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# PÆAN TO PRIAPUS

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# III

**AN ANTHOLOGY OF MULTI-MEDIA SLASH FICTION**

## **VOLUME THREE**

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

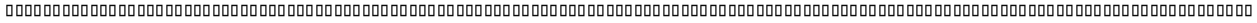
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## PREFACE

CAROLINE K. CARBIS, EDITOR

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 triggering-point 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.

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

Lord Peter Wimsey waved his recently-removed boutonniere 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?"

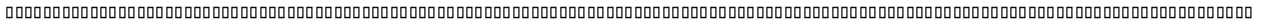
"M'm, an' once that's over the old palate, I do rather think we shall have a new bottle of brandy. Perfect way to end our little adventure in sleuthin', what? A fine 1800 Napoleon, absolute heaven an' quite the right reward. Have you finished potterin' about in the dinin' room yet?"

"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 well-groomed 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.”

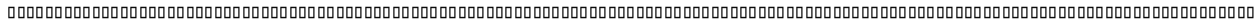
“I didn’t intend any slur on his character, old bean. I was simply tryin’ to say that you’re not so appallin’ an employer, that’s all I wanted to say, don’t you know. There’s no cause for you to go leapin’ down a man’s throat, when all he’s done is defend your











“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.

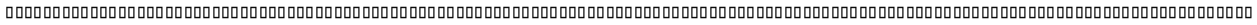
It seemed, when it had first happened, (and it had happened more times than some people might say it should have both during the War itself and in the months since Bunter had been in Lord Peter’s employ,) it seemed the most natural and the most charitable thing in the world, when he felt that hard thrusting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





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.”

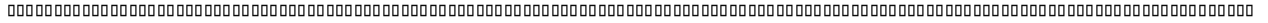
“Well, then, I shall indulge you, as you shall indulge me. I want to roger you, Peter, I want to bugger you and sodomise you, and fuck you. I want to know you,” he said, his hand going between Peter's legs, and he smiled as Peter rolled away from him, but only so that he might return, flat upon his belly, 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 heart-rending 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."

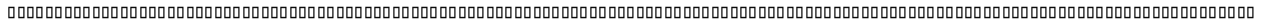
A pause here, as Wimsey thought the same thoughts he thought every time this happened. "I don't have much need for a gamekeeper myself, but I'm sure my brother would. He's not a bad chap, old Gerald. Quite a decent employer, I should imagine. I shall drop him a line for you, if you should find yourself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







# C I V I L 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.

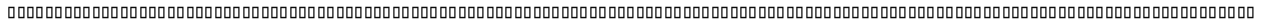
ADRENALIN SURGE, fear pounding through their veins, rush of life at the sheer exhilaration of survival. Doyle was stalking in front of Bodie, bootheels staccato click-click-clicking, back rigid and taut with strain, left hand clenched into a fist at his side, pocket of light gleaming briefly on it as 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







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.

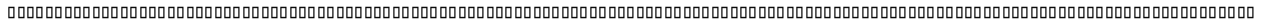
The next step between them, the hunger fed, the need met, the sweet aching of their bodies sheathed in one another. It was there, all over Doyle's face, in his eyes, in the painful bulge of his jeans. Words stoppered in his throat by the flashflood of lust, Bodie moved to Doyle, grabbing him by the arm 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 aching 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.





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

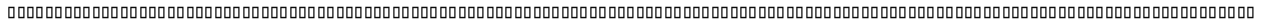
wild that spit didn't keep them wet for long enough. Curling his body over under the confines of the car roof, he shoved his left knee between Ray's, his right leg braced stiffly immobile between the back seat and the driver's seat, his strength holding them steady. His fingers were slippery now, snaking 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





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 almost-silent 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 rumbled 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 him...

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.

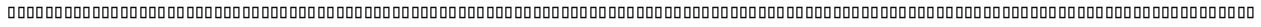
That, of course, ignored the minor detail of the pub they'd stood behind, and the raucous female laughter they'd both heard. But it was

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 re-heard 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 bover 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 buggger 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—

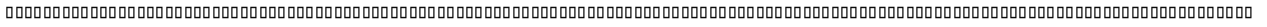
That look on Bodie's face, when he'd kissed him, fucking hell, it couldn't have been, could it? Could it?—

—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









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..."

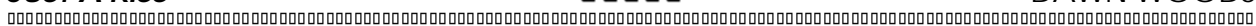
"Whassa matter?" And Vinnie cuddled up closer, for all the world as oblivious as a child. "I'm comfortable, you're not buggin' me."

*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, halfscared that Vince would stop, halfterrified 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.”

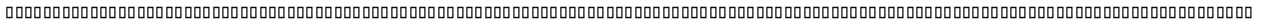
Frank wasn’t worried. He was panicked. But not enough to move, not enough to do anything to stop this.

“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.

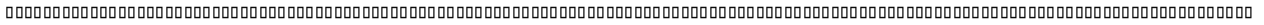
Oh, he’d wanted this for so fucking long, and here it was in his hands—in Vinnie’s hands—in Vince’s hand on his cock. Frank wished there was more light in the room, wished he could see the soft expression on Vince’s face that was reflected in his voice. That was definitely the best of all; that Vince 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





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.

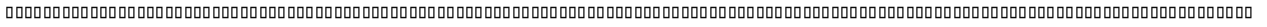
Dawn's early light provided just enough lifting of shadow for him to recognize every painful reminder of the years-long relationship that he had just possibly, in twenty minutes of ignorant self-indulgence, utterly destroyed. Over in the corner was the baseball Sparky had chewed to hell and back that 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





# 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





"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, Dalglish 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 Dalglish 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 Dalglish 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 re-treating man, leaving Dalglish 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 tree-tops 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



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 soupçon 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.

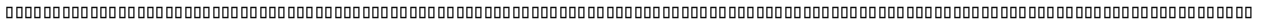
Thomas smiled at him, his whole face lighting him up, limning this rugby-ish man with pre-Raphaelite beauty. And he was beautiful. Not handsome, not attractive, but beautiful with the same kind of radiance he remembered his wife as having had.

“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.*





thing 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?”

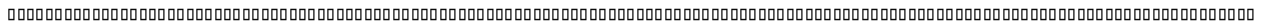
“Did you,” Dalgliesh continued, driven by the same need to poke and prod that afflicts both dentists and policemen, “do them yourself?”

“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





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 eruptions 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 brittle 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."

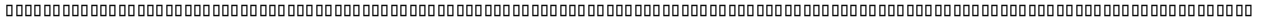
But he couldn't. Not sitting here in someone else's parlour, in front of someone else's fireplace, drinking someone else's cognac. He started to ease away, felt Thomas' resistance, and allowed himself this small comfort. But if Thomas—

"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







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-aided 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 ready-made 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



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?”



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-



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 splash on peaked





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

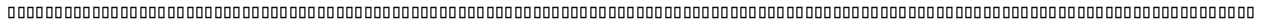
enough to find living less than appealing. One had uncovered his own cowardice, the other his own courage in getting through each and every day.

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





O D D S ,  
S O D S ...

TRIPLE CROSS  
J. M.

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*.

*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 ack<sup>1</sup> support group doesn't understand, exclamation point. cats, exclamation point.

<sup>1</sup> *Anxieties from Our Cats and Kitties—ed.*





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 feather-light kisses on Bodie's jaw, then pulled back as the bristles scraped his lips.

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

Bodie scratched 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 off-duty 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."

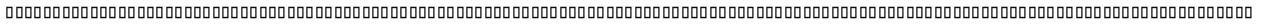
Ray looked up, meeting Bodie's gaze.

"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.







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 circuits.

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.





# ... 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 cuttngly 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



“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 wetting 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 worth thinking 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.”

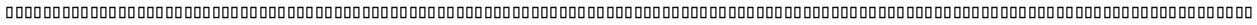
“Yes, you did, didn’t you, Kerr?” The hand was stroking again, easing its slow way across the litheness of leather covered thigh, across the hungry temptation of crotch, snaking sensuously towards the supple curve of Avon’s right buttock. “I can still remember every single moment of you and me. I’ve 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."

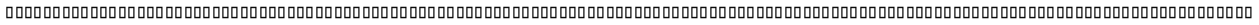
"Really? Is that how you've re-written the past? I suppose that means that you've erased all those sweet nothings you whispered to me? And all those dreams, and all those promises? And guilts, and fears." A burst of laughter, a wicked warping of something a young and rose-tinted Kerr Avon had once thought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











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 simmer 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



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?"

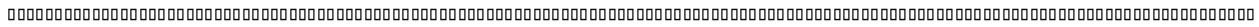
At that, Avon turned, stalking back to tower over the recumbent man, paying little attention as Travis slowly began tugging his clothes back into place. "Unlike you," he purred, "I outgrew telling tales a long time ago. However, you can run tattling to Blake if you choose to. I shall, of course, deny 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 full-fledged Tart!*

# C I V I L SERVANTS

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.

## NANNY'S TEDDY TALES AND OTHER BEDTIME STORIES: BEDTIME STORY

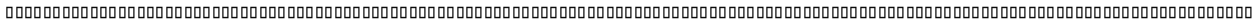
EDI N. BURGH

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 stropy 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, ex-Detective 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 shuttiness 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

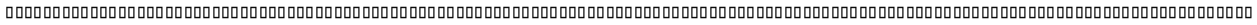
it was enough. Doyle stopped, jacket shrugged half on, head bowed, chest heaving as Bodie got to his feet and turned to look. All the sinews of Doyle's neck were standing out in stark relief, the muscles on his forearm rippling strong, the fabric of his jeans strained by the tensed clenching of thigh. 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 steamrolled 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 lummo, 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.”

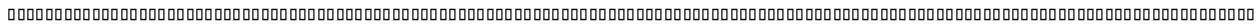
“Tut-tut, Doyle, your jealousy is showing, and all because you lack my sex drive,” he sneered, defending himself with the best offense he could muster. “Pull the claws in, petal, they don’t suit you.”

“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





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 ease-filled 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 halves’ 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?”



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..."

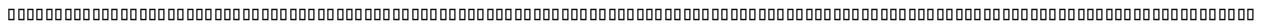
"If I just come quietly," Bodie said, still whispering, bedroom warmth dripping from his voice, "you'll wonder who the strange man in your bed is, won't you?"

"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







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 much-loved 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..."*



















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 top-heavy 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."

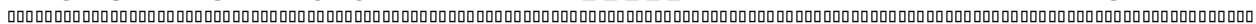
Bodie was walking away from him, waving an abstract good-bye over his shoulder. A sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, that morbid curiosity for which he was so rightly infamous, made him ask: "A nurse? The night nurse from the hospital?"

"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,





then?"

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 mind-boggling 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?"

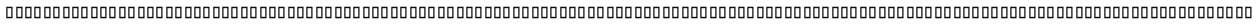
"In your arse," was the hoarse response, and then Bodie was lunging at him, flinging him onto the bed, Bodie's clothes and shoes being tossed aside with fine disregard.

"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





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 well-loved 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."

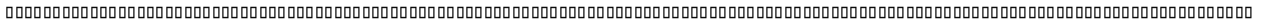
Bodie uttered not a mutter, and it was only when Doyle had shifted uncomfortably for what felt like the millionth time, that it dawned on him what had made Bodie go peculiar. It was him, unable to sit comfortably because Bodie had fucked him so thoroughly and so well. He grinned to himself, an evil little 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 good-natured mêlée.

"Doyle!"







# ENGLISH DETECTIVES

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.

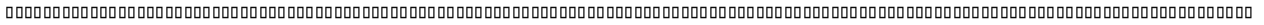
CARPE DIEM  
M. FAE GLASGOW

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 possible-witness 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 long-suffering 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





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 self-pity. "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, 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."

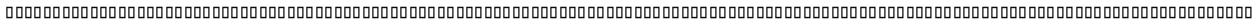
Neither of the other two men even glanced at him. "Well, I shall be off home to the wife and the kiddies then, shall I, sir?"

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





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?”

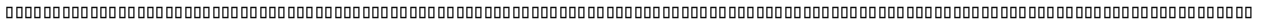
Newspaper held up high in front of his red face, Morse remembered it all too, too well. Second adolescence, behaving like thirteen-year-olds instead of the nineteen-going-on-ninety that a Classics scholar was supposed to be.

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





“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 incompleteness. 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!

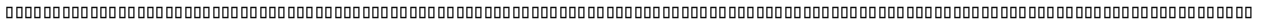
And then there was the question of whether or not Symie even wanted anything beyond a fling, and whether or not this bastion of true-blue Toryism would dream of coming out at all. Or if Symie was going to conduct every last bit of their lives in public like this, without so much as a thought for what 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







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, crescendoing 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 middle-aged 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



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 poorly-paid 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—"

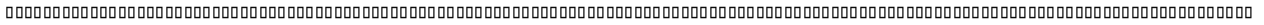
Again, that biting off of a comment. And that, of course, inveigled its way through Morse's determined, protective disinterest. Symington was hiding something, something that he would sooner walk out of here misunderstood than reveal. Something that made him...vulnerable. Morse wanted, suddenly, fiercely, 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?"









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 it—everything, 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?”

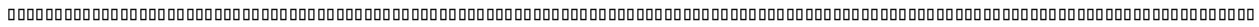
“As I said, I want the opportunity to love you the way we both deserve. I don’t want an affaire with you, I want something that’s going to last a lot longer than that. I want...”

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







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—”

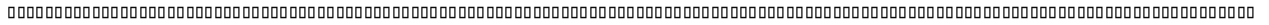
“Police brutality?” Symington purred, rolling onto his back and pulling Morse on top of his spread-eagled body. “Promises, promises.”

“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.”



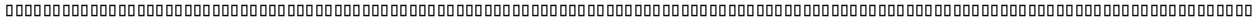


to live alone, change his selfish habits after so many years of thinking about no-one but himself? And if miracle came true, what the hell about the real world of work and money and the reactions of neighbours and friends and colleagues? And what about— And what about the old axiom, he thought to himself, 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!





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 worryingly 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.

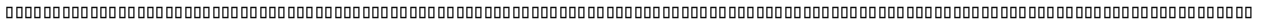
“—such as time served in one of Her Majesty’s prisons or one of the new immigrant detention centres or the mere appearance of homosexuality to decide that someone has AIDS and is therefore to be segregated and sent—”

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 lethality 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 be most...sensible, regarding the Government’s policy.”

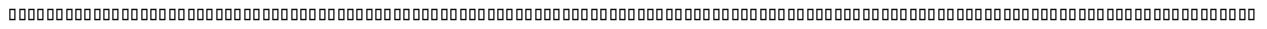
“True,” Godfrey answered, thinking about his own evening, and how much he had yet to accomplish before the new man—whoever he might be—came in and started nosing around where he had no business to nose. “And I do concede that he was amenable in the past, and perhaps it was wisest today to do nothing 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







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 tiptoeing on the edge of a full-fledged 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,

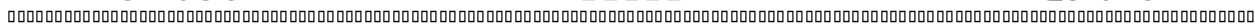
amidst the tired-old chat-up lines and the mating rituals of the majority, he still had to play one of his better-rehearsed rôles: that of butch heterosexual male. He sighed over that, and left off looking around and went back to contemplating his own inner structure. Whenever he stopped to think of 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 half-truths 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.





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 you?”

“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's 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 chuck-

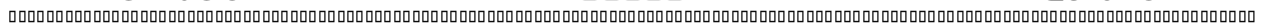












of ‘diddling’, which as an old boy, he knew *all* about. Mr. Reid, on the other hand, wasn’t doing any diddling at all, and as he was only about twenty-seven and absolutely gorgeous, I... Well, you can imagine what I did.”

“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.

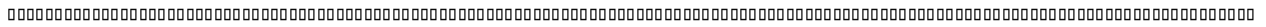
Running away again, Peter?

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





“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?”

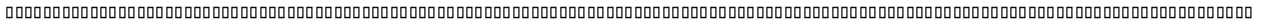
“I’ve seen bulls in china shops handle things better than this.”

“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





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 never-ending 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 knew...

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 choke-chain 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*—"

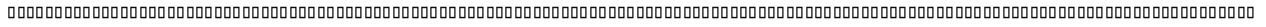
"You mean the one who got nowhere, was promoted not at all and disappeared rather rapidly? Oh, yes, there was him. And it's one thing for Naomi to know, but how do you think she would feel if it were blazoned over every cheap newspaper that her husband, the man she had two grown children with, the man 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—twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five 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





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 overly-sensitive 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,

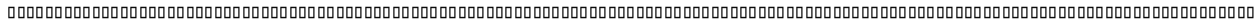
sucking Colin's tongue inside, tasting the limber muscle, and glorying in the slick wet slide into his mouth. It was like having his cock inside him, and that made him hungry for black meat, for the hot thick length of him down his throat, for the lean spurt of cum exploding into him. But not this time. 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,







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-judgmental. 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 fast-forwards 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 petit-fours, "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 at all.”

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 sunseting 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 quick 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



“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 sharp-toothed 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—”

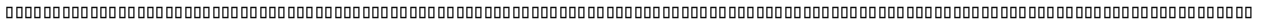
“Bugged me? Or would 'sodomise' suit you better? Or seeing as how you've gone all Lord Longford on me tonight, maybe I should say, 'shared bodily fluids' with me, eh? Better for you, that? Then you can pretend even more, can't you?” His eyes were puffy, skin dull, the muscles in his neck taut as cables, 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.





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 him.

"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—

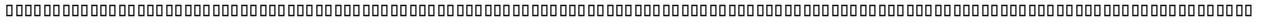
—and he wanted to scream at Peter to come back, he forgave him, he knew that Peter hadn't meant to hurt him, that he knew Peter loved him as much as Peter dared love anyone. But he couldn't, because lies were no comfort now, and he couldn't bear to hear any more lies coming from lips he had worshipped 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







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 open. He kicked it, 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?

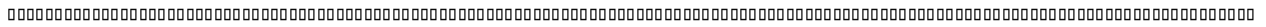
Nothing. Always nothing, always keeping his mouth shut, always doing the discreet thing. He left, not answering her, at least not ashamed of himself for joining her in her bigotry, until he was in his car and on the phone to a colleague, speaking so calmly and so pedantically about the possible repercussions 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,





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.

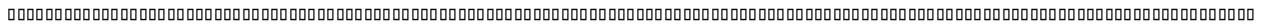
With a blink, the bright camera lights blinding him for a second, he realised he was in the chamber proper, and took his seat, well-placed for the camera and the microphones and the public to see and be impressed. A rising star, indeed. And it mattered—not as much as it should. If we had someone in your 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 crawl-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





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.”