually motivated by love. If that's the case, then why are you so quick to give in and go sloping back off to this wife you apparently don't love enough to have stayed with her—how long is it now?"

There was the slight delay his years in the police had taught him to expect from witness and defendants both, as the decision was taken whether or not to be honest, or whether lying was the better—or at least, less damaging—road to take.

"Twenty years or so. But it wasn't her I loved, Morse," and Morse stiffened in expectation of some poorly done Mills & Boon excuse. "It was the acceptance that marriage gave me. And the money, and the position, and the prestige."

Morse was listening intently now, hearing truth stripped down to the bare bones.

"You know perfectly well that I would have been either cut off from the family if I'd flaunted it or packed off to some obscure job somewhere if they had known for a second that the first-born and heirwas a flaming pouf who had neither the desire nor the means to continue the line. Men, in case you've forgotten your basic biology, can't have children with other men. It requires a member of the fairer sex for that."

"Really? Oh, you do surprise me. Learn something new every day, don't we?" Morse sniped back, professionalism storm-trooped by personal vulnerability, too blinded by his own concerns to see the humour that was Symie's greatest defence against any nasty little surprises life might throw at him. Such as being the first born with all the attendant responsibility to function at least once in a suitably fruitful heterosexual manner.

Symie began to snap back, but gathered himself back under control, refraining from indulging either in behaving like a fishwife or letting his own problems make matters worse.

"All right, all right," Morse muttered, made more malleable by reason than anger ever could. "Let's say I accept all this thus far. Then what."

No question, simply the command to divulge all pertinent information, and Symington slowly divested himself of his protection against an unsettled summer's weather, not beginning to speak again until he was sitting on the sofa, glass in hand, black trousers and hunter green shirt setting his colouring off beautifully. Or at least, that's what Morse thought, so ensnared in cataloguing the

handsomeness of this once-upon-a-time lover of his that he missed the first few words that Symington spoke.

"I'm sorry, could you say that again?"

Naturally, Symington gave him one of his patented looks for that, and hesitated, as if unsure of whether or not he should start it all over again. It seemed not only churlish to refuse, but stupid as well, considering what he had given up just to have the chance to start it—his life with Morse—all over again. "I was saying," he finally went on, voice pitched deep and melodic as always, "that I had reached the point where I simply could not face another day of nothing but lying and pretending and smiling through gritted teeth. We were supposed to spend the weekend at my father-in-law's country place, and my own parents were joining us there. We were all going to make a long weekend of it, and I knew I'd have hours upon hours of listening to them talk about things that just didn't matter to me at all any more. You see...it had finally dawned on me that I was going to die. And not some time in the distant future when I was so old I'd be glad to go, but perhaps in a matter of a few years. A heart attack, a stroke, prostate cancer. Any number of things, really, once you've seen the other side of forty.'

"So it is mid-life crisis that brought you here. What is it they call it? The male menopause? Some men go out and buy flashy new sports-cars and set themselves up with gorgeous young blondes, but *you* decided to rekindle your youth another way."

Genuine laughter, pealing out in that glorious cascade of sound that had always made Morse shiver with the attraction of it. "Rekindle my youth? By going back to places that had changed so much that I found myself having to ask for directions? With a man I remember as in the prime of youth but now gone whiteheaded? Oh, yes, my ever-fanciful Pagan, always fond of a good story."

He supposed he should be glad that Symie hadn't actually mentioned fairy tales, given the other man's execrable taste in puns and his now-remembered need for levity in the face of adversity. "If it's not mid-life insanity, then what is it?"

"Why can't you believe, Morse," Symington said, sitting round on the sofa to face him, "that it was all because I came to my senses one day? I realised that if I were to die that very day, then I'd go to my grave with more regrets than satisfactions and not a single damned thing I was unequivocally proud of. And that, Pagan, that is a terrible thing to say about a life."

"Better than some things that could be said."

"You are referring, I suppose, to what could be said about a man who goes running off, abandoning his lover to his fate, and all because an old lady has fallen ill? I can say two things in my own defence. One is: amare et sapere vix deo concreditur. I was head over heels in love, which naturally precludes any pretence of intelligence, and I confess, I was terrified that you had taken rather a shine to that young Dunn fellow, but...everything else happened so quickly, I had neither the circumstances nor the courage to ask you about it. I desperately needed reassurance, which was, I suppose, why I didn't dare ask for it. Then to make matters worse, my mother was so ill, we were all certain she was going to die. By the time it was apparent that she was going to outlive us all, then I had... Well, I had sunk into my own moral cowardice and degeneracy. I'd given in, Morse, simply buckled under to family pressure and admitted defeat. I had also," self-deprecating mockery invited Morse to share in the delicious irony of one's own human failings and self-loathing thereof, "become re-addicted to money and all the things it can buy."

"So you gave me up because you couldn't live without the gold cigarette case with your crest done in precious stones, is that it?"

"Oh, no, nothing so simple. It was so terribly seductive, Pagan old friend, that cloak of security that money offered me. Just think about it: if one is rich enough, no-one can touch one. Least of all..."

"Who was it, Symie?" Morse asked him after the silence had stretched too long, not liking one bit the pain that was etched on his former lover's face. "Who was it the money protected you from?"

A smile notable for its bleakness was the

beginnings of the answer. "How are the mighty fallen from the ways of grammar, hmm? But grammar aside, it was my father, Pagan. My father and all the rest of them."

"But it was his money, so—"

"If I didn't toe the line he drew for me—" He stopped again, running his hands through his hair the way Morse remembered doing to him, in the far-gone days when Morse's own hair wasn't white and his skin didn't show every one of his years and a few he had only imagined thus far.

"What was it, Symie?" he asked, coming close. "What made you run away from me all those years ago?"

Bitterness in eyes that he best remembered laughing or soft with loving. "Not something you would understand, not fully. Guilt, you see, Pagan my love, good old-fashioned guilt, fed by religion and stoked by parental fire."

"For being gay, you mean?"

"But we weren't gay back then, not the way they mean it now, anyway. We didn't really give ourselves labels then, did we? Not really. That kind of thing all came later, didn't it? D'you know, I watch some of these people on the television now, and I wish, I wish that we had known what they seem to know. It might have been harder in some ways, I suppose, but at least we would have had something to stand up and say, this is what I am, this is who I am. But all I had was College, because I couldn't possibly tell them that my special friend was the person I would marry, given a choice."

Morse was silent for a time, going through to the kitchen for another beer, not bothering to bring one for Symington who had always preferred his alcohol to come in a sweeter, bubblier form and never went beyond the first ale. "You know, you're really not making very much sense about all this, Symie. First it was money, then it's guilt, now it's a lack of identity. You can hardly blame me for not exactly falling for it hook, line and sinker."

"I suppose I should have had an elegant speech prepared, liberally peppered with quotes from the Latin and Greek—particularly appropriate for the occasion, actually. But..." He took Morse's glass, sank a hefty draught, and gave the tumbler back half empty, another change to make Morse wonder. "But I didn't think you'd even let me in this far. And I rather thought, knowing what you do for a living these days... Well, I didn't think a carefully rehearsed statement would help matters much. Foolishly, obviously, I decided to rely on the truth, if you even gave me the chance to explain myself."

"If this is what you call explaining yourself, then you should get a job writing instructions on programming videos."

"The reason I'm not making much sense is because the reasons themselves don't make much sense. Good God, Morse, we neither of us was even half-grown, not really. We were both immature and head over heels in love with someone we both knew, deep inside, that we shouldn't be doing any of this with in the first place."

Morse stared at him in mute and sullen defiance.

"Surely you haven't forgotten that day Mr. Rankin took us for our Greek and made us skip all those passages that dealt with the 'Greek Vice'? Have you forgotten how dreadful we felt for days after that? It took us both a long time to recover the magic, not that we ever once even mentioned it. Just swept it under the carpet along with everything else. Such as the pointed looks the Chaplain would give me whenever he did a sermon on the 'unnatural' vices. Oh, you never saw any of that, of course, did you, Pagan? But I did. And I heard all the not-so-subtle hints from him every time I bumped into him."

This rising, raw anger was different too, far from the sunniness and sweet-humour that he remembered in minute detail. It was plain, even to someone trying so hard not to fall at this man's feet all over again, that life had been a bed of roses for Symington: full of pretty flowers covered with thorns and growing in manure.

"And tell me, tell me this, Cody. How could I possibly have come back to College when I found out that my mother's heart attack had been caused by *me*? Can't you just imagine the scene? Pinter would have been proud of it. The dear Chaplain had gone down to visit them because he said he was so concerned that I was falling into 'the evil ways of the vile

flesh'. She almost died, Morse, she was lying there blue around the lips and my father asked me, asked me flat out in front of her if the Chaplain had any cause for his 'concern'. What would you have done, Pagan? Hmm? What would *you* have done?"

He didn't even have to think about that, his own mother treated to a parade of 'nice' girls all the time she was alive. "I would have told them the Chaplain was off his chump."

"Precisely. And then I had to stay on until she was definitely out of the woods, by which time I had lied myself into rather a tight corner. They were all after me, Pagan, every last one of them. Even my insane old grandmother came out of it long enough to pound away at me. I was so upset and so horribly confused... The sixties and all that freedom passed us by, didn't it? We were cocooned in our respectable schools and in our studies of the Classics. No room for anything else, was there?"

"Would it have made any difference at all if there had been?"

"I don't suppose it would. But I like to think I would have treated you better if I had had some idea of what life was all about. If I'd had some idea that all the old stories about it being 'just a phase' or 'schoolboy crushes' were so much tosh. If I'd only known..."

Morse had to ask. "Would it have made any difference?"

"I hope so. That's the best I can say, Pagan. I'm so different from who I was then. I'm not scared of them finding out any more, because they already know."

Shock, deep, blinding shock. "You told them?"

"Yes. Just like that, flat out, over the dinner table the morning we went to the country. My father-in-law read something in the paper about AIDS, went into one of his usual witless tirades, and I just...said it. I'd decided I was going to, the night before, but when he started that in the morning, I opened my mouth and said that he had better be sure of what he was saying, because I was one of them and he'd have to stand me up against the wall with all the others and shoot me too."

He couldn't help himself: Morse began to chuckle, low and quiet at first, louder as the imagining of that morning sank in. "Over the kippers and the kidneys, you said it? What the hell did they do?"

"Ah," said Symington, smiling at him and wagging his finger at him, "that would be telling, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, go on, Symie," Morse was falling back into the old patterns of their friendship, "tell me. It must have been—" Reality demanded attention, reminding him that this wasn't one of Shakespeare's little farces. "It must have been brutal."

Brave smile covering the raw weals where the verbal blows had struck him that morning. "I suppose that's one way of describing it. But it's over and done with—"

"They cut you off?" Morse demanded, the pieces slotting into place and a picture finally emerging.

"I always knew they would. And not just the money, of course. I've been well warned as to what will happen to me if I should darken any of their thresholds again." Even the excellent Vincent Price impersonation did nothing to hide the pain behind the humour.

"Your wife—?"

"Even as we speak, is employing the legal representation best equipped for sharpness and for shafting me."

"So," he said slowly, contemplating the patterns of foam on his beer as his mind untangled the implications that lay behind what had already been said. "It's all gone. The money, the social status, the family?"

"The main house, the job—can't possibly have a deviant pervert running the largest private children's book company in the nation can we. At least, not if he's actually been so disgusting as to come out and admit iteverything, really, apart from my own investments and savings and the flat in London. And even some of that is looking a trifle dubious, I believe."

"But surely—"

"None of it was actually mine, not until my father actually died. And he is still alive and well and foaming at the mouth."

My god, he thought fervently, this man who had been infamous for his refusal to attend services and his contempt for the trappings of what he considered a blind and

foolish faith. My god! "Where are you staying?"

"I've booked into an hotel. It's not far from here, it won't take me long to walk back."

So no request then, to stay with Morse. No using his loss as an excuse to pander Morse into bed, no attempts as out-and-out seduction. Perversely, humanly, Morse felt cheated. He had been so ready to hear shallow excuses and meet devastating seduction, and instead he had been offered honesty and a few unadorned facts, not one of them milked for effect. No demands, no emotional coercion, nothing. Native suspicion, as would be expected, rose at that point. "What do you want?" he asked, staring into Symington's eyes, determined to catch him in a lie if lie were offered.

A shrug, then, "I'm not even sure of that. Oh, I know I want to start all over again with you. I want a chance to love you properly this time. I never stopped feeling like that about you, but I...there were so many reasons that seemed so reasonable and right at the time. Why I never came back to you is as complicated as what I want from you now."

"Why don't you give me the simplified, abridged version to start with?"

"As I said, I want the opportunity to love you the way we both deserve. I don't want an affaire with you, I want something that's going to last a lot longer than that. I want..."

Morse saw that familiar expression fill the other man's eyes and felt his own knees go weak. He had never been able to resist that, never, never, never. Especially, he admitted, when he didn't want to resist. And what was wrong with going to bed with Symie? They were neither one of them virgins, although his list of conquests was singularly brief for this modern era. Even if he decided not to continue, to cut Symington off tomorrow and send him packing, what was wrong with a one-night-stand? A brief encounter, temporary pleasure, that would give him some clue if what he remembered still existed, or if all this so-called love was nothing more than rose-tinted memories and lust.

And what did any of it matter, when his balls were thinking for his brain, sending frantic messages, filling him with millions of sperm that were simply desperate to leave

home. And what did any of it matter when he looked at Symie and all the loneliness that had set in his bones lifted from him? What point was there in reasoning and analysis, when standing there right in front of him was the one cure he had ever found for the dissatisfaction of mere life. One look from Symie and he was a quivering, *young* man again, with vitality and vivacity flowing through him instead of the heavy thrump, thrump of his blood. For another minute, he simply looked at Symington, thinking about all of this, while Symington stood there, a monument to patience.

He could say goodnight, goodbye and good riddance, and tomorrow, when Lewis came to pick him up, he could go on with his life, precisely as it had been for eons now, as if nothing at all had changed, and he could pretend that he hadn't turned down this second chance—this second risk, this second taste of happiness before he shuffled off this mortal coil. He could, he knew he could. He had his music, and his books. Good ale and a good job. Friends, of a distant sort-although, he recognised with something akin to shock, with a bare few exceptions, all of them dated from his University days, the days when he had been basking in the reflected popularity of Symington and had been glowing with his own potential. But he could still say goodnight and goodbye.

But he couldn't say good riddance. For all the pain this man had caused him, he had also caused his greatest happiness. For all he had changed the path of his life, cutting certain avenues—and perhaps, certain self-truths?—off forever, the new path he had finally chosen had been a good one, and one he felt was ultimately more useful. And when all was said and done, he had never, not even in his own lies, stopped loving this man.

So it came down to that. Love versus caution. Risk versus the rut. The Epiphany versus his own personal Dark Ages. Ironic, doubtless, for a man nicknamed Pagan, but perhaps it was time he claimed himself an Epiphany or a Rapture all of his own, a quintessential amelioration of the amatory, erotic and emotional impulses. To regain the most precious thing he had ever lost.

But the consequences...

He stared into what little was left of his beer and thought, for a moment, about consequences, good, bad and indifferent. And thought about whether or not tonight would change his life, whether it would be a beginning, a middle or and end.

"I don't know," he heard himself say and felt an involuntary start jump through Symie. "I simply don't know whether or not to believe your story—or which *part* of your story. I don't know if I want to never see your face again." He saw those words hit home, saw eyes darken and upper lip stiffen, saw pain barricaded behind well-bred manners and the utter refusal to be bowed by a blow. "But by the same token, Symie, I also don't know if I want to wake up looking at your face beside me in bed every morning."

The hope rippled, spreading like shock waves from a pebble in a pool, so small a thing to cause such large repercussions.

"Then," Symington smiled his wonderful smile and came closer and closer still to Morse, pressing both his advantage and Morse's knee, "why don't we agree to start all over again? Take the best of what we had, and take what we can learn from it, and simply wipe the slate clean. A fresh beginning. I can court you, Pagan, with wine and flowers—" a sudden incandescence in the smile— "and opera, and you can put me on probation and let me prove myself to you, the way you would any stranger. Or—"

The hand moved, sliding along the muscle of his inner thigh, sliding right into his heart. "Or?" he asked, embarrassingly breathless from so little stimulation.

"Or, we could go to bed right now, and you could let me make love to you. You know, actually *show* you how I feel about you. And the third 'or', Pagan my old love, is that *you* could take *me* to bed right this very instant and fuck my brains out."

He had always loved it when Symie spoke like a gutter. He suddenly pictured them locked in sweaty, straining embrace, Symie's mouth aspate like the gutter after rain, his cock so beautiful and hard, and—

He hauled Symie in to ravage his mouth with his own, feeding on him in voracious

carnality, devouring, consuming, punishing even, his body hard and demanding, insistent, dominant, Symie melting into fire before him, returning passion for passion and—

Love. Oh, god, there it was, filling him, overwhelming him, being thrust into him with aching tenderness, strong arms pulling him in as if to meld them into one single body with everything shared, everything partnered, all of it together. It was more than it had been before, bolstered and buttressed by adult knowledge of what life was, if this were denied. There was desperation there, the visceral fear of losing this all over again, the gnawing horror of it all going wrong again.

But the love bandaged all that, leaving a tingle of healing where it touched, shooing fear back into the realms of the rational to sit quietly until its turn came again. Somewhere along the line, Morse's trousers had been undone, the zip gaping open, his cock still trapped inside the whiteness of his underwear, Symington's hand burrowing in to find him, Symington's tongue burrowing into his mouth to know every cell of him. Symie was on top of him, pressing him down into the sofa, a tangle of arms and legs that splayed and spread to compensate for the smallness of the furniture and Morse's hands were on Symington's buttocks, grinding him down as he himself thrust up, Symie's hand trapped between them. There was a sudden gathering explosion of sweetness in Morse's belly, and then Symie thrust down onto him again and he erupted in orgasm, coming and coming, his cry muffled by Symington's kissing.

The first thing he realised was that the shuddering heaving going on above him had nothing to do with uncontrolled lust and everything to do with uncontrolled mirth. Emasculated, he pushed at Symington, only to shove the man off the narrow sofa and be pulled off himself by an embrace that had lessened not at all. Tangled on the floor, a shoe discarded god-knew-when digging into his side, Morse was petted and kissed and adored, all of it punctuated by giggling hysteria.

"Find it amusing, do you?" he finally snapped, voice slapping some sense into Symington who subsided into controlled

hiccoughing delight.

"I'm sorry, I truly am. And it's not you I'm laughing at, Pagan, love. It's just—have you any idea how many times I've imagined our reunion since I left you? It must be absolutely thousands. And not once, not once, I tell you, did I ever think we'd end up like spotty teenagers, grappling on a couch and leaving sticky patches on our underwear. You didn't even touch me and look at me!"

"You too?" A symphony of disbelief, distrust and dismay.

"Well, what else did you expect with you going off like a rocket simply because it was me? Yes, Pagan, me too." Something in Morse's expression obviously betrayed him, for Symington added, "You can feel it if you like."

All the tension flowed out of him with that one comment, all the insecurities and inadequacies vanquished by that offer, for Symie knew him well enough to know that he would, actually, check. And he did, and he found not only a very damp, very sticky patch seeping through Symie's very expensive trousers, but he also found the humour of the situation, his eyes crinkling at the corners, his mouth lifting from its pout into a smile. "I've always liked to feel it," he said. "In fact, as you didn't even have the good manners to expose yourself in a lewd and libidinous manner, sir, I shall have to ask you to do so now."

"And I'm always more than willing to assist the police, constable."

"Constable! Why you—"

"Police brutality?" Symington purred, rolling onto his back and pulling Morse on top of his spread-eagled body. "Promises, promises."

"Like that kind of thing, do you?"

Symington looked at him with the remembered honesty that could cut, condemn and condone all in a glance. "You were my lover for longer than anyone else in my life. You tell me."

Morse gazed at him for a long time, then eased himself to his feet and reached a hand out to bring his friend with him. "The bedroom, I think," he murmured, leading the way, one hand holding his friend, the other holding his trousers up. "You have a lot of loving to catch up on."

"And you," a kiss on the nape of his neck, a hand stroking the cleft of his bum, "are just the man to do it."

Exhaustion-clogged brain, worn-out body too heavy to lift off the mattress, at first he thought the noise was his alarm clock, but insistent poundings thereupon hadn't shut the damned racket up. Then it filtered in as slowly as the knowledge that that was daylight burning through his eyelids. Doorbell. It was his doorbell, at some ungodly hour, rung by some ungodly demon who was going to end up with his balls in a sling and—

The unspoken diatribe ended the instant he opened the door and realised simultaneously that it was Lewis come to pick him up for work and that he had answered his own door in nothing but gaping dressing gown and a frown. He wiped the latter off his face and tugged the former tightly about his body, refusing point blank to blush when he saw the kiss-and-tell love-bites that decorated him.

"I'm not quite dressed yet," he said as if there was absolutely nothing worth commenting on. "Hang on half a tick," opening the door wide, wandering back towards the living room, Lewis in tow and realising, with a lurching of horror, that the bedroom door was lying wide open. And that Symie was lying on the bed, wide open, the rumpled sheet covering his left foot and nothing else. Swallowing hard, he whirled round to face Lewis and was confronted by a carefully blank expression.

"Shall I go on in to the office myself, sir, and tell them you've come down with this stomach bug that's going around?"

"Yes," he stammered, "you do that, Lewis." "Right you are then, sir. See you in a couple of days?"

"Make it Monday. Tell them I'm really flattened by it."

A quirk of a smile, quickly erased. "I'll see to it, sir. Monday it is, then. Oh, I'll, em," a nod at where the dressing gown, having been without belt from the start, had parted like the Red Sea again, "show myself out."

Dumbfounded, he stared at Lewis' departing back, shocked to the core by the other

man's casual acceptance. Good god, if *Lewis* knew and didn't bat an eyelid, then who the hell else knew? Or suspected, or assumed? Phrases, half-remembered questions, friendly enquiries, blunted ribbing. Never been married, at your age? Never found the right, ah, girl, eh, Morse? Just as well you've never married, the way you go on. But of course, you've never wanted a family, have you? Your sort never tie the knot—your sort of dedicated policeman, I mean, of course. And on, and on. Not to mention the other comments, not all of them nice, that he had shrugged off over the years.

So much for being in the closet, then.

And Lewis' reaction—or lack thereof—raised new questions and subtly altered some, turned others 180 degrees. If people knew, if it was already known about by his colleagues and superiors, was it all right? Or had it been all right so far simply because he'd had about as much sex life as a petrified forest?

A sound of movement caught his attention, and he turned round in time to see Symie roll over onto his stomach, his perfect buttocks and beautiful back displayed in the forgiving glow of morning sun. As if under thrall, Morse went into the bedroom, dropping his dressing gown at the foot of the bed, climbing beside his lover amidst much wincing and aching of muscles he hadn't used in far too long a time. Symie stirred again, one hand reaching out, and finding the space empty, eyes opened sleepily and Morse saw the moment when he himself was seen and Symie smiled at him without a single protective barrier in place. This, then, was to be one of those cases where omnia vincit amor, up to and including his own self-destructive doubts.

Of one thing he had no doubt whatsoever: he had never, ever, been loved so much before. Carefully fitting in beside Symie, he covered himself with sleep-warmed, welcoming flesh, until he was lying with Symie draped half over them, their heads sharing a pillow, faces only inches apart. There were so many questions, so many doubts, so many fears. Symie had loved him before, but left him anyway—why should this time be any different? And if it were, could he himself, bachelor content—if not precisely ecstatic—

to live alone, change his selfish habits after so many years of thinking about no-one but himself? And if miracle came true, what the hell about the real world of work and money and the reactions of neighbours and friends and colleagues? And what about—And what about the old axiom, he thought to himself, lying in the happiness of this bed, remembering the languid, halcyon days of his youth that had been ripped from him by a single abuse of love: abusus non tollit usum. Should he allow one abuse to forfeit himself all further use of this love? Or should—

Tomorrow, he thought, stopping the vicious circle dead and staring instead at the sleeping face of the one person he had loved and never stopped loving, he'd deal with all that tomorrow. There'd be time enough to-

morrow for the questions and the doubts and the fears. Today—carpe diem. That would be his new motto: enjoy the present day, and, to finish the rest of the quote, trust the least possible to the future. He was going to do precisely that, allow himself to enjoy this, to gambol in it like a child locked in a sweetie shop, inundating himself with sensation and with all the things he'd wanted for so long but had never been able to afford before. The probable problems...They could wait until tomorrow. Carpe diem, he repeated, hugging Symie closer and beginning to wake him with roving kisses and strolling hands, smiling to himself as he heard his own name whispered and a firming of desire pressing into his thigh, and love conquers all: they'd manage. He'd bloody-well see to it!

C I V I L SERVANTS

QUESTION TIMEM. FAE GLASGOW

The setting is slightly in the future, a Britain not quite of our own universe, but of one only a door or two away. So the details—well they don't quite match with reality, but given the right circumstances they could. And that's scary! The main character in this novella is Peter Balliol, introduced originally in the British television mini-series, For the Greater Good. Balliol is a Member of Parliament, a medical doctor, and a man of uncertain sexuality. The story, set some months after the end of the series, builds on what we already know and speculates about a particular undeveloped, unexplained relationship...

"Ан."

"What? Is that all you can say, Peter?" the Right Honourable Member for Gloucester whispered fiercely. "Ah? Christ, I need a better answer than that. My constituent is getting rather edgier than I care for, so close to a by-election. I need an answer—the *right* answer—about this bloody motorway before next month. And if you can't persuade the Minister to help us on this, I can't guarantee that we'll win the seat again."

"Surely," Dr. Peter Balliol whispered, quietly enough that the microphone dangling over his Honourable Friend, the Member for Finchley, would not pick up his voice, "the situation isn't as bad as all that. Didn't we have a 12, 000 majority last time?"

"Almost 14,000. But the mess over taxes and cutting Old Age Pensions is hitting us very hard. Even the Liberals are looking like competition this time. And if that motorway plan goes through..."

The latest skirmish between the ambitious front bencher and the Prime Minister was over for the moment, the Speaker calling for—Balliol craned his neck a little, until he could see the Member for Aberystwyth lumbering wearily to his feet. The poor old codger was showing his illness, with the hollowed cheeks and parchment skin that shouted 'cancer' so loudly. "Ah," he said, turning away as if to pay full attention to the Speaker.

Beside him, another breath was drawn to launch into another speech and Balliol went on, hurriedly, "I shall speak to the Minister for you, George," he whispered, not really paying any attention to the flatulent MP who always insisted on sitting beside him, cold shoulders ineffectual against so thick a hide. But the promise worked where argument and threats never had: the Right Honourable, the Reverend George Maxwell, shut up, sitting back to ruminate on the proceedings of the House whilst his bloated belly rumbled and grumbled away under white shirt and perfectly cut city suit.

Balliol escaped as distantly as he could from the threatened eruption, sitting as far forward as possible, legs crossed, right elbow resting on right knee, chin nestled into his palm, an expression of engrossed concentration all over his face, the bovine 'hear, hears' chuntering away in the background. Behind the glittering sparkle of his glasses, his eyes were

sharply focussed on the slight back of the Prime Minister, whilst his mind wandered over his surroundings, the PM's voice nothing more than a pleasant background drone, to be ignored today, for all the questions on the List were minor, nothing that posed either embarrassment or threat for the Government. He himself had briefed the PM on the Question about the new police powers, all the pat reassurances duly trotted out—although he did think his little reference/joke thingy about good old bobbies had gone down rather well. Nothing to worry about really, anyway. After all, if one couldn't trust in the decency of the average, decent policeman—and he was honestly quite sure that the bastards who had raided the Club the night he'd been in it were aberrations, not representations—then who could one trust? And the expansion of Sections 25 and 28 were going to get nothing more than the usual leftish Liberal-type questions, and those were easily enough taken care of. He squirmed in his seat a little, helpless to stop his attention turning to the Chief Whip, the man who held the keys to all the dirty secrets, and an awful lot of the closets too. Really, what could he do, but try to convince himself that it was all right? He certainly couldn't rock the boat, not with the skeletons he had in his own personal closet. Wouldn't do, simply would not do. No, best to just sit tight and help where he could. Better than being thrown out in disgrace, for how could one possibly effect change from beyond the Pale?

For all his respect for the system, for all his belief in the measured pace of democratic process, he thought that there must surely be a better way to conduct Prime Minister's Question Time than this. The PM always looked foolish, jumping up and down like a yo-yo to answer each question as it was hurled at him, or bobbing up like a grateful child at its own birthday party when one of his own MPs rose to pat him on the back in carefully rehearsed fawning.

That was his job today. Last Question was his, and the Minister had told him to use it to congratulate the PM on the resoundingly successful privatisation of Immigration detention at all the major points of entry. A rip-

roaring success, oh, yes, certainly. If one weren't some terrified refugee fleeing to one's old Colonial masters as the last hope of safety. He frowned then, glowering at the PM's back, for once completely oblivious to the cameras that hovered and darted to capture the rowdy process of government for the masses to devour along with their supper. That report he'd seen, the unofficial one sent out by the refugee rights' group...

He shifted, leaning back against the rich green leather of the bench, stretching his legs out as far as they could go, giving himself a feeling of freedom. Which, his conscience pricked him, was more than those pathetic refugees had. Held for weeks or months in conditions little better than work-camps... But that was only what the radicals said, and they were hardly what could be called unbiased.

Rather like his own Government, really.

Which was not the kind of thing he should be thinking, not sitting here in the panoply of the House of Commons, backside resting so comfortably on the padded leather bench, directly behind the PM himself, a position that declared how high his star was rising, if you were one of the privileged few who were also privy to the unspoken symbolism of the House. And he was, now. Almost hadn't been. Almost hadn't been in the House at all. If it hadn't been for...

What the hell was she *doing?* According to the list, she was going to ask about the acquisitioning of additional buildings to house the school overflow, nothing about the explosion of AIDS in prisons! He leant forward again, heart thudding, adrenalin flooding him, and he wasn't quite sure why, at first. Then he recognised it, even as the PM rose to his feet and spoke, his shilly-shallying whitewashing causing an uproar. Balliol's glance darted about, quick eyes taking in the contrast of sedate Parliamentary chamber with its rich wood all aglow, and the rippling rumble of outraged MPs. No-one was sitting still it seemed; no-one was keeping their own counsel, voices rising in a cacophonous mockery of choristry. But Peter Balliol was quiet, Peter Balliol was still, for his guilt had locked him in place, as surely as if he were

still in the third form and caught out by a Master for being in the gymnasium changing rooms instead of out on the cricket grounds warming up. The Prime Minister's flim-flam had succeeded, the racket from outraged parliamentarians drowning out even thought, the Speaker hammering his gavel and shouting, "Order! Order!" with all the success of a constipated gnat. However, with enough droning on, with a severe enough lack of response (the PM was sitting on his dignity, looking very grim indeed), even the loudest of mobs will eventually turn either to violence or silence, and this being the House, silence finally won—although by a worrisomely small majority.

Balliol was leaning back in his own bench, watching with the extreme care of self-preservation, who was speaking to whom, and where the battle-lines had been drawn. Interestingly enough, it was not along the usual party lines, there being more than a few turncoats amongst his own colleagues. Surprising rather than interesting was the fact that even the draconian Fforbes-Smith was on the side of the SNP woman: odd, that. Those two were usually incapable of speaking to each other in the same language, never mind actually finding a political hot-potato on which to agree.

It was Hewitt's turn for a Question. Balliol sat back and relaxed: the day's excitement was surely over. He listened with half his attention to the usual bleat on unemployment, then checked his watch very quietly while the PM bobbed up to deliver his answer. Only a few moments of Question Time were left, and Moynahan was up next: she was really quite sweet and an excellent team-player, so she would consume the rest of the time with her customary, cloying congratulations that were merely phrased as questions to give a nod to the proper form.

"Would my Right Honourable friend, the Prime Minister, not agree—"

Balliol stifled a yawn and started to run through the appointments he had for the rest of the day.

"—that it is barely short of criminal abuse to withhold treatment at local health centres and hospitals for AIDS patients?" Balliol came bolt upright in his seat, as shocked as the rest of the House, a hum of morbidly curious silence hanging over the room.

"And would my Right Honourable friend not also agree, that it is indeed a criminal act to find someone guilty on nothing more than circumstantial evidence—" a rising wave of noise, of protest, and of support drowning out the protest, but her clear voice was still carrying high above it, a clarion call.

"—such as time served in one of Her Majesty's prisons or one of the new immigrant detention centres or the mere appearance of homosexuality to decide that someone has AIDS and is therefore to be segregated and sent—"

She was shouting now, almost screaming, insisting that she be heard, and Balliol remembered now that her brother had died only yesterday, and he had only been in his early thirties.

"—to so-called specialised facilities that are nothing more than charnel houses for the dying to die in!"

Uproar. Absolute uproar, and this time, Balliol wondered if the battle would remain purely verbal. Words were hurled with all the speed and lethalness of ballistic missiles, epithets were buried like serrated knives and then twisted and left to fester, colleague to colleague, people who were going to have to work together to run the country and who were supposed to sit together on advisory panels. Fforbes-Smith, purple in the face and pounding on the bench in front of him, Balliol noted, had obviously just lost himself the much-coveted Minister for Health spot. He himself sat very still, drawing, he supposed, no attention to himself at all, whilst the rumbling belly beside him lumbered to its feet to join its bellowing voice and shaking fist to the mêlée.

Sun westering slowly, night beginning its slow stroll in to claim yet another day, and there were a multitude of interesting things happening in London, but only two were of any real interest to our story. It matters not to us that Fforbes-Smith went home and locked himself in his study to down several measures

of a very fine single malt in singular misery at his own stupidity in losing his temper and thus, the plum of a job. And although we sympathise, Margaret Moynahan has already had her place in our tale, and so we leave her to mourn, in dignity and in private, with what remained of her family.

No, for us, the places of interest are a small, beautifully appointed chamber within Whitehall, and a rather ugly street in a rather ugly part of the city. But let us deal with first things first...

"No, I still stick with what I said before. We should recommend Balliol for the Ministry. You saw how he handled himself during that shameful riot today," the Chief Whip said as soon as they were all seated.

"Handle himself?" sneered the career Civil-Servant, the man who actually held the most power in this room, in his humble opinion, despite the fond delusions of the two politicians.

"Would you care to elucidate on that, just a trifle-if you don't mind, Godfrey?" murmured the Chief Whip, thinking this the perfect time to bring this particular meeting to heel and remind these two who was the real power here.

"Certainly, certainly," Godfrey Wilmington answered with the political correctness of the career Civil Servant. "Peter Balliol didn't handle himself at all, unless you count managing not to pee himself as some kind of self-control. He did absolutely nothing, nothing at all. He sat there like a pretty penguin and kept his mouth shut."

"But isn't that how you prefer your pet politicians to behave? I would have thought that, as he's going to be your Minister, you would quite enjoy having someone who knows how to sit still and look pretty while you got on with the job of running the Department?" sniped the third man, the one who was convinced that, as the holder of the real purse strings, it was he who was the towering power in this room.

"Time, gentlemen, please," the Whip said, before the usual feud could re-commence. He had another two meetings this evening, one of them business, one of them a distinct pleasure, and he had no intention of letting this pair of old women throw him behind schedule. Anyway, his mind—and therefore, the PM's, although the PM didn't know that yet—was already made up on who would be the lucky man: this meeting was pure politics, a means to the end of keeping the troops happy and busying away like proverbial little beavers.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Now, surely you can take my point?" the Whip continued. "Balliol has proved himself before—and over this very same prison issue, I might add—to most...sensible, regarding Government's policy."

"True," Godfrey answered, thinking about his own evening, and how much he had yet to accomplish before the new man-whoever he might be—came in and started nosing around where he had no business to nose. "And I do concede that he was amenable in the past, and perhaps it was wisest today to do nothing at all amidst that rabble. But still, with that dubious incident in the gay club clinging to his name..."

"That has been quite tidily explained away, after that witness we...found came forward to admit that he had asked Dr. Balliol to meet him there with the promise of confidential information. But think about this, both of you," the Whip went on, "and take into consideration that it is in the best interest not only of ourselves that the present government be returned at the general election—which, if polls continue as they have done, the PM might hold as early as November-but it is also in the very best interests of the nation. Peter Balliol is that rarest of mammals: a politician the public regard as a man of integrity. He is enough of a rebel-but," and he pointed, quite rudely, to make his point all the more emphatic, "never in such a way that would seriously harm the government. He has great visual appeal, particularly to the younger and the higher-educated voter; he is a doctor, which appeals to the elderly and to those who hold certain authorities in awe. He has charm, when he chooses to use it, and he is not a fool: he listens most carefully when the situation arises."

"But surely his comparative youth and

lack of seniority should be held against him?" the civil servant asked, with the native distrust Permanent Secretaries had for all those under the sensible and sedimentary age of fifty.

"Not at all," said the financial adviser, better known to the public as a rather diffident and shy back-bencher, "for that will mitigate the position Minister will give him in our own party, so he will be able to boost the party's image and thus help with votes across the board, but will be so resented for leapfrogging over the heads of the more experienced, etc., etc., that he will be basically powerless. Apart from whichever power we choose to give him to deal with those certain matters which are of interest to us."

"Which is precisely what we need. Someone to bring the votes in, but someone who won't rock the boat. And let us not forget something else, gentlemen. Peter Balliol will be Prime Minister one day. One simply has to look at him to know that he could win an election for us—but one day, when he is a little older and a little...wiser. We want that man on our side. We do not want to risk him becoming restless and perhaps joining one of the Opposition to form one of those dreadful mongrel amalgamated parties. Were he to do that—"

"With the right public relations firm, they could give us a run for our money," said the money-man.

"Worse than that," said the very civil Civil Servant, "they could win, and that would take us back to pre-Thatcherism." The words brought a shudder of horror to each of the three men: pre-Thatcher would mean a return to the 70's, with Labour Unions wielding power and Government on the run, with miners striking and holding the country hostage instead of striking and ending up in hospital. For these three, that was the proverbial fate worse than death.

But the holder of the purse strings murmured, "I'm still not entirely convinced—pretty though he undoubtedly is—that he will be PM one day—"

"Take my word for it," murmured the Chief Whip, leaving the other two in no doubt whatsoever that he had some very pertinent information he was not at luxury to reveal. "Our pretty puppet will, indeed, have his turn at answering Questions in the House instead of merely asking them. I," he smiled with the serenity of a hungry piranha, "can guarantee it."

"Well, if that's the case, then I withdraw my objection," said the man who was going to have to endure Balliol as boss, recognising that certain things had already been put in motion by those and such as those, which meant that protest would do him no good at all, and could actually do him a great deal of harm: one simply did not want to have a question mark placed against one's loyalty. "I will support Balliol and start dropping the word in the necessary ears."

"And you?" the Whip asked, turning with courtly politesse to the third man.

"I accede to your superior knowledge," came the answer, redolent with the ill-grace of one who has learned that his is not the power at all.

"Well, in that case, gentlemen, shall we adjourn?"

As the Chief Whip was rising to his well-shod feet, Godfrey asked the final question. "But if he should start to get out of line, the way he did last year, asking those dreadful questions about the arming of the police and that hunger-striking agitator—what was his name? Not that one trouble-making prisoner matters, but what if Balliol should get a similar bee under his bonnet again?"

"Then I shall tug on precisely the same leash I used then, shan't I?" All three of the supremos knew, in detail, what that leash was: the quiet dropping of a charge of assault and battery against a police officer and the producing of a witness to explain away what the hell Dr. Peter Balliol, MP, had been doing in a well-known gay club. "I assure you," the Whip purred, thinking on how satisfyingly effective the mere reminder of that little débâcle had proved to be, "it will be just as effective then as it is now. Dr. Balliol is too deeply...indebted to us to cause us any little anxieties."

And that, as far as they were all concerned, was the final answer.

The second interesting thing, and in fact,

the more interesting of the two, was about to begin.

The wind blowing the cobwebs of Parliament out of his mind, Peter Balliol strode along the street looking far more certain and determined than he felt. In fact, his doubts were such behemoths—should he, could he, how could he *not?*—that he hesitated outside the beckoning lights of the pub on the corner, finally going in and sitting down at a very small table with a very large brandy.

The people around them went on living their lives, their chatter and their music not so much background for his own life, but filler for the silence of his. His life: whatever that was. Oh, his wife was with him still, technically speaking anyway, but nothing could take away the knowledge he had that Naomi had wanted—and, he was quite sure, still wanted—to leave him. Divorce. Complete and final, but she had rallied round the cause, as it were, when...

Damn it all, he actually missed the Club. It was one of only two places he actually felt himself to be himself, not simply some appropriate rôle: doctor, Member of Parliament, husband, father. But never simply himself. He always had to be what they needed him to be, for if he didn't...

In the end, even playing the part as well as he was able hadn't been enough. Naomi had wanted a divorce and his sons had neither known him nor wanted to know him. Work was a battlefield, home was a mine-field of resentful adolescence and a slowly estranged wife, and his private life—oh, his private life was a cease-fire tiptoing on the edge of a fullfledged civil war. Up until the police had raided the Club that night and he had given in to a rage he hadn't even known he possessed and finished up being arrested for assaulting a police officer, he had had two sanctuaries against all the questions and doubts and amorphous unhappiness, and those two refuges had helped him retain some semblance of a status quo in his life. Had helped tremendously, actually, their absence only proving how invaluable they had been to him.

This pub, and he looked around it as he thought, was not the sort of place he needed—certainly not what the doctor ordered! Here,

amidst the tired-old chat-up lines and the mating rituals of the majority, he still had to play one of his better-rehearsed rôles: that of butch heterosexual male. He sighed over that, and left off looking around and went back to contemplating his own inner structure. Whenever he stopped to think of it, which luxury he only very rarely allowed himself, he really, really hated being straight. Or was it that he really hated being gay? Well, no, neither was strictly true, he thought, contemplating the complexities of his home life, which was his favourite way of neatly avoiding the core issue. He loved his wife dearly and felt a shudder of fear every time he considered a life without her strength and support at his side. But he loathed the lying, to himself even more than to the others. This self-imprisonment in a cage of lies and halftruths made him want to scream—or beat up a policeman for daring to raid one of his two sanctuaries, destroying the second one with incidental malice.

His second sanctuary. That was why he was here. Well, not here *per se*, but on this street. Someone he knew had just been released from prison. Someone he had once needed rather badly and needed rather more desperately now.

Colin.

Colin, who had tried to stop the police from seeing Balliol that night at the Club, who had been willing to suffer arrest to give Balliol those extra few minutes that might let him escape to the very undignified, the very seedy, but also the very straight club upstairs. He wondered, as he sipped his rather nasty brandy, whether he would have preferred the life that slipped through his fingers the night they caught him in a gay club. Moot question, really, but he turned it round and round in his mind, examining it, mourning the status quo. He was uncomfortable around change, never quite sure how he should react to it: that came, he supposed, from never being able to allow himself to react with visceral instinct, always having to stifle certain impulses and certain attitudes. Of always having to search for meaning and emotion in the life that he publicly lived, making himself useful in lieu of actually living.

Naomi had accused him of that, before he'd been arrested and she'd been such a brick. His best friend, really, when it came down to it. And how, he wondered, would she feel if she were to find out that after all we've been through, I'm shilly-shallying about contemplating going to see my gay ex-lover? Who might not be my ex-lover at all, depending on what happens tonight...

Grimacing, he tossed back the last of his brandy, tears stinging his eyes as the dutch courage set fire to his belly. He left the dingy racket of the pub and went on down the street, his jacket slung across his shoulder, the expensive Savile Row silk dangling from one finger. There was no need for the sliver of paper in his pocket: he had a very good memory for addresses, and this one was particularly easy to remember simply because it was particularly important.

He started paying attention to house numbers as they lowered steadily towards the one he sought and there it was, near the corner, the façade crumbling and stained, cheap curtains hung from sagging wires at dirty windows. Not the kind of place he usually frequented, but then, this wasn't quite what Colin had been accustomed to, either. The was a front door, but it was propped open by a milk crate where some children had been playing at shop with crumpled knots of concrete and tattered, yellowed leaves. A list of names, most of them scrawled, one of them a rather pointed and very rude admonishment, hung haphazardly from the outside wall. He checked to make sure that his information was correct, and then began his way upstairs. The first flight was filthy, the second immaculate, the third also reassuringly clean. The door he wanted was on the right, a small name-plate screwed immediately beneath the peep-hole.

Nervous, Balliol rang the bell and stood there, waiting, his nervousness growing by the minute. Literally on the threshold of his decision, he wasn't sure if this was the right thing to do. In fact, he was fairly positive that it was a very bad idea indeed, but he had had to come. For Colin's sake, if not his own. He owed him that much at least. Footsteps approached the door, then stopped and Balliol

knew himself to be observed. He held very still, swallowing almost convulsively, wondering if he should stay or go. The decision, without any further preamble was made for him. The door opened, and Colin, thinner, appearing more than just a year older, was standing staring at him.

"Ah," Peter Balliol said, one of his dictionary of impressively expressive 'ahs' with which he managed to avoid saying almost everything at almost every given circumstance. Or which he used to say absolutely everything when words were insufficient or too dangerous by half.

"Better come in then, I suppose, before her next door sees you and invites you in for tea. She's got eight cats and I think she's got them trained to piss in the tea-pot to save her buying tea-bags."

Balliol followed him in, through the minute hall and into the sitting room, which had obviously been part of a large bay-windowed parlour before sub-subdivision.

"Have a seat," Colin said to him, ever so casually. "I'll put the kettle on. Can't offer you much, but I do have those chocolate biscuits you like?"

"Yes, yes, that would be fine. Colin—"

But Colin had gone, disappeared through the doorway, presumably into the kitchen. Remembering numerous other times in Colin's old flat, Balliol knew better than to go into the kitchen, for Colin hated people seeing things at less than their best and no matter how clean he kept this place, Balliol sincerely doubted that it had been at its best for a good twenty years, if not longer. He contented himself instead with wandering around the room, picking up some familiar objects, the precious knick-knacks that would have been kept for Col by his sister, the cheap secondhand furniture that would have been bought when he came out of prison. There were very few books, which surprised him, Colin being the most voracious reader he had ever known. They had argued, cheerfully or intensely, depending on their mood, more times than they had had sex, actually, and perhaps, he conceded, with more honest feeling on his part.

There were only two plants, sorry speci-

mens that looked as if they needed more light, despite being on the table that filled the bay where a window seat had once reclined. A small television, a portable stereo-cassette and—he looked around, wondering where it was and then he found it: the familiar ball of grey fur. "Hello, Gandalf," he said, tickling under a chin that raised itself luxuriously for him. "It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"You know, that sums you up, doesn't it?" Colin said bitterly, coming back into the room, complete with mugs and plate.

"Pardon?" Balliol said, whirling round as if caught stealing.

"I've been in prison fourteen months because of you, and not a single word from you. Then when you show up here, all you can say to me is 'ah', but my bloody cat gets an entire conversation. Still hiding then, are you, Peter?"

"Ah," he said, and flustered, melting suddenly into the smile that could charm birds from the trees and Chief Whips from displeasure. "I've missed you. There, is that better?"

"Ah," said Colin, mocking, putting the mugs down and taking the plate of melting chocolate biscuits from its precarious perch on top of one of them. "Actually, yeah, that is better. Quite a bit better, really."

"I..." He wasn't exactly good at actually mentioning feelings; almost as poor at it as he was at recognising them in himself. "I really did miss you, you know. Missed having you to talk to-missed listening to you, for that matter."

"Missed fucking me too?" Colin asked him, an acid bite to his words. The smell of fourteen months in prison was still on his skin, as far as he was concerned. It didn't seem to matter how many baths and showers he had taken in the last two and a half weeks, he just couldn't get the stench off, and here was Peter talking as if they were nothing more than old chums who occasionally shared a cup of tea, or who went to the theatre and discussed art together. When nothing could be farther from the truth, their relationship defined by clandestine needs and barred from the social, limited to the sexual. "Missed the fucking most of all?"

Balliol looked at him as if he might say 'ah' again.

"And if you say 'ah', then I'll murder you," he said, letting Peter off the hook. It wasn't Peter's fault he had to keep so sodding quiet about this half of his life, and he didn't want to start the acrimony again. "So go on, think of something else. And if you can't think of anything, then don't say anything at all. Or at least," he said, softening still more, affection and love reminding him of how wonderful this man could be, "make it one of your meaningful 'ahs'."

"One that would tell you how terribly sorry I am that I abandoned you to your fate like that? Or one that would tell you how much I regret not being able to stay in contact with vou?"

"It's not as if I expected anything else, is it? I knew what I was doing when I tried to fend the police off for you on that staircase at the Club—didn't know you were going to be thick enough to join in the fight, did I? Bloody stupid thing to do, that. You could've got away scot free, instead of getting done over the way you did."

Balliol drank his tea, munching his way through the chocolate biscuits he loved and in which Colin, who hated them, indulged him shamelessly. It touched him, really, that in amidst everything else that was happening, Colin would have remembered to buy him his biscuits. Which reminded him: he took a large, white envelope from his inner pocket and placed it on the small table. "Please," he said as Colin got that obstreperously proud look to him again, "don't argue with me. Look at it as being my guilt-money, if you must, but take it."

"I'm not some fucking chit you can buy—

"And I'm not trying to buy you! Colin, you earned a very decent income being a waiter at the Club, and you were good at it. But who's going to employ you now?" he asked, facing the realities he was good at dealing with, those of practicality and fiscality, the kinds of things he could actually help with. The kinds of things he could make himself useful over. "You now have a criminal record, you've been placed on probation—well, don't look so

shocked. Of course I checked your records, how else did you expect me to find you?—and dole money isn't enough to live on, so I've been told. Whereas I have more money than I can spend: let me help you."

"How's that going to look on *your* record, eh? They'll forgive you for keeping a mistress, but they'll hang you by your balls for keeping a black fairy."

"But they won't find out, will they?"

"Not from me," Colin snapped, stung by a criticism that was there only in his own mind, fed by the depression of prison, "but then, I didn't tell them you were gay either, but they found that out, too, didn't they?"

Neither of them spoke after that, falling into an awkward silence whilst the sun setting turned the room orange, then violet, and finally, grey as the last of the day faded and night crept in. The tea was long gone, and the thread of conversation so unravelled that neither one of them knew where to pick it up again. Finally, Colin stood to put the light on, and Balliol looked at him, really looked at him. What he saw dismayed him. Oh, to other eyes, eyes that had never seen Colin before prison, he would probably look wonderful, truly gorgeous, but Balliol had known him for several years. But never, not once, looking quite like this. Colin's skin had lost its inner glow, the black now almost matte, dull in the dim light, compared to the vibrant healthy sheen he remembered with such a kick of passion in his belly. The bone structure was flaunted now by a lack of excess flesh, until Colin was the image of some beauty in a magazine, but not the lush man that he had been. The discreet muscles, hard won with hours of weight-training to fill-out a sparrow physique had been whetted down to the lean sinew more commonly seen on the Masai than a bloke living in central London and therefore central Western decadence.

"My god," Balliol whispered, "what did they do to you?"

"Believe me, you don't want to know any of it and you wouldn't believe half of it even if I did tell you."

"No, I do want to know," Balliol said, coming to his feet, his hand encircling Colin' forearm. "What did they do to you that you're

so thin?"

Colin looked down his nose at him, and for a moment, he was unrecognisable as the thoroughly nice, rather sweet man Balliol had almost admitted to himself that he loved; then the banked up anger siphoned off into some walled-up secret compost heap, leaving behind the warmth that Balliol had craved without quite daring to confess it. Better to pretend that such feelings didn't even exist than to try to assimilate them into the supposed eminent respectability of a Member of Parliament and happily married man.

"Oh, come and sit down, Peter," Colin muttered, tugging at his friend and lover, knowing that Balliol was nowhere near ready to hear what prison had been like, and protecting him from the habit of caring. "Not much point in us standing here like this, is there? And listen, thanks for the money. I won't tell you it's not useful, because it is. You're right about the dole money, I don't mind telling you."

"I have a friend who runs a restaurant—"
"No." So flat, so unequivocal that it brought
Balliol up short.

"No? No to me helping you, no to my friend, or no to the restaurant?"

"Just no, all right? Look, let's change the subject a bit. I've been worried about you—some of that stuff in the papers was really bad at the start. *The Sun* just about crucified you, and the things they were asking your kids, god, that was awful!"

"Actually," Balliol said, leaning back against the lumpy sofa, Colin's presence relaxing him more than anything else in his life could, "that was the most surprising thing about it all, really. It was the most amazing thing. This whole mess forced me to realise that my sons aren't children any more, but young men, as grown up, in some ways, as they'll ever be. More, in some ways, than I am." He stopped for a second, remembering, then smiling at the memory. "I was terrified about having to face them, but the elder one walked up to me and actually hugged me-he hasn't hugged me in years, absolutely years, since he was a very small boy—and he said that he was glad that my secret was out, because it explained so much about me. D'you know," he chuckled, his grin lighting his face up, disguising the glow of delight at being here with Colin, sitting side by side with Colin, close enough to touch, "he actually thought it was better to have a father who was a closeted homosexual than simply a cold, unfeeling bastard, which is what he'd thought I was, prior to all this?"

Colin was fighting off a smile, and failing, the smile becoming a giggle, then the most infectious of laughter. "Oh, god, Peter, only you! I suppose though, it does make sense. I mean, to find out your dad's a bit odd because he's queer!"

It was one thing to smile at the memory of filial reconciliation, quite another for someone to laugh at his sufferings. "I'm glad you find it all so funny. I can assure you it certainly didn't feel that way—"

"Don't you dare, Peter," Colin snapped, no trace of the humour left now. "Don't you sit there in your expensive suit and your expensive shoes and your expensive dinner sitting in your well-fed belly and even think about whining about how much you've suffered. Not after what I've been through."

"Ah," Balliol said, conveying more regret, remorse and recanting than most people could with a ten-page speech. Not knowing what else to say, and suddenly very, very tired—or very, very depressed, the two seemed interchangeable these days—he rubbed his nose, took his glasses off to polish them. Without the aid of the lenses, his eyes had that typically almost-pained look the very short-sighted have when bereft. Slightly unfocused, wholly repentant, he was quite simply irresistible. Especially if you were in love with the man, which Colin was.

"Oh, come here," the younger man said, pulling Balliol into his arms, cradling him in close. "You always were one for putting your own problems right in front of your nose so that you couldn't see anything else. No, don't put your glasses back on—" taking them from Peter, placing them on the table out of harm's way, "shan't be able to cuddle you properly with those sticking into me."

"I'm not sure you can cuddle me properly as it is—with those ribs of yours sticking into me." There was a long pause, the kind of silence that used to be called pregnant, as

they both waited for Balliol to give birth to the question once again.

"Was it really dreadful? In prison, I mean." "D'you really have to ask?"

Balliol thought about this, thought about what he knew, in his privileged position in a privileged class in a privileged government and said, "Actually, yes, I do."

"I thought you knew what was going on in all the prison and detention and all that."

"Ah. You've been reading the papers again, haven't you? I'm a junior Minister, quietly shuffled off to the side until all the controversy died down and I could be useful to them again. I don't get told anything and part of the tacit agreement is that I also don't ask any questions, especially not the difficult sort."

"Thought it might be blackmail."

"Oh, I wouldn't call it that."

"No? Then what the fuck would you call it then?"

"Creative management?" Balliol said with the whimsy that marked him when he was at his most despairing. "The art of conversation or should that be the art of conversion?"

"I know-the art of coercion."

"I wish that were ridiculous enough to be funny."

"So do I. Look, Peter, why didn't you get out? I tried to give you time, I tried to give you a chance, and what did you do? Threw your career away fighting a battle that I'd picked to get you off the hook in the first place. What'd you go and do that for?"

"Do you know, I've wondered about that. I've thought and thought and thought. And I simply don't know the answer."

Colin played with the collar-length brown hair, scrunching it in his hands, playing with the curving shine of it after. He said, to the top of Peter's head where he was curled in against Colin, "Come on, Peter, you can tell me. Even if it was just you living up to your name and refusing to grow up."

"If it were that, then it was a hell of a time to start playing pirates, wasn't it? No, it was...oh, I don't know. I'd just been so pushed by everyone. And if they weren't pushing me, they were pulling me. And the lying, oh, god!" he rolled his eyes heavenward, his jaw clenched with anger. "Lying to my wife about my work, lying at work about my wife, and then when I finally got to the Club, which is what I was lying to both lots about, I had to lie to *you*."

"Because you were going home with other blokes?"

"Ah. I suppose I really should have expected that."

"Of course you should! I've got eyes in my head, haven't I? You'd sit and chat to some bloke and then you'd tell me you were going home, and when I looked around, hey presto! The bloke would be gone too. Course I knew. I'm not an ostrich like you, you know."

"Well, isn't it a bit of the pot calling the kettle black," he dropped a quick kiss on ebony skin, "—so to speak."

"No, nothing like that at all. Unlike someone I could mention, I didn't go home with strangers."

"Ah. Just with me, then?"

"Nah, told you, didn't go home with strangers! Seriously, I'd seen too many statistics and too many sick people to go home with someone I wasn't fairly sure of. You had a reputation for being a top only, and careful with it, so even though I knew I shouldn't, I went home with you that time. Well, brought you home with me, that is."

"Do you regret that?" Balliol asked, somewhere in the region of Colin's right nipple.

Fondly, Colin smiled down on him, hugging him a little bit tighter, gentle because of the insecurity of this man. "I ended up in a pit of a prison for you, I've lost my job, my flat and my motorbike. Course I regret it, some of it. But most of it—I'd do it all over again. 'Cept this time, I wouldn't waste my time trying to get you upstairs to the straight club. I'd just knock you out and prop you on the stairs, say you were drunk or something. Anything to stop you clouting that policeman." Colin bestowed a kiss on the crown of Peter's head, and his voice betrayed his pride when he went on: "It was lovely to see, though, you all worked up like that, fighting to protect me."

"So you've developed a taste for violence, have you?" He paused, stricken, thinking about some of the reports he had seen before they'd caged him with his promotion. "I'm sorry, that's not something we can joke about now, is it?"

"Not even close, love. Peter..."

"Yes?"

"How did your wife take it? Finding out about you, I mean?" Colin wasn't sure that he wanted to hear the answer, any of the possible answers. He would be jealous as hell if she took it well, upset if she'd taken it badly because Peter would be hurt by that, and he simply did not want to know if her reaction had been complicated. "I know she was great about it, stood by you and all that, leastways, that's what the papers said, but in private, how was she there?"

"Honestly? She was actually keener on me for a while than she had been for a long time before. The thought of me with men excited her, you see. She wanted me to tell her what my male lovers looked like and what we did. She wanted to know every single gory detail..."

Colin felt his gorge rise, nausea stunning him. To think that Peter had been in bed with her, talking about *them*, about what they'd done, in all the gory details... "You bastard, you absolute bastard!" he shouted, shoving Balliol away, jumping to his feet. "I'm in prison because of you, and you and her are getting your jollies talking about what you and me did—'in every single gory detail'. Oh, that's rich, that's really rich."

Balliol had found his glasses by now and struggled to his feet, hands turned outwards to plead. "No, Colin, not you. I never told her a word about you. Yes, yes, I told her all about the others, but I never so much as mentioned you."

"You expect me to believe that? Look, Peter, I know how important having the right wife is to a man like you and I know, I mean, I really know what you'd do to keep her, because you're convinced you couldn't tie your fucking shoelaces if the little woman wasn't at home to back you up. So don't you go lying to me, not now. I've had it with you lying to me, d'you hear me? Had it up to here—" and he made a chopping gesture at his throat, his words snarling out around his rage, "—with you lying to me and I'm not going to put up with it any more! No more, Peter, no more lies. Don't you get it? Lies hurt

more than truth does, in the end. And I just don't want any more of it."

"Sit down, Colin, come on, sit down. That's better." Balliol ran his fingers through his hair and sighed heavily. "So you want the truth, do you?"

"Yes and after this long, I think I'm entitled."

"Very well. The truth about Naomi, myself and our marriage bed." Another sigh, lips pursing after, then the glasses were taken off and polished again, making Balliol blind enough that he couldn't see Colin, and his eyes so blankly incapable of focussing that they were no longer mirrors to the soul. He hemmed and hawed for a minute, began: "Ah. Yes, well..." Then another deep breath, and this time: "I'm impotent. Unless we talk about my men friends, that is. I don't seem quite able to function with her—or anyone, really—without going through elaborate mental charades that once the sweating and the heaving are over and done with, well, quite frankly, none of it seems worth the effort."

It would have been easier for Colin to believe it if Balliol had told him he was having a sex-change operation. "You? Impotent? For a night or two, maybe, happens to all of us. Maybe even a week. But like that? You? Pull the other leg, it's got bells on."

Balliol laughed, self-mocking and without even trace elements of humour. "I didn't expect you to believe that, not really. But...it is true. I've even popped in to see the urologist a couple of times. Nothing physical, just all in my mind."

"You're serious, aren't you? But—"

"Because I was twice a night and three times on Sundays? Because it was my libido that got us both into this stink in the first place? I simply couldn't keep away from the Club and the sex I could get from the men I met there. The Club was always my refuge, but I hardly need tell you that, do I? I could get whatever I needed there: sex, companionship, the chance to relax and not pretend... My arrest, and then you being in prison, destroyed all that. I couldn't go back to the Club, I didn't dare even go near another one, so I had lost both the places I went to when I needed a chance to be just me. Which is," he confessed,

safe to admit it here, with Colin, who knew and didn't mind and loved him for it, "predominantly homosexual, with a dash of heterosexual thrown injust for good measure, but overall—I'm simply sexual. Apart from after I was arrested. But it was almost as if, because I had lost you and the Club, that I had lost the places I used to define myself and my sexuality, so it was as if I had lost my sexuality as well."

"Psychological crap. Get off it, Peter!"

"No, I'm serious. Go on, think about it for a minute. Where, apart from the Club or with you, could I ever be myself? I mean, completely and totally honest? Hmm? Precisely!"

"But you were never 'completely and totally' honest, were you, Peter? You always had your secrets. There were always other men, little rendezvous that you thought were behind my back." He pushed Balliol away, getting to his feet and pacing the room that wasn't much bigger than his cell had been but at least he didn't have to share this room with five other men until the only walking area was the eighteen inch space between the bunk beds. "And then," he went on, voice aggrieved, hand shaking as he rubbed it over the short nap of his hair, "then there was your wife, and your kids, that you never told me about until I saw a picture of you in the paper with them. So don't you come telling me you were honest—"

The calm brutality of it bloodied him, kicking him in the teeth so that he blurted out— "I told you lies about *things*, about bits and pieces of my life but I never, *never* lied about *me*. I never once pretended to be someone else, or, or—"

He broke off, only then realising that at some point, he had jumped to his feet and grabbed Colin by the arms and was shaking him. "Ah," he said, apologising, admitting his confusion, his emotionalism. "Ah," once more, soothing where his fingers had gripped with unwarranted force. "I'm sorry—don't quite know what's got into me these days."

Balliol was the one with University degrees, a fancy government post, the proper accent and the magic door-opener of the proper old school tie: but it was Colin who understood, and who did what he had always done. He

forgave Peter, and loved him, unconditionally. "Poor lamb," he said, pulling Balliol into his arms again, running his hands up and down the silk-clad back. "My poor, poor lamb. You're coming apart at the seams, aren't you? Just falling apart all over the place. What you need is a holiday—"

"No I don't. I've just had a week at one of these stress-reduction health-spas—"

"Not that kind of holiday, Peter. A holiday from being what everyone expects you to be. A holiday of being *you* instead of pretending to be who they think you are."

Balliol leaned back a little, but still close enough that he could actually make out the details—albeit softened a little, like watching a close-up of a slightly mature film star—of the handsome face that was gazing at him with the same love he had always taken for granted. "What do you recommend? A gay little cruise through the Greek islands, sampling the local talent?"

"Well," Colin said, letting go of him for a moment to swap tapes in the cassette and switch the machine on. "Well," he repeated, "where was I? Oh, yes, I was standing holding you in my arms, thusly, and thinking about how lovely it would be to squeeze your bottom, thusly—"

"Colin!" A veritable squeak, and a frantic nod at the wide open window. "The curtains—!"

"Oh, my curtains are very broad-minded, Peter, they won't mind at all. Plus, in case you hadn't noticed, the houses across the street are derelict and all boarded up because the local government ran out of money again for temporary shelter. So," he dropped his voice half an octave, to a rich, deep bass, and a rather convincing American accent, "it's just you an' me, babe."

There was a hiss from the tape, and then the music finally began. A quick shove sent the coffee table against the wall, and then Colin was waltzing them, very, very slowly, and with extraordinary intimacy, around the tiny pocket of floor.

"It is just you and me, babe," he whispered in his own accent, cheek pressed to the softness of Balliol's, "you can have a little mini-holiday here with me. Just the curtains, Strauß, and you and me. What more can a man ask for?"

And suddenly, moving slowly, barely shuffling around, using the dancing more as an excuse for closeness than anything else, he knew the answer to that question, even if he didn't admit it. He had slipped into the easy comfort of their old relationship as readily as he had slipped into Peter's embrace. "I've been asking myself that all my life, Colin," he murmured, lips moistly caressing Colin's neck with every word he spoke, "and the only time I've been able to say 'nothing' was when I was at school. Rather sorry state of affairs, really?"

"And what was so brilliant about school?" Colin asked him, withdrawing a little until they were face to face, or as much so as they could be, with their height difference.

"It was a closed society. I was a boarder, of course. I rarely even went home for vacs. One of the masters there...well, my happiest time was the summer when he and I were the only ones from our House who were still there. The Head had decided to doss me with some boys from another House who were staying on during the long hols, but then Mr. Reid—our junior House Master—came forward and said that as his plans had changed, he was staying on also..."

"Filthy bastard pervert."

Balliol started, either from the words or the utter loathing with which they were snarled. "What on earth..."

"Well, I hate these blokes that take advantage of young kids. I mean, you were probably fiddling about with other boys your own age, but that's different from one of them pædophile bastards getting his dirty old hands on you."

Balliol snickered, hiding his smile against the smooth line of Colin's collar-bone. "People do get such funny notions about the public schools, don't they? Yes, I was already 'fiddling' about with other boys my age, but I was seventeen and my parents were the ones who were insisting that I not be left unsupervised—" the smile became outright laughter and Colin could feel the tension dissolving away under its magic—"my father had some notion that I was becoming altogether too fond

of 'diddling', which as an old boy, he knew *all* about. Mr. Reid, on the other hand, wasn't doing any diddling at all, and as he was only about twenty-seven and absolutely gorgeous, I... Well, you can imagine what I did."

"You fluttered your eyelashes and winked those big green cat's eyes of yours at him—"

"Don't forget wiggling my bum and 'adjusting' myself in my trousers. Although, in the end, it took the tried-and-true 'terrible nightmare' trick to get into his bed."

"But it was all right after that?" Colin asked gently, some dreadful sadness under the banter giving him a horrible suspicion of what was coming next. "Go on, Peter," he said, very softly, hugging the other man close, giving up all but the pretext of still dancing, his hips moving slightly to the lilt of the music, "tell me about it."

"A trouble shared is a trouble halved? I'm afraid I've never believed that."

"Yeh, but have you ever tried that?"

"Ah. You have me there."

"I have you here an' all. Go on, tell me what happened to you and your Mr. Reid."

Silence stretched between them, Balliol moving in his arms, taking the lead, beginning the romantic waltz again and Colin realised he was going to have to either cause an argument or accept defeat and let it lie. After not even seeing this man for so long, there was not so much as a second's debate over it. He held Balliol closer and closed his eyes, drifting with the pleasure of dancing with his love.

"We were found out," Balliol said out of the blue and into the crook of Colin's neck. "At the end of the Christmas term. Someone told the Head, the House Master spied on us, we were found out and he was dismissed, under threat of being prosecuted for having sex with a minor, child molestation and illegal sodomy with a minor child. Under eighteen, you see, by only three weeks at that point, but still over three years away for most of the things he and I were getting up to."

"And you blamed yourself."

"Well, whom else should I blame? I was the one who seduced him, after all and—"

"And what about blaming the system? It's the system that was wrong, not you." Balliol was pulling away from Colin now, his voice going cold, the familiar nervous habits showing up as he fought off the threat to his secure, if not altogether comfortable world. He fumbled his glasses on, blinking slowly and saying, most of him believing every word, "We need laws to protect children from abusive adults—"

"And what did he do that was abusing you, eh? If you'd been a girl, you could have run off with him and got married once you were up in Scotland. But because you're both blokes, he can get kicked out with a black mark against his name that I bet stopped him getting another job teaching in this enlightened country."

"I don't want to talk about it, Colin." Withdrawal, sudden, complete, behind the comfort of the status quo, and a glance at his watch, means to an end, escape in sight. "Oh, gracious, is that the time? I must be going—"

And, as he was at the door, two things.

One: "Running away again, Peter?"

Two: "And not going to kiss me goodnight before you go?"

His heart beat, once, twice, as if the world and he had slowed down to a nightmare crawl. Running away. Again. From Colin, from what he was with Colin. Homosexual. He knew he was, had known it all his life.

And had always hated that part of himself, even as he loved men.

What was that question Colin had asked him, that he had suddenly known the answer to, then buried that truth before his conscious mind could hear it, dredging up what should have been a safe memory in its stead?

Ah.

Yes: What more could a man want.

And he had known the answer: freedom, and happiness and to live with you forever and not have to look over my shoulder in fear of someone seeing me in love with a man.

Running away again, Peter?

Not going to kiss me goodnight?

"Ah," he said, turning away from the door, and escape. "I was, actually. Running away," he added, over-explaining as he often did, "and leaving without kissing you goodnight."

Colin, weaker with this man than he would

ever dream of being with anyone else, said, rescuing him, making it easier for them both, restoring the status quo that Balliol needed so much: "It'd be easier to just drop the subject, wouldn't it?" Nothing overt, neither word nor deed showing it, but it was suddenly obvious in the room that sex was on offer, sex as panacea, sex in lieu of communication, sex as buffer against a life that was obviously becoming skewed into a helter-skelter. Then Colin smiled again, a little sadly, and whispered, both word and deed displaying it now: "And it'd be a lot pleasanter as well, Peter."

It still made his breath catch in his chest, for all that he had, of course, known that he was going to end up in bed with Colin the instant he had found out that Colin had been released early for good behaviour. For all that he had, of course, also known that he would pretend to himself that his reasons for going to visit Colin were purely filial and fiscal, to repay an enormous debt. And, also of course, Colin had seen right through him, just as he always did, although that truth Balliol was as inclined to ignore as would most of us be. It is rarely pleasant to have someone see beyond all our defences and into all those dark places and homes of weakness that we are so fond of hiding away. But the philosophy of it all barely mattered, when Colin was standing right in front of him, offering him love and affection and haven: the return to what they had once had, the return to what they had once been, together. For the first time, the image of them facing the world together, shoulder to shoulder crossed his mind as anything other than the most self-indulgent form of daydreaming. But that was, perhaps, for the distant decisions of the future: for the now, there was a man, a gloriously handsome man, light gleaming on black skin and soft smile, body thinner than before but all the more beautiful for the elegant sensuality of line that was thus revealed. Colin. His Colin, who loved him still, more than his wife, perhaps, had ever loved him, for poor Naomi had never been allowed to see who he truly was. But Colin had always known, it seemed, from that first fumbling uncertainty in the Club, himself the awkward one, Colin shy and relatively innocent, but possessed of an

inner confidence that made him a joy to be with.

Peter began to smile, happily relegating the complexities of life to the wastepaper basket with all his other bad ideas, and started to walk forwards, physically and backwards, metaphorically, to the man he needed in a way he thought it best not to fully comprehend. He dropped his jacket on the couch as he passed it by, and pressed his front tightly down the length of the other man, smiling more widely at the sweet pressure of hardening cock digging in to the pit of his groin, the tender swell of Colin's balls kissing his cock and making him grow hard enough to match Colin. His arms closed around the other man, and he stretched up, mouth open in a kiss, shivering at the first wet touch of Colin's mouth. Large hands framed his face as the kiss went on, and on. Colin caressed him, right hand on his throat, left on his buttocks, then sliding round to his front, tugging at leather belt and beautifully tailored silk, shoving both out of the way as if they were worth no more than the jeans that Colin himself was wearing.

"Oh, yeh, love," Colin was whispering now, a benediction of carnal worship flowing to salve the wounds they both bore, his mouth roving Peter's face, neck, ears, "you touch me like that. Get your hands on me, Christ, been waiting so long, babe, go on, make love to me. Been so fucking long..."

As if there was suddenly a chorus of whispering demons in the room, Balliol heard the agonising litany of figures unscroll through his mind, figures that his position—on the end of a leash forged of this very man and the Club that had been a refuge for them both—forced him to ignore every hour of every working day.

"Colin," he said, pulling away a little, trying to resolve his will against the aching need throbbing in his own cock and the desperation in Colin's eyes. "There's something I need to ask you." He took a deep breath, and another, and finally had to turn away, else he would have been back in Colin's arms and common sense consigned to the deepest hell. "And there's really no 'nice' way of asking you. Ahmm, well, yes. I suppose—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, just come out and ask me!"

"All right." He turned round then, to watch Colin's face as the question hit him. "Do you have AIDS?"

The rage that erupted in Colin demanded, hissed, screamed for its pound of flesh. Too many times, too often, that question, that suspicion, that shadow of fear. Guilty, never to be proven innocent, oh, how his blood—out, out damned spot—boiled at the invidious insinuation. "Oh," he said, as nasty in that one syllable as Balliol himself could have been, "I get it. So cos I've been in prison, I'm automatically a suspect, am I?"

Balliol tried, frantic now, soothing tone of voice, soothing words, a Canute before the tide of outrage. "No, that's not what I meant, although the figures do suggest—"

Wrong words, wrong tone, wrong everything. "What?" Colin shouted, memories too strong, the stench of prison filling his nostrils, the sights of men dying in the ward of horror filling his eyes. "That being sent down for shop-lifting's tantamount to a death sentence these days?"

"It's really not that bad—"

"An' how the fuck would you know? You're just a politician, you feed on fucking lies!" voice rising, banshee wail, death hanging over all their heads. "That's all you know and that's all you want to know!"

Heavy as lead, the silence returned. Alone in the middle of the room, all hints of erection and that fact dawned on him with all the subtlety of a boot in the balls, shocking him, terrifying him, because what did it say about him that sexual difficulties, those self-same difficulties that were diagnosed as definitively psychological, were cured by the mere reappearance of a man he had slept with before but he didn't want to think about before. He didn't want to think about it, he didn't want to know about it. He just wanted everything to settle down and stop blowing up in his face. His head was spinning, had been, for what felt like years now. What had been years, ever since his father had come down to his school after Paul Reid had been kicked out.

He was dancing along the edge of an abyss, dancing and swaying and dipping, but he could not, simply could not, take that last step and leap off out into the inky darkness, unsure of what was waiting at the other side. Or even if there were another side, or if it were all just bottomless blackness into which he would sink and never get out of, all control of his life gone because of that one, single final step.

He couldn't, couldn't possibly commit himself to the unknown like that. Couldn't make that leap of faith, couldn't trust that after the jump there would still be a 'him', nor that he would still be himself, and recognisable and whole. Could not hope that labelling himself as homosexual would allow him to be himself.

"Christ, you really take the biscuit, you do, don't you?" Colin broke through to him, voice impatient with reluctant understanding. "Here I am, trying to just let all the crap go, and you bring it up, and then when I try to actually deal with it, you know, actually sort it out so we can retire the stupid fuckin' issue, you go all misty on me and disappear off somewhere, thinking. So tell me, Peter, this thinking you're doing—come up with any answers, has it? Answered the Meaning of Life yet? Or the Origins of the Universe? Or the Origins of the Species, for that matter? Or've you just decided where you're going to have supper somewhere that doesn't allow wog pansies in, I'll warrant.

"No," he said, face crumpled like a used hankie. "No, that's not what I was doing at all. Col—" he stopped, took a deep breath, and started again. "I'm not handling this very well, am I?"

"I've seen bulls in china shops handle things better than this."

"And none of the issues are going to be resolved like this, are they?"

"D'you mean by the arguing," Colin answered with his customary bluntness, "or d'you mean the fucking?"

"The fucking what?" Balliol asked wryly, faint smile twisting his mouth. He hung his head, running both hands through his hair in a gesture of utter exhaustion. By way of explanation and apology, he began, "I've been living on my nerves for months now—since the police raid, actually. And I've been going

round and around in circles, about motives and reasons, and all of the other stuff and nonsense that seems to fill my life nowadays. The only thing, Colin my dear, of which I can be utterly, supremely confident, is," he smiled, not kindly, laughing at himself with a particularly unforgiving mockery, "that I don't know anything at all, about anything. Well, about nothing important, that is. Oh, I know everything there is to know about this particular political issue, or that medical matter, all that kind of rot. But the important things in life, the important qualities in life—well! Really! If you knew how ignorant I was about those, you would be appalled, Col, absolutely appalled."

"Would I?" Colin asked, sighing heavily under the knowledge that he already knew all about Peter's lamentable ignorance of the subtleties of life and that there was nothing to do but forgive Balliol his shortcomings: it was always either that or give him up completely. And as far as he was concerned, cutting them apart was a particularly stupid bloody thing to do, considering what he had risked and actually lost because of this man. It was also, he sighed to himself, the slow draining of the last of his emotional reserves, making him long for a respite at any cost, a symptom of just how deeply he loved this man. "D'you know something, Peter? I don't think I'd be even the slightest bit surprised."

The damning comment stood between them, ugly as only the truth could possibly ever be. His own willful blindness jumped up and struck Balliol in the face. Of course Colin had known all that about him, every wart, every failing, every inadequacy. Who better than Colin, who had been both lover and friend—although always kept at a 'safe' distance, it would never serve the yearned for unrippled surface of life with someone coming too close—to know how shallow and unfeeling he was, when you peeled away that first layer?

And, he worried to himself, how passionately emotional when you peeled away the second protective skin? How fragile? How scared... But best not to think about that. Best not to leave himself so vulnerable. "Why did you do it?" he asked instead. "I mean, try

to protect me that night at the Club? You must have known, surely, that you were going to be caught because you gave up your own chance to escape so that you could give *me* a chance to get out."

Colin didn't answer him then, it being his turn to avoid revealing something of his inner self.

He should let it rest, Balliol knew he should. It would, in the end, be more comfortable, to simply let it go and walk out now, for such a mess left behind would make them both reluctant to attempt a restart of their relationship. But there was that misery bowing Colin's shoulders, and that loneliness that clung to both of them, joining them together even as it conspired to keep them apart. And there was, perhaps most of all, the need in him to keep Colin with him, for Colin was the one with whom he was most comfortable, the one with whom he could be not only gay, but himself (to a degree), as opposed to nothing but a one night stand with a stranger. "Why did you do it, Colin?"

"You honestly don't know? Oh, come off it, Peter! Not even you could be that much of an ostrich."

Warning lights, great glaring klaxons going off, telling him, alerting him, but still, he had to ask. If he walked out of here without asking, there would be no refuge anywhere for him, save in the arms of strangers, and that was never quite enough; or with his wife, to whom he lied, as price for his haven; nor with himself, for Colin was his past, his link to bring his life back into one seamless whole, instead of this badly darned rag of Then and Now. But if he asked, then... But if he did not, then all was lost already. "Why did you do it?"

A harsh bark of laughter, sounding closer to tears than to amusement. "Because I'm in love with you."

"Ah." Nothing he hadn't known, not really, merely something that he had been too terrified to see. For love, you see, meant commitment, it meant the other person having needs and wants, and therefore obligating him to at least think about these things. Not necessarily too dreadful a thing, even for Balliol, but love also meant looking at this as something beyond a mutually beneficial re-

lationship. It meant asking why he had stayed, to a degree, with this young man, even though there were so many others out there who wanted him and with whom he could have such uncomplicated sport.

After all, it was almost impossible to trace even a politician if he was wise enough to stick to anonymous encounters in a neverending montage of changing venues. But a politician foolish enough to return time and time again to the same club, and to the same waiter, and thence, to the same flat... Time after time after time. Until the regulars at the Club knew not to try to pick him up when he had retreated to the rear lounge and was sitting by himself towards closing time. Everyone knew then, of course, that he was waiting for Colin and tonight was not going to be either anonymous or casual. Everyone

That was the very first time the suspicion ever crossed his mind. A set-up? A nice strong leash to tie around his neck, a chokechain to pull him up short when they wanted to stop him or to command 'walkies!" when they had a task in mind for him...

Referring to the expression that had just seized Peter's face, Colin demanded: "What's wrong?"

"What's right? Surely that would be the better question-certainly the briefer to answer."

Colin had fostered a consolation in prison, throughout the indignities and the abuses and the attempts on his arse, and now that consolation was revealed as nothing more than mere delusion. He had actually thought that at least Balliol wasn't sharing his misery, that at least the man he loved beyond both wisdom and reason was faring better than he. "Christ," he muttered, collapsing in a heap onto the sofa, "what a fucking mess."

"Yes," Balliol answered without hesitation, knowing exactly what Colin meant. "It is, isn't it? And," he went on, "I can't see any way to make it better."

There was one way, in Colin's opinion, and one thing he'd never so much as hinted at, always preferring to take Balliol as he was without trying to re-mould him. But it had to be said at some point, and this ebb seemed to

beg for it. "You could always come out, you know," he said, off-hand, more from hopelessness than anything else.

"Ah. Well, perhaps that would be the answer for someone else..."

"Don't suppose there's any chance of you telling me why it wouldn't make any difference to you?

But there was a chance, Balliol having had too long without this man to confide anything at all in, until the need to talk overwhelmed his need to hide. Or perhaps it was simply that tiny changes had gradually inveigled their way into him, until the unthinkable had become mundane and the impossible merely avoided. "I didn't say it wouldn't make any difference to me. I simply don't think it would make any positive difference to me. In fact, I rather dread to think what would happen if I did come out. My wife, my seat..."

"Don't be stupid, your wife already knows and you wouldn't be the first gay MP. There was whatsisname—"

"You mean the one who got nowhere, was promoted not at all and disappeared rather rapidly? Oh, yes, there was him. And it's one thing for Naomi to know, but how do you think she would feel if it were blazoned over every cheap newspaper that her husband, the man she had two grown children with, the man she has lived with more than half her life, is a raving poufter? The humiliation—"

"Is something she would get over and anyway, shame is a stupid reason to keep on being miserable."

Peter could hardly deny being miserable. He could deny the shame even less. Perhaps, he thought, he should blame the system that condemned him, instead of blaming himself. It would certainly make life more pleasant... But the upheavals! And who was to say that it wouldn't backfire on him? And who was to say that he could cope with losing his family, and so many of his friends? And who the hell was to say he could cope with living—twentyfour hours a day, three hundred and sixtyfive days a year—a gay lifestyle? Especially now, with the new AIDS restrictions coming into effect, and the new guide-lines. Not to mention Section 57, once it was enacted.

But still, Colin loved him. Despite his own

inability to love the way he thought he should, the way Colin deserved to be loved, Colin loved him That was worth something, surely? But giving up everything he had been, everything he had worked for, been brought up to believe in? He heard Colin sigh, felt guilt bludgeon him deep inside. He hated hurting Colin, absolutely loathed it. Tenderly, he reached out and stroked a frighteningly gentle hand across the nape of Colin's neck, offering what little comfort he could to make up for the chance at happiness he was denying them.

The conversation was getting them nowhere, which Colin knew he should have expected: once you started Peter thinking, you could forget him committing to action. Indecision ringed Peter in, chaining both of them in limbo. Colin, better than Balliol, knew why that happened and understood, if not entirely sympathised. He couldn't quite blame Peter too much: after all, the man was so busy lying to himself and trying to live two completely separate lives, it was hardly surprising he couldn't make his mind up about things. "Why don't we go to bed?" Colin said, resigned, wanting to salvage at least that much. "I didn't have sex with anyone while I was inside, and they tested me three times, so you can rest assured I'm negative. You?"

"Oh, negative, of course," he heard himself answer in automatic and profound self-defence and delusion, neglecting to acknowledge that he'd never once been tested. He was. after all, a Member of Parliament, not of a high-risk group. Plus, he knew he didn't have it, although it had been a plague for so long now that he couldn't actually remember a time when it hadn't been the first thing one thought of when hearing about the death of an unmarried man under the age of fifty. Or when it hadn't been the main topic of conversation, if only because people were talking so much about other things so as to avoid mention of the dread initials. "After the raid at the Club and all of that. I had to be even more discreet than before. I haven't indulged myself since you went to prison," he said, conscience skating easily over the camouflaging lie.

"Then why don't we go to bed?" "Sex doesn't solve anything, Colin." Token protest, inviting persuasion.

"And talking does? When one of us doesn't want to even think about anything that could rock the boat," came the tart reply.

There was no reply, tart or otherwise, that Balliol could give to that blunt statement of fact. So: this time, it would be he who would have to ask, he who would offer tactile affection in the stead of honest love. "Do you really want to go to bed?"

"After that long with nothing but my right hand and my imagination? You know, Peter, you ask some really stupid fucking questions."

There was a joke that Peter could have made, but he thought it unwise, and anyway, while his mind was capable of joking, the rest of him was too depressed to care. He had had such expectations of this reunion, and this was nothing like any of them. No romance in this encounter, no unbridled joy, nothing but wrangling that they both saw as being too pointless to get rancorous about.

"Ah," he said, and even he wasn't entirely sure what it was meant to convey. All he knew was that even his refuge might not be refuge any longer, but simply another place of impossible questions and silent demands. But at least, he thought, there was still sex. That would still be wonderful. Just dancing with Colin had been incredibly erotic, and sex might not cure all their problems, but at least it had always made them forget for a while.

He didn't say another word, in case it was the wrong one again and drove another wedge right in between them. Instead, he leaned across the smallish space between them, and pressed his lips, very gently against Colin's. Then the taste of each other's lips made the slow, steady pulse in their groins start to race and gambol.

"Bed," Colin said into Peter's mouth, his hand night black on white skin, framing Balliol's face. He lapped at Peter's skin, sucking on an ear-lobe.

Balliol returned the caress, both hands cupping the delectable swell of Peter's arse, grinning in delight at the enthusiastic response of cock bludgeoning to hardness. He was determined that this time, he wasn't going to let talk or truth or anything else get in their way. Sex might be the only

uncomplicated, successful thing they had, but it was enough. Or had been, his mind supplied in a reasonable voice that did nothing to disguise his own self-disgust.

But he was thinking again, and he had promised himself that he wouldn't. Instead, he deliberately let his mind go blank, filling the canvas in with glorious riot of sensation, brighter than any colour.

He didn't even notice that he had been led from the room until his knees gave way under him, pole-axed by the lip of the bed behind him. They tugged at one another, a button coming flying off to land, unnoticed, in a corner, and a zip coming apart under their enthusiasm. Colin was holding him, fingertips curving to hold him in the palm of his hand, the pink of his cock nestling into the pink of Colin's palm, the large hand folding shut around him, encasing him in beautiful dark skin.

And devouringly, mindlessly, he knew what he needed.

He needed to be inside Colin. No thought to it, nothing more than an emotional need so deep, it overwhelmed him. He needed that commitment from Colin again, that tacit promise that Colin belonged to him, stupidly tied up in that one act. When sane thought and common sense prevailed, he knew that it was nothing more than a sexual pleasure, but lying on that bed, with Colin wrapped around him, sweet musk rising to drive him insane with lust, all he could think about was Colin loving him enough to take him inside, for Colin to yield his pride to him, for Colin to let him own him, in a way that was overlysensitive simply because of the colour of their skins.

Colin said to him, out loud, saying what Peter needed to be shown: "I love you."

He couldn't say it back, although his heart ached and his body yearned and he couldn't imagine life without knowing this man, or knowing that it was only a finite measure of time before they were together again. Or as much a couple as Balliol ever allowed them to be. But if he couldn't say the words, he could show and reveal, and so he held Colin tight, hugging him, arms straining to pull him in even closer. He opened his mouth wide,

sucking Colin's tongue inside, tasting the limber muscle, and glorying in the slick wet slide into his mouth. It was like having his cock inside him, and that made him hungry for black meat, for the hot thick length of him down his throat, for the lean spurt of cum exploding into him. But not this time. After, when he'd marked Colin for his own again, when he'd been inside him, and possessed him.

And Colin sensed it. The hunger for reassurance was emitted in waves of passion from Peter, repeated in the hoarse-voiced caresses. To be owned, but as an equal, for this was not a night for them to play games of master and slave, nor of white explorer and African prince. There might, if they were lucky, be enough nights so that they could recapture all that they had had before, but tonight was for the re-forging of old bonds, and for reassurances that the past was still part of their present. Nipping teeth caught his nipple, making him gasp, then making him gasp once more as he looked down to see Peter's face pressed against his chest in loving lust, the green eyes closed, the pale skin flushed, and made all the whiter against the darkness of his chest. He pressed Peter's head to him more firmly, wanting to be sucked harder, demanding that every last hint of tentativeness should be thrown out and their old mutual passion replace it.

Peter felt the familiar size and weight of the hand pressing his nape, and reached down to take another familiar size and weight in his hand. He groaned as the hard cock filled his hand to overflowing, his thumb peeling the foreskin back, his fingertip stroking the slit in the satin head, probing it, a surge of pride in him as he felt the pleasure of his skill shatter through Colin. There wasn't a single thing he had forgotten, and the joy in that was so much that he forgot to be afraid of what it could mean, and of what depths of commitment it revealed. All he could think of—all he would think of—was him, and Colin, together, in a pleasure greater than anything he'd ever been able to find with anyone else. Mouth still fastened round the upthrusting nipple, he half-reluctantly released the delightful cock and ran his fingers along the sweetly responsive rimple that led from balls to arse,

closing his teeth, but gently, round Colin's flesh so that he could grin without losing the slightest contact with him.

Ecstatic, Colin arched his back, so that Peter could reach him better, sighing with something like nirvana when that teasing fingertip probed into him, beginning to stretch him. He knew what was going through Peter's mind when that finger stopped and hesitated, dilettante, before caressing him even more carefully: Peter was thinking that what he had said about doing nothing in prison must be true, for he was tight as a virgin again. He knew too, that Peter would be first wary, for fear of spoiling it all by causing pain, and then inundated with sexual thrill at the imagining of taking a knowledgeable 'virgin' for his own once more. It was a sweet fantasy, to think of himself as losing his virginity to the man he loved, and sweeter still because he knew every trick in the book—most of them learned from Peter—to make sure that neither one of them had a second's pain. He wriggled, encouragingly, the very tip of Peter's wellmanicured finger opening him, beginning the familiar pattern that made them belong to each other. He would take Peter inside, and let Peter take him, the one act fulfilling them both.

"I've got some stuff," he whispered. "In the drawer."

Peter knelt between spread legs, his own tinged with a faint gold, Colin's dark and gleaming. "You're the colour of Bournville," he said, bending down to lick at luscious skin, then biting as if he were feasting on his favourite chocolate.

"Then why don't you eat me then?" Colin asked him, grinning down the length of his body at the equally grinning face. But the smile faded, gone, lost, washed away by an expression of ecstatic awe, as Peter swooped down, sucking him in, swallowing him whole, pink mouth stretched taut around black flesh. "Christ almighty but you're wonderful," he muttered, hands holding Peter's head in place, hips thrusting his cock right down the wet slide of throat. He laced his fingers together, pulling Peter's head right in until he felt the press of lips against the crisp curl of pubic hair and the sweet pressure of chin

against his balls. He thrust, once, twice, fucking Peter's face, making him gag and swallow, only then allowing Peter to surface for air.

Peter, chin wet and lips swollen, grinned even harder at him, taking him in his mouth again, pressing down as far as he could go, moaning in delight as Colin fucked his mouth again. It was a luxury he had, here, to be passive and receptor, where he usually only allowed others to play catamite to his masculinity. But here, oh, here, with Colin's musk filling his nose and Colin's cock filling his throat, he could be man and still be the one to play the homosexual rôle. There were no restrictions on him with Colin, nothing to stop him from doing any of the things he loved: no threat, no undermining, no fear. Only lust, and the reassurance of Colin's love for him, and this exhilarating ecstasy that after, he always convinced himself, was nothing more than lust. Pulling back, reluctantly allowing Colin to slip from his mouth and nestle instead in his hand, he gazed at the other man, seeing his beauty, and his grace, and all the things that he loved best about him.

That word, love, would be expunged from the experience as soon as their sweat had evaporated and their cum cooled, replaced by terms both safer and less terrifying. But for now, even if left tacit, they could both see it, and feel it, as Peter stretched himself out upon his love, wrapping them together, mouth to mouth, chest to chest, cock to cock. Colin was spreading his legs, cradling Peter between them, murmuring wordlessly, pushing Peter's hand down to his arse, demanding, demanding.

Peter probed at him, letting go only long enough to reach into the bedside drawer for the KY, gelling his fingers, sliding one in, slowly, until it was deep inside Colin and pressing with exquisite sensitivity on the buried gland, Colin's cock jumping with delight at every firm touch.

"Like that, do you?" Peter whispered, biting Colin's ear-lobe, just so, the way Colin liked it, flexing his buried finger the way he knew Colin liked that too.

"Christ, d'you need to fucking ask? C'mon,

Peter, you're not going to hurt me. I'm just out of practice, so go on, do me. Yeah," a long, lush sigh as two fingers went home, cool to the heat of his bowels. "Oh, yeah, that's it. Almost ready for you now, just a bit more..." He loved this, loved the pressure and the stretching, achingly anticipating the invasion of Peter's cock, which had fed many a wet dream for him, the thick, heavy pinkness sinking in to him, stretching him beyond belief. He was almost, almost ready for it, Peter's fingers fucking him now, taking him beyond pain and into the pleasure. "Okay," he muttered, eyes closed, hips rotating, fucking himself on Peter's now-stilled fingers. "Go on, get it in me. Fuck me, love. Go on, fuck me."

A squeeze of the tube, and Peter's cock was glistening like Colin's inner thighs, the gel viscid and silken on the hardness under the skin. He got up on his knees, Colin's legs locked around his hips canting him to exactly the right angle, and then the head of his cock was pressing against the knot of flesh, demanding entrance, making him groan as the sweet clutch of flesh captured him, sucking him in, deeper, deeper, until his body was buried in Colin's and he owned the other man. Just as, he thought, the image a burning pleasure, Colin owned him. Possessed and possessor, he began to thrust, fucking Colin slowly at first, listening to the other man's groanings and moanings of pleasure, himself silent, hoarding all the pleasure inside, watching as his whiteness was consumed by the blackness of Colin's arse. Every second that he watched aroused him more, every deep thrust of his hips excited him more. He began to move faster, fucking harder and deeper, Colin holding him close, words of love and lust raining down on him as he plundered Colin's body, feeding it with his own. A shift, and then he was in deeper still, Colin's hands on his hips pushing him to fuck harder, until he thought his spine would crack. He was almost there, could feel the tremble inside Colin, and then Colin's mouth was on his and Colin's tongue was in him, thrusting into him as he thrust in to Colin, and he was being fucked and he was fucking, and it was all too much. He came, screaming, the only sound

he had made, and held still, perfectly still, as his balls spasmed and his cock jolted cum into Colin, satin slickness smooth inside. Heart still thundering, he grabbed Colin's cock, pumping it hard, white hand on black cock, the sight of it inflaming him all over again, until he felt as if his orgasm was rippling through him still.

Peter was in him, still hard, cock spurting cum, then motionless, until a hand descended upon him, milking him hard, loving him, while Peter's eyes said to him what that mouth would never reveal. Love. He arched his back, moaning and cursing and praising Peter from here to heaven, loving him, needing him. He didn't want to cum. didn't want this to end, but Peter's hand was on him, knowing him, so perfectly, thumb pressing him there, like that, the way he adored, the way he did to himself and pretended that it was Peter. Then Peter withdrew from him, cock still arcing proud and hard, and knelt for him, mouth closing over his cock, tongue stroking him, throat devouring him, and he was cumming, streaming into Peter, endless pleasure.

It was over. Not done: they both knew now that it could never be done. For all that would never be spoken of beyond this bed, they both knew. Despite the disputes, despite the arguments and the things they disliked about each other, there was too much loving and too much needing between them for it to ever be over. Each cradling the other, silent now, they settled down to sleep, each keeping his own counsel, and holding the other close. It wasn't over. It was begun again.

Still, it took three months, two weeks and five days for Peter to really feel that the status quo was back to normal, his life as tidy as it could be with two lies coexisting side by side in mutually exclusive orbits. Happiness was even threatening him with its hope and euphoria. They had made him Minister for Health, with its attendant powers and perks and privileges. Naomi and he had settled down into a kind of friendly room-mate situation, rather closer to the friendship they had shared at University, and wonderfully comforting and fulfilling for him. His sons

were actually, to his immense surprise, proving to be rather interesting and very intelligent young men—who seemed, as long as he played a certain rôle, to like him. And Colin—oh, Colin was heaven on earth. Discreet, passionate, accepting, non-judgemental. Life, he was content to think as he walked, whistling, to his new, very plush office, was certainly coming up roses.

It lasted precisely four more months, long enough for him to feel secure, to be sure that everything was going to be all right and that life as he knew it was going to be, if not wonderful, then certainly not devoid of either its happinesses or its pleasures. He was even able to convince himself that he was doing something useful in his job, even if the Whip did have a tendency to be somewhat overweening. It hadn't been too bad, not compared to what he had almost had to go through because of the police raid, and even Colin seemed to be relatively happy with their lot.

That morning, a perfectly banal and routine Friday morning, his Secretary gave him an immensely disapproving glower and said: "There was a message for you, sir. From a young man, a rather common young man. He was quite rude, insisting that he speak to you. When I was finally able to convince him that you were not yet here and would not be until after your meeting with the Chief Whip, he demanded that I give you a message."

His heart plummeted, rather like being in a lift when the cable snaps, and Death fastforwards life past you.

But he managed, very calmly, to say, remembering only too clearly what the Whip had so pointedly impressed upon him, "How very peculiar, Godfrey. Probably one of these dreadful AIDS activists," he went on, locking and bolting and barricading his closet behind himself, the accusations and the mortifying moralising still burning in his ears, quaking inwardly with the fear the Chief Whip had crushed him with. He had lost track of what he had been saying, his mind a whirlpool, sucking him under, stunned by how much could be lost by the revelations delivered with such devastating threat. To lose everything, absolutely everything, including Colin—fear clutching his belly, making his guts churn,

that they knew about Colin and everything, all the details sneeringly delivered like three week old fish—to lose everything, for everyone to point and laugh and know, and him to be completely useless, for then who would he be? An aging queer, alone without Colin, and Naomi, how could she possibly stay with him when it all came out and he was made nothing?

"Minister?"

The autumnal calm of Godfrey's voice quieted him, gave him an anchor, drew him back to the present.

"You were saying, Minister, about the AIDS activists?"

He took a deep breath, hysteria giggling that he should reveal all, shout it to the world, starting with Godfrey Wilmington, scream it from the roof-tops, erupt in honesty the way he had that night at the Club, attacking the system that was destroying him by such infinitesimal degrees. But the second passed, and was gone, and he was once more trying to hold the tattered rags of his life together. "Ah. Yes, it's probably one of these agitators trying to get me to recommend more spending for their damned cause." He went over to his desk, sitting in the lush leather, beginning his routine perusing of files, seeing absolutely nothing, save the image of his life emptied of everything and everyone, himself, naked and bare and revealed as nothing at all. Quite casually, displaying none of the riot within, he added, "Out of curiosity's sake, what was the message anyway?"

"Now that is a curiosity, Minister. He left no name, and simply said to have you telephone him absolutely immediately and that it was urgent. He actually used the term," the voice took on all the disapproval of Jeeves confronted with plus-fours in place of petitfours, "'life and death', Minister."

"Really? How absurd all this hyperbole is. As if AIDS is more life and death than cancer—I mean, really!—and yet cancer is hardly the victim's own fault, is it, unlike this AIDS business," he said, attacking in the usual way of those with most to hide, covering his tracks with a smoke-screen of homophobia. "I'll deal with it later. If he rings again," he hesitated, balancing his two lives on the

sharpest of fulcrums, finding a tentative new balance, "have him put through to me—after all, there's no need for us to spend departmental money if we can have him pay for it, is there?"

"Certainly, Minister. Now, to other business..."

It was when the gold-embossed red-leather folder was placed before him with such unctuous politeness that he knew, sickness rising in his stomach, horror rising in his green eyes, that his own Secretary knew, and was part of it all. Why else would a—supposedly—minor nuisance phone call be brought to his attention before something of such major importance as the contents of this folder.

Wilmington was looking at him, blandly impassive, and exuding the glee of he who controls the puppet's strings.

"Ah," Balliol said, face turning grey with the lurch of fear and fury in him. For another second, he stared at that knowing, pious face, revolted by the hypocrisy—oh, he knew all about Wilmington's little indiscretions with the young women aides who came to Westminster with stars in their eyes and left with the nasty taste of groping hands and excessive sexuality—because there was nothing he could do about it. They—the Whip, Wilmington, whoever else had use for him—had him by the short and curlies, and he could do absolutely nothing.

Unless he was willing to lose everything he valued. Everything he needed. Everyone he loved. Or tried to love.

"Minister?" a politely indifferent request, but still with the power of damaging information behind it. What was that they said about a little knowledge?

But his knowledge was too small to be dangerous to anyone but himself, so he bowed his head under Wilmington's amused smirk and bowed his fury under the iron door of his own paralysing fear. "Nothing, nothing

And that, he felt, was what they just might use on his grave after all.

After six, back aching, muscles protesting the long hours of sitting, head protesting the long hours of negotiation and argument and

gallons of caffeine without benefit of food. His car was there waiting to take him back to his London house, the chauffeur as impassive as Wilmington, although perhaps that was just boredom. Whatever it was, it decided him. No surreptitious phone call to Colin once he got home: he'd decline the car and take a taxi straight there, go and see him and find out what was wrong and what he could do to help. A few words with the driver, and then he was walking along the sunsetting street, streetlights beginning their glow, his wallet checked to make sure there was enough there for taxi and whatever emergency had come up.

It was too soon thereafter that the taxi had deposited him at the door of Colin's place the Chief Whip's comments still ringing in his ears, it seemed stupid to do the usual routine of walking over from several streets away too soon, because he still had not shed the slings and arrows of the day, all of them pricking his skin and his mind. But still, he was here, and as he climbed the stairs, nodding a friendly hello to Mrs. Ferguson who lived downstairs, he hoped that that would be enough. After today, all he could face was some fiscal crisis that could be solved with a guick cheque—and how much easier that would make life! No need for subterfuge there either, now, was there? and then they could retire to bed, where Colin's loving would set him on fire enough to bring him back to life.

The chain was on, and that surprised him: surely Colin was expecting him? After all, Col always understood about the pressures of work and discretion-he had a sudden dizzying vision of himself ringing Col quite openly from his Government offices, for why not, now that the Whip had made it so plain that they could hang far more than one carefully swept-under-the-carpet police charge over his head these days, photos from the disembowelled house across the street fanned across the burnished desk, making him sick, sick, until he thought he would surely vomit, how could they, how could they do that to him and Colin? Make it so cheap, pornography smuggled in from Holland under dirty underwear, Col's face screwed up in love enlarged

and blown up until even that was obscene, oh, how could they, how could they and he wanted to scream and scream and hit that bastard policeman again, the one who had hit Colin-

Colin opened the door, the chain clinking softly against the wooden door, the noose on the gallows tree. Balliol rushed in, seeking his sanctuary, sliding into Colin's arms, up against the heat of his living, loving body, and all the world would be shut out when those arms closed around him.

His back was chilled by the absence of the embrace. A half step stumbled backwards, and he could see Col's face, the angry baleful mask that Colin's face had become.

"Why didn't you ring?" So harsh, none of the melody left, as cold as the dead.

"I was in meetings all day."

Another basilisk stare.

"I wasn't alone for so much as a second. Even when I went to the lavatory, there was someone who would decide to go at the same time, so I could hardly slip off to phone you then, now could I? But," himself, hesitant, unsure, what little solid ground he had left shaking under him as if this were California, not the city he had lived in all his life, this Colin standing facing him a complete unknown, "at least I'm here now."

"Big of you." The rage was consuming him, and the pain and the fear and the emasculating nightmare horror and Peter was doing nothing to help. Hadn't even phoned him up, nothing.

"What's wrong?"

"Suppose I should say, 'what's right', cos that would take us back to the beginning again, wouldn't it? Or back to when we started all this again. Jesus fucking Christ, I want my head examined. I must've been insane when I let you fuck me instead of kicking you the fuck out."

"Would you care," Peter said, in the tone of utter reasonableness he used when he wanted to run away screaming, "to expand on that?" Expecting, honestly, some ugly tale of quietly vicious questions asked by men who worked for the kind of Department that didn't actually exist (if you believed everything Her Majesty's Government told you).

Expectations, as the adage says, are as nought.

"I got a phone call this morning, Peter."

"Yes?" Still expecting, even more absolutely, the tale of questions and prying and warnings.

"From the Clinic."

He wanted the day to stop, right there, right now, stop and never restart, oh, no, not this. Make it syphilis or herpes or contagious gangrene of the prick and have his own cock fall off right now, but let it stop, don't let Colin say it—

"I've got it. I'm HIV+, they said." "Ah."

Colin exploded, right fist swinging round, hitting home with a satisfying thud on Peter's jaw. At that moment, he couldn't have hated anyone more. No one, not the mass-murderers, nor the child-molesters, nor the bastards who hated him. All he could feel was hate for this man, to whom he had given love and from whom he had received—what?

"Ah? Is that all you've got to say? You never seemed short of a few words before, did you? Lies. A pack of fucking lies, that's what you told me, isn't it?" he yelled, standing, Colossus over the dire straits Balliol was in, a towering fury. "You told me you were negative! What'd you go and do that for? If you'd told me the truth, it'd've been no problem, you know that, we'd've just carried on the way we did before I was put inside, but no, that didn't fit into your pathetic hetero fantasies, did it? If you were fucking me, then you didn't need one, because you didn't do this queer stuff, usually, not any more, was that it? Pretending again, trying to make all that gay stuff go away. Well it won't, you stupid prick, and pretending it will might make you sleep better, but look where it got me." He sat down on the sofa, fury and misery blending like oil on water, ready either to burst into flames or to be doused. "Oh, Christ, Peter, why'd you lie to me?"

"I..." How to answer that, when the reasons were so hideously tangled in his own mind, a skein gone to knots and loops, each thing leading circuitously back to itself.

"Have you ever even been tested?" He his head, shook dismayed and uncomprehending. "Bet you haven't."

"No, I...well, had I gone for the test, that would have been it then, wouldn't it? The disclosure rules don't give the doctor any choice, do they? My name would have been on the next notification list, and that would have shot down my career, my marriage—"

"But it would've stopped you from shooting down my life." Sad, acrid accusation.

"Now wait just a minute," Balliol started, righteous with his own rationalisations that had kept him so cosily buried in the sand, "how can you blame me? It could have been anyone, surely?"

"Anyone? Anyone?" Colin roared, jumping to his feet, prowling the room with coiled fury, hitting one fist into the palm of the other hand, "Anyone? What d'you think I am, a slag? A rent-boy? Jesus fucking Christ, I haven't had half as many as you—not even an eighth as many as you." One of the sharptoothed rats that had been gnawing him spoke: "God, Peter, how many other people have you infected? I mean, there was what, one a fortnight or one a week, apart from me, of course. So how many does that make, eh? How fucking many? And how many partners have all of them had? You haven't got the faintest idea, have you, because you never bothered to find out if you were safe or not."

"Why can't you see? I simply could not get tested. At first, I was worried in case word got out, and then, well, once the rules came in, there was no 'if about it." He slowed the spate of words, took a breath, went on. "And anyway, what were the chances of me having it? Apart from you, I can count on the fingers of one hand how many men I've...who have..."

Rank disbelief displayed itself as black humour. "Fucked you up the arse? Bit late for going all coy on me, don't you think? Bit late for a lot of things, now."

And that last comment was the chink in his armour. The damning knowledge began to actually penetrate. He sat down, heavily, suddenly feeling himself to be an old, old man. It wormed into him, what Colin had said. Positive. HIV+. That meant what? Anything from a few months to eleven years before the first symptoms. Anything from a few months to eleven years before the bang became a whimper that killed him. Unless

the scientists had to revise the figures again. But he couldn't think about it. Couldn't imagine Colin, bright and brash and boisterously beautiful Colin withered away into death, or brought down by one of the opportunistic little bastards who lived on HIV's coat-tails.

"No." It was all he could say, all he felt he could do. "No."

"Oh, yes, fucking yes. I'm positive, Peter, and where else would it've come from but you?"

That was one burden he neither could nor would bear. "You were hardly virgin when first I—"

"Buggered me? Or would 'sodomise' suit you better? Or seeing as how you've gone all Lord Longford on me tonight, maybe I should say, 'shared bodily fluids' with me, eh? Better for you, that? Then you can pretend even more, can't you?" His eyes were puffy, skin dull, the muscles in his neck taut as cables, anger burning him up from the inside out. "But it's got nothing to do with when we got started with each other, has it? I was clean when I went into prison, and I didn't have anything when I came out, and all I did inside was wank to memories of you, which goes to show you what a fucking fool I am." His legs went out from under him and he sat, heavily, worn out by the tension of the day. "Why'd you do it, Peter?" he asked abruptly, almost pleading. "Sometimes I pretended to myself that it was more than fucking for you, but it wasn't, was it? I mean, inside, I suppose I really knew you didn't love me, but how could you do that to me? Why'd you tell me you were clean when you weren't?"

He didn't want to hear any talk about love, not now, not telling him that he had never made Colin feel loved— "Why must you insist on blaming me?" he said, turning to the easier thing to deal with. "For all either of us know, I could be negative—"

"After what you've been doin', and for as long as you've been doing it? And I told you, I was clean when I got out of prison, and you've been the only one I've been with since then, so fat fucking chance."

That stopped him, stifling him, ripping the air from his lungs, shock sundering him.

"Me?" he whispered, eyes wide in horror, the nightmare beginning. "But I'm never ill. I've always been as healthy as an ox, fit as a fiddle. Never so much as a cold. And I'm hardly promiscuous—"

"Not promiscuous? Oh, yeah, right. Pull the other one." His face was inches from Balliol's, but the sight didn't move him the way it usually did. The agony of vulnerability in those wondrous green eyes only made him furious, for he felt as if the scales had dropped from his own eyes, letting him see clearly. It wasn't feyness that made those eyes so mysterious, nor enormous depth of feeling to be hidden, nor even that enduring innocence. It was ignorance, wilful ignorance that lent those eyes their wondering beauty, ignorance that made him want to rend and tear and rip apart with his teeth, raging at this man it hurt him to love, because he couldn't even see the virus in his blood, let alone kill it. He'd have to wait for the scientists for that, and the castrating helplessness of it all made him want to warrior-rampage and shatter the only focus within reach. "You're a coward, Peter, and I've always forgiven you for that, could even understand why you couldn't tell anyone—"

He wondered, for the briefest of moments what Col would say if he told him that he'd confessed homosexuality to a lobbyist—and then invited her to bed with him. Another lie, that one to her, designed to keep him safe.

"—but to tell me you were clean and then fuck me like that? Christ's sake, what made you do a thing like that?" Colin saw only the instinctive, blinkered denial staring back at him and his fist clenched in violent hunger. "Oh, what's the fucking use!" he shouted, so that he wouldn't give in and actually beat Peter to a bloody pulp. "Get out, just get fucking lost."

Seeing the fury, Balliol backed away, physically, metaphorically, emotionally. He couldn't quite accept it, not yet, that Colin was positive, that he carried the plague within him, that it was only a matter of time. Couldn't accept it, and wouldn't accept that it had been he who had done this to Colin. That was just too, too unfair.

And too, too terrifying. For if he had been

the one to infect Colin, then he had to have it himself, didn't he? And he couldn't. He simply couldn't. Not him. He was too clean, too careful. Very quietly, so that he wouldn't notice himself doing it, he closed the door on the honesty that wanted him to remember how many times there had been without a condom, with strangers, up against walls, on his knees with cock in his mouth, on his knees with cock up his arse, oh, so many times, too many times, hidden, denied, done when drunk so that he would never have to face the truth. But not now, he wasn't going to think about them now...

"You know what makes me really sick?" Colin said over his shoulder, trying to make sense of how he was feeling, of the outrage and denial and fear, struggling with the internal dismay of the disease and the external threat of people's reactions. "I've just seen in this morning's paper what your lot are going to do to people like me. D'you get it, Peter? Not some nameless bugger you can tell yourself is some sleazebag prommie who's lost count of how many men who've fucked his arse, but me. And you take the biscuit, you really do. I mean, if we had one person, just one person, in your position who'd come out and say, look at me, I've got it, then we could make a difference. And I always thought if push came to shove, you'd stand up and make a difference. Christ, how wrong can a person be? You're not helping *us*, you're helping the pigs round us up and throw away the key. Quarantine? For fuck's sake, Peter, that's as bad as—"He stopped speaking, sighed heavily, shoulders slumping. "I'm just wasting my breath. You never had the balls to do anything before and you're not going to stop playing at being straight and politically perfect now, are you? So just go away, will you? Just go away and don't come back. You've done enough damage already."

He let the words wash over him, flowing away as if they had never been spoken, and stared instead at Colin, at the limber back that had lost the over-thin, under-fit look of prison; stared at the coarse black hair that always gave him a thrill of pleasure after the satin of smooth skin; at the sweetly curved rump and long, strong thighs. Stared at the

man whose bed he had shared, and whose body he had shared, and whose life he had never quite shared. But now he could see only the disease, and then that bitter, bitter accusation with its whipping tail of fear that said he must have it too, if he had given it to Colin. Which couldn't possibly be true, not him, he shouted to himself instinctively. He would have felt some signs of it, some symptom, some inner awareness, if he'd had it himself, surely. But all he felt was in the pink of health and vitality.

I do not have it, he told himself, knowing it to be true. Praying for it to be true. Needing, desperately, for it to be true, longing to crawl off into his own little world where everything was all right and nothing was going to change.

"I told you to get out, Peter. So fuck off." "Colin, you can't blame me—"

"Who else can I blame? The system, the way I used to tell you to? Well," he leant back in close to Balliol, and all the love in him had retreated, routed by what he had learned that day, of the betrayal and the treachery that was going to eventually steal his life and his dignity, "let me tell you something, I do blame the system, Peter love," making the last word an accusation and a condemnation, "and guess who's the fucking system now, Mr. Health Minister."

A thousand shards of glass, he sat there, scarcely breathing, as the words shattered

"I already told you," Colin hissed, napalm voice wounding, "get out. NOW!"

"But—"

"Don't 'but' me, not after what you've done to me. Get out, Peter, because if you don't, so help me, I swear I'll kill you."

The words sat there, ugly and true and invoking another killing that was going on, cell by cell by cell. Suddenly, Peter wanted to scream, scream until his throat was raw and his voice gone and everyone in the world had heard his agony. He stumbled to his feet, not knowing what to say, not knowing what to do. Not knowing what to feel...

"Once you've calmed down, you'll ring me? Once you're ready to discuss this—"

"There's nothing to discuss, because you don't want to hear anything. Oh, go on, get

out. Run away and bury your head in the sand and don't think about what you're doing and who you're infecting." He looked at Balliol with bewildered disillusion. "I used to think you were a good man who'd got stuck in a rotten situation. But you're not, are you? You're just a fucking coward, that's all. Look at you! Cabinet Minister, got the ear of the Prime Minister, and what do you do? Try to pretend to yourself that you're not even fucking gay. Pathetic. You're a pathetic coward, and I don't ever want to see you again."

He opened his mouth to speak, to say something that would make things better, that would give him Colin back, but there were no words there, only the mounting scream lumping in his throat like tears. Colin turned his back on him, dismissing him, shutting him out, and still there was nothing in him that he could say. Slowly, he finally pulled himself together into some semblance of himself, and went to the door. He turned, at the last, to look at Colin once more, but there was nothing there for him but rejection. He opened that door, and stepped outside—

—and he wanted to scream at Peter to come back, he forgave him, he knew that Peter hadn't meant to hurt him, that he knew Peter loved him as much as Peter dared love anyone. But he couldn't, because lies were no comfort now, and he couldn't bear to hear any more lies coming from lips he had worshipped with kisses. As the door clicked shut, he clenched his eyes shut too, but still the tears escaped, burning hot and bitter down his cheeks-

—where Mrs. Ferguson from next door was sweeping her step and looking at him with inquisitive concern. He found a polite smile for her, and walked sedately down the stairs, looking like his usual self, apart from a tenseness around the eyes and the lines of misery around the mouth. With every step, the inner scream was louder, but none of it escaped, blanketed down instead to this outer calm. Still, he couldn't help it: as he left the building, he looked up to Colin's flat, but there was nothing there but drawn curtains. As if Colin was already gone...

He walked on, faster and faster, until he was running, heart pounding, mind blanking out the pain and the guilt and the horror, giving all his breath to running so that he couldn't scream, so that he wouldn't vent his rage on some poor passing innocent. Running, running, running, oblivious to the stares of strangers, until exhaustion defeated him and he stopped and looked around himself, trying to work out where he was. Not far, really, from his flat, the closest thing to a refuge that he had left. So he walked on until a taxi came along the street, the yellow-amber light welcoming him. On then, to his flat, to sit, alone, body enforcing stillness upon the mind, Colin's words enforcing themselves upon his thoughts.

This time he knew that it was over. That he and Colin were over and done with, finished. And he did not like what was beginning.

The lowly office staff put his fraught and furious behaviour down to the strain of the impending interviews and protests that would surely come once the new AIDS regulations were announced. Hearing this gossip over the morning coffee, Godfrey Wilmington merely smiled, and hugged to his breast the satisfying warmth of information wielded well, gambolling behind sombre face at the thought of the leash wrapped so tightly around the Minister's neck.

The Minister, in the meantime, gritted his teeth and tried not to think about his surreptitious visit to an old school friend who also happened to now be a Harley Street specialist, and the kind of man one visited for examinations of the discreet sort. He tried not to think about the darkness of his blood as it pulsed slowly into the phial held by gloved hands. Tried not to think of what would happen to him if his friend reported him after all. Most emphatically tried not to think what would happen to him if his friend had any cause to report him...

The frown on his face never went away, unless it was when he took his glasses off to rub at the permanent ache that pounded him. And the frown only deepened as he read the reports and approved wording for a bill of which he approved not at all. But what else could he do? A protest would do nothing but oust him, with public exposure and humili-

ation too. And how long would it be before the press found out that Colin was positive—

He couldn't think about Colin. Couldn't. Didn't dare, for the pain would swamp him, and sitting at his desk, Wilmington hovering at his shoulder, was not the place to break down. Or take a hefty swig of Scotch. Or do any of the other things that took the most lacerating edge off the pain. Nothing for him to do, but bury himself in work, and deny to himself that his work was part of his problem, that his work was going to make life hell for too many people. The scream was rising in his throat again, and he swallowed, forcing it back down, struggling to contain the scream within, fighting to not let it out. No. There was no point in that. There was nothing he could if he were ousted from the corridors of power, but at least he could do something by sitting on committees and changing those things he could change. Better than nothing. Better than being useless. Better than being nothing. Blinking behind the corrective glass of his spectacles, he went on being blind, correcting the wording of his own oppression, telling himself that he wasn't listening for the phone to ring.

But he was waiting for the phone to ring, every trill making his heart leap with hope it was Colin!—and his spirits plummet—it was the doctor, and hell—and every properly governmental call stretching him on the rack of waiting. Tuesday morning, going over the list for Prime Minister's Question Time, checking what was going to be asked, memorising the 'question' the Whip had arranged for him to ask. He looked through the spending figures once more, making sure the rather impressive hospital figures would trip rollingly from the tongue, then gave some thought to what he should wear: with the cameras in there, it stood one in good stead to always look the part for the public. Of such things were great promotions and good election results made.

"Sir, it's a Doctor Pargiter for you. He is insisting upon speaking to you personally and immediately," Wilmington said plummily, crossing the room and picking up the receiver of the desk phone.

He froze for a second, no more, and then he

was his usual self, seating himself in the burgundy leather seat behind his mahogany desk, speaking casually as if this were nothing more than a call to arrange golf for that weekend. "Yes, Harry, how are you?"

Wilmington found some papers that absolutely had to, really must be tidied this very instant.

Balliol glowered at him, to no effect, and then stared instead at the documents on his blotter. "Glad to hear it. And the family?

Wilmington was still tidying the immaculately neat papers.

Balliol sat silent for a moment, listening, and now the wait to hear his fate almost ended, he wanted it to begin all over again, to give him that time over again, postpone this moment, all his certainty of health fled in the face of Colin testing positive. As he listened, his face went white, bloodless, and the breath went out of him.

"Ah," he said, wordless. He fumbled the phone back on to its cradle, then sat staring at it, face utterly blank, only his convulsive swallowing betraying him. He didn't even hear Wilmington speak to him, didn't see him either. Numb, the pain not yet begun, he got up, walking slowly, blindly seeking out the one person who could understand, and the one he needed, desperately, to talk to, to apologise, to beg forgiveness, to come to and hold and try to make sense out of the words careening around his skull. His official car was luxuriant and plush, redolent with leather and money. None of it registered with him, not the car, not the passing streets, not the beetling crowds. Destination reached, steps stretching above him, Everest in winter, but he climbed them, the litany of words circling in his brain, screeching at him. His key in Colin's door, but it wouldn't twist, the door wouldn't He kicked it. open. uncomprehending, forcing the key, uselessly, cursing the door, voice rising until he was shouting at it, damning it.

Next door, opening, Mrs. Ferguson coming out, no inquisitive concern now, but hostility, distrust and disgust.

"He's gone, you know, your fancy man. Gone, and good riddance."

He forced his voice into modulated calm.

stopping himself from screaming, needing, oh, needing Colin so much. "What do you mean, gone?"

"Didn't he tell you? Got AIDS, filthy swine. Gone off to his sister's an' I'ope he stays there. Course, once that Register-whatsit starts, the likes of 'im won't be wanderin' round spreadin' it to decent folk, will they?"

The rage blistered him, conflagrating him, but what could he say?

Nothing. Always nothing, always keeping his mouth shut, always doing the discreet thing. He left, not answering her, at least not ashamed of himself for joining her in her bigotry, until he was in his car and on the phone to a colleague, speaking so calmly and so pedantically about the possible repercussions of the new bill. As if it had nothing to do with him, save politically. As if everything was all right and he had nothing more to think about, save Question Time. As if he didn't want to hurl his rage at the world.

His secretary couldn't get Colin's sister's number: married, different name, and he wasn't sure which part of London she lived in. But he'd find him, eventually. There were mutual acquaintances, clubs and pubs that he could search in, people he could ask. He needed to find Colin. to make sure Col was all right, to make sure that he himself would be all right.

For, of course, this wasn't something he could tell Naomi about, was it? And she was used to him being impotent: he rather thought they both preferred it that way. But he could talk to Colin about it. Talk to him, hold him...

But Colin was gone, and had told him that he never wanted to see his face again. Peter could still hear it, every last intake of breath, every expelled—and expelling—word. He could, if feeling suitably masochistic, even remember every gesture and every atom of hate on the handsome face. He could, but only in that weak moment between sleeping and waking, remember seeing Colin watching him with all the love turned to hate. Gone. It sank into him, stone into his heart, breaking him into pieces. He was nothing, he thought, a complete failure. Positive. He was HIV+, which meant he could no longer be husband to Naomi. Oh, he could stay married to her,

but he would have to hide behind the lie of impotence. He had lost Colin, and with him, the best part of his life. Which, of course, in the way of human history, he had never appreciated in time. Too late, he saw it for what it was, every glittering second of it, every fragment of honesty and freedom. But perhaps it was for the best, that Col had gone. With his test results, it would be better if he kept an extremely low profile on the gay issue, both in private, and in public.

The car pulled up outside the steps that would lead him in, to the metaphoric and literal corridors of power. Question Time would be starting soon, giving him just enough time to get there and take his place, his Question running through his mind. He wanted to run too, run forever along these echoing passages, to run and never have to stop and face his life. Someone—a colleague, the one who had pushed to get that new AIDS quarantine bill put forward—smiled and nodded, congratulating him on his work to protect 'decent people' from those 'disease machines'.

He wanted, achingly, to kill the bastard. But instead, he smiled with gritted teeth and walked on, hand in pocket, glasses flashing furiously in the dotted pockets of light. His fists ached to break someone's face, to wipe those self-satisfied smirks off their faces, if only because he knew how often he'd had the same smile himself. Hypocrites! he wanted to scream. Murderers! But he wanted to scream that at himself. He hated himself, loathing what he was, what he had become. What he had done. He had no excuses, fear not being enough, not any more, now that the unthinkable, the inconceivable had happened. He was HIV+, carrier of HIV2, and spreader of it to at least one person.

His stride faltered with the sickening realisation that he couldn't possibly tell any of his former partners: he had to keep this secret, else he'd lose his job, life insurance, mortgage insurance—freedom. Although he was beginning to see how precious little of that he had left anyway. He was not, perhaps, entirely caged, but certainly he was un-free. Unfree to choose his own partners, his own loves, his own life. Unfree to do such simple

things as hold hands in public with someone he loved—unless it was the more-or-less platonic love he had for his wife. And now, knowing, knowing he carried the disease, he was even unfree to use his one 'relationship' talent: sex. That had always been his credit card in lieu of real emotional coin, but few had ever complained. And Colin had always—don't think about that last morning, don't think about what he said—seen that the sex had been a smoke-screen of protection, at least when it had come to the relationship he had had with Col, regardless of everyone else.

He was nodding greetings to those who acknowledged him, the business-like exchange going on over the top of his mind like mist before rain, him not really thinking about it, simply doing it. Going through the motions, he reminded himself, starting a dauntingly long catalogue of all the other things in his life that he had made into merely 'going through the motions' because he had—or so he had honestly believed—no other choice. Which, as he made a jocular hello to a particularly unfavourite colleague of his, he was beginning to doubt.

What was it Colin had said? If they—we, a small voice whispered, repeating in clinical detail what Dr. Pargiter had told him in icy detachment—had just one person in your position helping them (us, you're one of us now, it whispered again, you and Colin), instead of throwing them to the pigs whilst you sit safe and sound in your ivory tower. The Chief Whip nodded amicably at him, but he didn't want to even look at the man. A hand on his arm stopped him, slowing him down and the scream started in the back of his mind again, as he smiled politely into that much-loathed face.

"You're looking rather pale, Peter," the Whip said with such lugubrious and spurious concern.

"Am I?" he asked, with perhaps just a touch too much of his residual rebellion showing through.

"Yes, you are. Perhaps all this added work is proving a bit much for you, on top of all..." the perfectly timed pause, salt in the wound, humiliation delivered with such delicacy that it was barely perceptible, unless you were the

victim and wanted to rip this man's face off to expose the corruption of maggots within, "on top of all your other...duties. Perhaps you should take a little holiday? I'm sure your wife would enjoy a few days in Paris. We could always send you on a 'fact-finding' trip—something to do with the EC."

"Ah. Yes, well, how kind of you," he said, thinking instead a litany of vile epithets and vicious curses, "I just might take you up on that. I'm sure Naomi would love a romantic weekend in Paris," but I wouldn't not with her, oh, dear Christ, what's happening to Colin? But then he smiled again, composing himself, clamping down against the hysteria and fear and guilt which threatened so to swamp him.

"Well, let me know, do, dear chap, and I'll see what I can arrange."

"Of course, the very moment I've had a word with Naomi, I'll ring you up."

Another smile, another friendly nod, and he was walking on, his easy grace consumed by tension, his back itching with the feeling of being watched.

A slightly raised voice, still discreet enough that the few government people nearby would be able not to hear. "You won't forget the Question, will you?"

The leash, being tugged.

"Of course not," himself, coming to heel, although he'd be damned if he would add anything so defiling as an honorific to the comment. Sufficient, surely, that he obeyed: they could make him behave, but they could forget the licking of their feet and the fetching of their slippers. He could still feel that speculation burning into his back: the Chief Whip, he knew, wondering about him, speculating, perhaps working out what useful little job he could perform in Paris for them. Pavlov's dog, he decided, abruptly, Pavlov's dog. Conditioned to respond with fear and subterfuge to the revelation of his true nature, crippled by that fear to reveal himself to anyone at all. So convinced of his unworthiness that he thought himself useless unless his job was of value. Nothing. He saw himself as nothing if one were to strip away the camouflage. But he was something. A knot of burning, aching agony-he couldn't stop

seeing Colin looking at him with hate, and saying those awful words, you never loved me, you never loved me, you never loved me. But I did, he needed to tell him. I still do, I just didn't believe that I could. I was too busy lying to everyone and myself that I simply did not know.

With a blink, the bright camera lights blinding him for a second, he realised he was in the chamber proper, and took his seat, well-placed for the camera and the microphones and the public to see and be impressed. A rising star, indeed. And it mattered—not as much as it should. If we had someone in your position, Colin had said to him. Colin, ashamed of his duplicity, appalled by his stabbing them all in the back—would he be watching this today? Would he be sitting at his sister's house, with her children off somewhere, or perhaps yelling and playing as children do, with Colin shouting at them to be quiet, he was trying to watch Question Time? Or would he be silent and alone, not at his sister's at all, but disappeared where the authorities couldn't find him to Register him? In a bedsit, damp and cold and miserable?

He couldn't bear to think about it. He sat back in his bench, standing and sitting as tradition demanded, sitting somnambulant, enduring this time until he could get outside into the fresh air and think. Automatically, he kept track of who was asking what, rehearsing in his own mind the craw-sticking Question written out for him: Would my Right Honourable Friend agree, that the recently allocated spending by this Government, will give Britain the finest hospitals in Europe and the best system of health care, particularly for the elderly. And will my Right Honourable Friend also agree, that the proposed Children's Centre for AIDS Treatment will be a major landmark in this Government's striving to help these innocent victims?

Innocent victims? His mind screamed at him: innocent victims? Then what am I? What is Colin?

But of course, he couldn't say any of that, could not dare reveal himself and send his house of cards tumbling down. There was droning going on repeatedly about the usual—unfair spending cuts in the North, cut-backs

in certain services in Wales, unduly high unemployment in Scotland, one of the customary litany, too overwhelming to listen to item by item—and he sat there, handsome and still and under several very watchful eyes. They could see his tension, and his abstraction, and some wondered why, and some wondered what he was planning.

Nothing. He was planning nothing, for he was inventorying his life, and finding that all he had of value left was his family, and even that had been founded on a lie. His career, oh, his wonderful career that he honestly had believed was making a difference in people's lives, well, it was definitely making a difference in people's lives. Except, he had always wanted to *help* them, not this... After Question Time was over, he was supposed to go back to his office and sign the documents that were the last task he had in connection with the new AIDS bill. Sign it, and it would be off his hands—and on to how many people's backs, hounding them?

He wasn't going to think about that right now. Not here, in the House, lights glittering, leather and wood gleaming, faces bright or bored as the proceedings took them. He was not, most emphatically not, going to think about Colin. That was his private life, his separate life, the one he had to keep apart from his Ministerial position.

But they hadn't allowed him to do that, had they? His fists clenched, almost of their own will, his mind oblivious to the tell-tale sign. One person, just one person saying the wrong thing, and that would be it: he'd go for them, attack them, destroy them—destroy himself and make all this stop. His head was pounding and he took his glasses off to rub the bridge of his nose. Blinded, the world blurred around him, he realised that it was his turn to ask his Question—their Question so he rose to his feet, asking the traditional question which so many, less respectful of the past, had long since dispensed with. The PM bobbed to his feet to give the traditional response—after my duties before this House, I shall have meetings this afternoon with my Ministers and others—and as the Prime Minister reseated himself, Balliol put his glasses back on, moving as if his life had been

slowed down to the crawl of a snail. The first person he saw clearly was Fforbes-Smith, the man who had lost this job because he had dared stand up and be counted, protesting the treatment of AIDS victims—me, he thought suddenly, the identity settling on him like an iron girder, me!—and then he saw poor Margaret Moynahan, drawn and paper-like, a stiff upper lip doing nothing to disguise the underlying depression.

The Question. The Question they had given him to ask, another lie in the winding road of lies that he had trod all his life. Their Question. Or his own.

He had to decide. To choose, once and for all. Make a decision, define his life, cut away or keep, now.

The scream was banshee howling in the back of his mind, threatening his throat, his mouth, his career. He forced the scream back down, deep down where it couldn't escape and turn him into a gibbering wreck.

"Would my Right Honourable Friend not agree," and he saw the bored, inattentive faces, saw the hovering ear of the radio broadcast come to hang in front of him, and then the unblinking eye of the camera that would take this moment into every home in Britain, that would record it for every news broadcast: BBC, Independent, C4, Sky, Euronet, CNN, all of them, every home, everyone could see him, standing there with his balls in someone else's hands, collar and leash around his neck, asking the questions like the well-trained dog he was.

Colin. Watching him?

His career. His last chance to pave the way to 10 Downing Street.

Or his last chance to regain himself, to finally be free.

"Would my Right Honourable Friend not agree," he began again, following the prescribed pattern, "that it is immoral, unethical and unacceptable," the first seconds of the stunned stillness of the entire House, "to use the law-and-order crisis, the recent rioting and the AIDS crisis as a means to distract the population from the corruption," the first gasp of shock, the first murmur of comment, "the incompetence and the hypocrisy of this Government?" The scream was whirling and

dancing now, elated, and he was soaring with every word he spoke, a link in the chain struck off every time he spoke, joy exploding inside him. Colin. Watching him. Himself, setting himself free. "And would my Right Honourable Friend not also agree," and now he could hear the beginnings of protest, the first shout, the first shouting down, "that the new health bill is nothing more than a charter for discrimination, bigotry and hate and—" he had to shout in his turn, to make himself heard, "and a mandate to brand people as scapegoats to cover the appalling health and social—" he was pounding the words out now, over the roar of the mob that had once been the government, seeing nothing of the shock on the PM's face nor the fury on the Whip's, "—social services record which is full of lies and untruths presented to this House and the people of this country as fact? And would my Right Honourable Friend not also agree," his eyes were flashing now, and he was high, flying high on the ecstasy of being free and telling the truth, unvarnished and undisguised for the first time, "that it is high time that he and I and all the others in this House who are the same," and he was intoxicated with it all, "should stand up and admit to being homosexuals?"

And that did it. The unspeakable spoken, the unwritten rules erased as if they had never been. He had done it. He had stood up and been counted, and forced others to stand up with him. Silence descended upon the House, until a pin would have been heard, had it dropped, and the hydraulics of the cameras hissed as they wove and bobbed, trying to capture himself and the pasty-white face of the Prime Minister turning a slow,

sickened grey.

Balliol stood utterly still, only realising what he had said once he had shut his mouth, closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. All those people, a sea of faces, and every one of them staring at him. My god, dear god in heaven, what have I done? he thought, the elation of freedom evaporated, fear running in, euphoria leaving him to be cold and naked and vulnerable, exposed for once and for all, in the most spectacular coming out in British history. He knew that the newspapers were changing their headlines, news broadcasts were scrambling for words and his picture, my god, they would all be flaunting a picture of him with his mouth open and the truth screaming out from him It would be everywhere, absolutely everywhere he went, his own honesty staring at him accusingly, his world ripped into a thousand million little tiny pieces...

Dear Christ, what had he done?

A millisecond, that was all it had taken for the reality to sink in to him. A blink, that was all he had had to stare at all those faces. At the faces, the people, who were staring back at him, for a heart-beat of perfect silence. And into that silence, everything-including, he realised with a deathly shiver, eyes catching sight of the grey-skinned Prime Minister, the Government itself-tumbling down around his head, with the eyes and the ears of the nation watching him, he said the only thing that seemed to fit the circumstance.

"Ah," he said, looking at them, seeing the babble and the rabble rise again, the House turned to mob, the ravening horde about to turn on him. "Ah."