

IV

AN ANTHOLOGY OF MULTI-MEDIA SLASH FICTION

VOLUME FOUR

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

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

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TO THE READER

Welcome to issue four of Pæan to Priapus.. Faithful readers will note that, in contrast to the last zine, the current one has a heavy concentration of *Professionals* and *Blake's* 7 stories (6 and 4 respectively). The other three pieces consist of a Holmes/Watson tale, a Jeeves/Wooster anecdote, and a narrative placed in the world of the Pascoe and Dalziel mystery novels. The common factor for all of the stories is their U. K. setting (a first for the series). Four authors are represented, two of whom are new to Pæan: Jane Mailander and Tallis. From Sebastian there is a lovely, dark story which inspired M. Fae Glasgow to compose two different takes on the same situation.

Thanks this time round go to Mac in London for contributing his perspective that 'yes, this does happen,' to M. Fae for *finally* finishing writing between serious illnesses (they seemed to go on for month after month), and to LDM for both patience and his ability to give answers and make decisions when asked. (These are sterling qualities in a husband.)

—Caroline K. Carbis, editor

Also available from Oblique Publications the OBLAQUE series (Blake's 7 slash) **Oblaque Oblaquer Oblaquest** Oblaque IV: to be taken intravenously Oblaque V: in venery veritas the BENT COPPERS series (The Professionals slash) ...As a £3 Note ...As Two £3 Notes the PÆAN TO PRIAPUS series (multi-media and literary slash) Pæan to Priapus, volumes I, II, III the BENE DICTUM series (well put, well said, well dicked) A Dickensian Christmas by M. FAE GLASGOW

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HOW DOES ONE

DISTINGUISH

THE MEN FROM

THE BOYS?

We open in a complete reversal of our usual practice: with a piece of utter, nonsensical froth. It's not that froth is not to be found elsewhere, but rather that this particular sort of mixture of bubbles usually is reserved for the closing story. Well, not this time. The characters of Jeeves and Wooster in the first tale are delightfully hilarious and well worth having to begin a bout of reading. And following Jeeves' solution to Bertie's dilemma, we move north to the Glaswegian's home territory and a group of men with long, hard sticks and small, white balls. This story is another addition to our continuing *Professionals* Sports Series. In it, the question may truly be asked: how does one distinguish the men from the boys?

CALLY FORNIA DONIA

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

Having folded his underdrawers on the bedroom chair, Jeeves had scarce picked up his dressinggown before he heard a mewling cry come trickling from the main bedroom. The dressing-gown was a rather magnificent creation and would have been quite the silliest thing on a lesser man than Jeeves. However, Jeeves would never permit such considerations to colour his actions and the exquisite dressing-gown was donned with its owner's usual calm efficiency. Being of the efficient sort, it took the merest of moments for those two rather large, very pink beneficiaries of excellent pedicures to be snugly ensconced in slippers. Some poor sheep was undoubtedly shivering on a Welsh hillside, but Jeeves was snug as a bunny, if one can mix one's metaphors with such gay abandon and complete disregard for all the efforts of one's Masters at school. Jeeves glided down the main corridor to the bedroom occupied by his employer, a certain Bertram Wooster, called 'Bertie' by his friends and 'that dashed young fool' by those who knew him rather better than they cared to. The bedroom, or so it seemed by the ululating racket emanating from behind the door, was also occupied by a rather spoilt little boy of approximately five summers.

"Jeeves!" came the peevish cry. "It's doing it again!"

Bertie was all alone, the plaintive infant's cry belonging to him and him alone, much to Jeeves' relief, for he was, after all, a valet and enormously unsuited to nannying. In fact, Bertie had once observed the excellent Jeeves in the presence of a child and thereafter spent the next fortnight delightedly trumpeting the tale of How Jeeves Shuddered. Jeeves pushed the door open and entered the bedroom whilst another high-pitched whine was reverberating, rather piercingly to the old ears, around the room. "It's been and gone and done it again!"

"May I enquire to what sir is referring?" Jeeves asked in his usual plum velvet tones. He would have sounded quite natural and appropriate if he had been in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot, that is, rather than standing at the foot of a disgracefully untidy bed that contained an appallingly dishevelled man.

"This!" Wooster shouted. One could perhaps, if one were of a less than truly charitable nature or unkinder still, if one were a close acquaintance of Sir Roderick Glossop, one could even describe it as an hysterical shriek. One is, however, neither uncharitable nor a friend of Sir Roderick Glossop, so one will simply state that Bertie Wooster was sitting upright in bed, bed-clothes clenched in his raised hands and his voice raised even louder as he shouted for his man.

"Would sir be so kind as to clarify what 'it' is and precisely what 'it' is doing 'again'?"

Bertie blushed, quite prettily for a girl, but as he was a long way from a girl, both in geography and anatomy, the blush was not pretty, but as red as a flag to a bull. He mumbled in a manner that, if he heard such unmannerliness, his dear old Pater would tear the few remaining hairs from his pate and weep over all that money mis-spent on tutors

and schools and the like.

"I do beg your pardon, sir," Jeeves murmured, for Jeeves rarely merely spoke, "but I failed to distinguish the words of your pronouncement."

"Oh, dashitall, Jeeves, must I really say it? Must I really permit the filthy words to pass these pure lips?"

"I really do not think it my place, sir, to comment upon the purity of your lips. However, if I am to render you assistance, then I must respectfully request some additional information. As Shakespeare once wrote, 'a little knowledge—'"

Bertram made a sound authors most commonly, and common authors invariably, render as 'pshaw!'. "There is a time and a place for everything, Jeeves, and my bedroom is no place for Shakespeare!"

"I shall attempt to keep him in the parlour where he belongs, sir. Will that be all?"

"Yes—NO!" Bertie cried once more, bestowing a morose stare upon the offence taking place under the bedcovers. "There is still this matter. Oh, do help me, Jeeves. You always have an answer for everything, you winkle me out of every scrape I have ever landed myself in, please, don't let me down on this!"

"I shall endeavour to render sir every satisfaction," Jeeves responded, blissfully unaware that he was being more than usually prophetic, even for a man of his enormous talents. That last, however, is even more prophetic than Jeeves was to dear old Bertie. Enough of such banter, let us continue with the story.

"I don't know what satisfaction you can render with this thing," Bertie said, sighing gustily. "It does this quite often, every bally morning, I must admit. It usually sorts itself out, if I ignore it for a long enough time and simply pretend that nothing exists below the old belt-buckle. Although perhaps that's not the word I'm looking for. Perhaps I mean that I pretend that nothing exists below the old pyjama ties, because it usually does this every morning. Before I awaken, there it is, ready to ambush me the instant I open my eyes. Quite terrified me the first few times it happened, I don't mind telling you."

Now, all Society knows what a treasure Jeeves is, and all Society knows that Jeeves knows everything there is to know, and all Society knows that Jeeves sees all, knows all and says nothing. All Society would still, I put to you, be shocked at

what Jeeves was presently knowing.

"I believe the event to which you refer is a normal physiological function of the male member, sir.'

Bertie turned redder than a sunset at sea and his mouth gaped wider than a caught fish. "That's silly, Jeeves. How can it be normal?"

"I am merely expressing the opinions of several learned men who are leaders in their field which is medicine and the human anatomy, sir."

"But still, it seems deuced odd to me. Anyway," Bertie shrugged as best he was able with his hands still lifted on high with the bedclothes wrinkled over them, "Nanny told me all about it, and when was Nanny ever wrong? Hmm? Go on, Jeeves, tell me one instance, just one, when Nanny was wrong?"

Jeeves, impressively well-mannered, made no comment. "I am quite sure I could not do such a thing, sir. May Iask the occurrence that precipitated Nanny's pronouncements?"

"Must I?" Bertie whimpered.

Jeeves, ruthless in his search for knowledge, nodded.

"Oh, very well," Bertie sighed. "It was when I was but a lad. One night, I was awakened by the most peculiar sensation. At first, I thought the earth had moved under me, but not another soul was up and about. Oh, I listened, but there wasn't a single sound, apart from some dratted squirrels or bats or some such creature scuttling around whimpering and moaning."

Once more, proving what a sterling fellow he was, Jeeves offered no comment. It was not, in that worthy's opinion, his place to shatter the innocence of his master by drawing his attentions to truths of a somewhat carnal nature, if one can forgive the use of such language.

"Anyway, in the morning, after the chambermaids changed the linens on my bed, Nanny called me up to her rooms."

"Then you were no longer in her charge, sir?"

"Of course not! I was far too old for that! But you know how it is with Nannies. One grows very attached to them, and she had been in the family for years."

This gave rise to another opinion which Jeeves preferred not to utter. It smacked too much of disloyalty to comment that if Nanny, whom he had met on several less than auspicious occasions, had been with the family for years, then that fact

would go a rather long way in explaining why the entire Wooster brood was a trifle odd.

"You were saying, sir?" Jeeves prompted, still preferring not to do anything so commonplace as speak.

"Oh, yes, where was I? Up in Nanny's rooms, with her giving me some lecture in botanics. Is that the word I need, Jeeves? Botanics, or something that covers flora and fauna. Or is it something else entirely? Are bees fauna, Jeeves?"

Jeeves drew himself up to his full and impressive height, tucked his hands behind his back and took a deep breath. This was a pose everyone, and most particularly Mr. Bertram Wooster, was familiar with as being Jeeves' lecture pose. Bertie raced hurriedly into speech. "Not that it matters too terribly much, I suppose. So there I was and there she was, and she was rabbiting on about birds and bees and needing to shave and going blind. Well, as you can imagine, it took me quite a bit of time to sort all this jumble out, and Nanny, being a dear, took pity on me and explained it all to me again."

"May I enquire as to the details of this explanation, sir?"

"I'm surprised that you need me to tell you all about it, Jeeves. I thought you were quite the man of the world. But a man can't leave his fellow man wallowing in ignorance, so I shan't spare my blushes. Well," he lowered his voice and whispered, so quietly that Jeeves couldn't make out a word of it until Bertie patted the bed and gave him permission to sit thereupon. "As I said, Nanny told me about how it, you know, that thing down there, sometimes rises up. Well, that's because it's an instrument of Satan and we all know how often the Bible tells us Satan's instruments of Evil will rise up and smite the good?"

Jeeves nodded, far too stunned to make any comment on this, which was rather a pity, for he had thought of another substitute for 'said'.

"It turns out," Bertie mused, using the word Jeeves had been saving for himself, "that *it*, one's *membrum virilis*," he broke off there to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Dashed difficult work, this explaining all this and having to actually utter the naughty words. "*It* rises up and when it does, one must not, absolutely must not touch it. You see, if one were to touch it, then one would be aiding Satan by spilling one's seed on the ground. And we all know what a sin that is." He sat back,

rather puffed up with pride at having delivered such a difficult lecture so well.

Jeeves said nothing for quite a few moments. In fact, so many moments passed that Bertie was beginning to wonder if Jeeves would need to borrow a thesaurus before he opened his mouth again. But then, at last, Jeeves postulated: "However, I believe that the continuation of this situation has become an ever enlarging problem for you, sir."

"And never a truer word was spoken."

Jeeves winced at such a banal and simple verb being applied to his prestigious pronouncements, but being of a generous and forgiving soul, he immediately reminded himself that this was, after all, Bertie Wooster speaking and certain allowances should therefore be made for the dear, sweet thing. "If I may be permitted, sir," Jeeves continued, not by one flicker of a hair revealing any of the thoughts racing round his mind, and certainly being far too subtle for Bertie to uncover his secrets, "there is, I believe, an honest and moral solution to this increasing problem."

"I was hoping that you, of all people, Jeeves, would come up with something just the teensiest bit cleverer than *that* old solution. I suppose there's nothing else for it." He heaved an enormous sigh, dropped the bed-covers whence they immediately formed either a small mountain or a very large molehole (depending on one's point of view and list of comparative experiences) over his lap. With an expression of pathos upon his handsome features, Bertie stretched his hands out in front of himself and remained in this odd position, apparently not only waiting for Jeeves to do something, but expecting Jeeves to know that that something was.

Faith in one's abilities is always flattering. However, it can be somewhat bemusing when that faith is blind to the point of obscuring the issue so thoroughly that one is hard-pressed to have even the faintest idea of what is expected of one. Fortunately for Bertie Wooster, Jeeves was not as the rest of us mere mortals, but a man of singular intelligence and more importantly, a considerable acquaintance with Bertie's mental machinations.

"I assume you are indicating, sir, that Nanny was in the habit of placing either mittens or boxing gloves on your hands when you retired for the evening?" Jeeves presumed in a very understanding voice.

"Red ones. Until she discovered that the wool was simply too soft to beat back Satan's rising instrument of evil."

"There are some who would say that soft, woollen mittens can be a positive asset in the matter of beating rising members. However, I do not believe that the answer to your problem is to run from Satan's wickedness.'

"Gosh!" A wide smile of enormous gratitude spread across Bertie's face, animating him rather. "Iknew I could depend on you! You are *such* a dear chap."

"Thank you, sir," Jeeves acknowledged.

"But Jeeves, before you, well, you know, solve this little problem for me, there is one thing I would really like to ask you. It's above and beyond the call of duty, of course, and you don't have to answer and I'll be happy to pretend I never so much as mentioned it and simply sweep it under the carpet, if that wouldn't offend your housekeeping standards, but I really, really do want to know. Is it only me or do other people, well, you, really, do you have the same battle that I do?"

"Indeed, sir," Jeeves replied smoothly. "Ibelieve it is a problem endemic to the male of our species and it is therefore a source for constant alertness. As I was explaining to you a few moments ago, sir, Ibelieve I have a solution not only for your problem, but also for mine. As Nanny said, one really must not touch one's own member when it has risen in such a manner."

"Don't I just know it," Wooster agreed.

"Then may I suggest that we assist one another in this matter of such extreme delicacy?"

"How?" Bertie queried, breathless, a fact not entirely unexpected due to the manner in which Jeeves was administering him one of his chest massages.

"If we enjoin this battle together, sir, then we shall surely defeat Satan's rising power. You will lay your hands upon my member, I shall do the same to yours, and thus, Satan will be routed, the rising tower shall be cast down once more, and as we will not have touched his power with our own hands, we shall be protected by the strength and goodness that comes from sacrificing of oneself for one's fellow man," Jeeves explicated, also more than a little breathless, a state undoubtedly caused by his continuing massages which had moved from Bertie's chest to Bertie's back. This move made it necessary, of course, for Jeeves to press

Bertie against his chest that his arms might reach round far enough to soothe the tensed back muscles. This was a service Jeeves had been providing for some months now, and dashed effective it was too. The molehill was gone, and it was definitely a mountain that remained, a fact to which Jeeves was only too willing to attest.

"So what you're saying, old chap, is that united we stand, divided we fall, in essence."

"Yes, sir, that is precisely my position," Jeeves lied, proceeding now to a massage of the gluteus maximus. Understandably, Bertie wound his arms around Jeeves' neck, for it was nigh near impossible to remain on one's posterior if one wished to have a gluteal massage at all, and Bertie was rather fond of the full treatment received in return for full

"Oh, well, then, why don't we get on with it then?"

"Certainly, sir. May I assist you with your pyjamas?" Jeeves enquired, slowly releasing his hold on Wooster.

"Oh, pish, Jeeves, I can bally well take my own jammies off. Now, go on, you do the same. I shan't have the courage to do this if we don't do it together." A considerable amount of huffing and puffing from the bed, and Bertie was, eventually and at a considerable cost to his hair-dressing, denuded of those impediments called pyjamas. "I say," he said, "d'you think it really is necessary to doff the old jim-jams?"

"Absolutely, sir," Jeeves indicated in a low voice that had the most peculiar effect on Bertie. "If we were to remain clothed, how would we see if Satan did, indeed, get himself hence behind us?"

"Hmm, that is true, I suppose. Oh, well, it doesn't matter, does it? What's done is done, or it would be, if you were done, but you're not, so it isn't, is it?"

Jeeves, slippers discarded, stood up once more and removed his pyjama bottoms, revealing his own bottom in the process. Having folded his pyjamas neatly across the foot of the bed, he turned towards his master.

"Oh, I say!" Bertie exclaimed. "Satan must really want to defeat you, you poor old thing. Do come here and let me help you."

Jeeves was in this, as in all things pertaining to the service of his master, more than willing to accede to Bertie's wishes. He turned the bedcovers down, revealing the root of Bertie's problems and the answer to many a prayer of his own.

"Snuggle up, Jeeves," Bertie pleaded as soon as they were both under the covers. "No need in making this any harder than it already has to be. Yes, yes, I know, it's not exactly the done thing for a valet to lean on his master so, but I really don't mind. After all you're doing to help me, I'd be a cad to complain about a bit of indecorousness, wouldn't I? Now, what is it we must do?"

"If you will permit me, sir, I will do what's necessary and if you would be so kind as to echo my movements, I'm sure that we will find that to be a most satisfactory solution to our dilemma."

"Oh," Wooster erupted in surprise as his problem rubbed against Jeeves moral dilemma, "I think you're right as always!"

"Thank you, sir," Jeeves gasped, somewhat distracted by the solving of their mutual distress to their mutual satisfaction. "It is always my intention to please you."

He was certainly succeeding in this laudable goal, as witnessed by the breathless sighs and high-pitched moans coming from the throat of his master.

"Oh, Jeeves," that worthy sighed, "I would never have believed that sacrificing oneself could bring such joy. Is this," his voice broke as he copied a particularly effective blow against Satan's rising power, "is this what the books call an ecstasy?"

Jeeves was pressing his advantage home, and much to his relief, Bertie was matching him stroke for stroke. "Oh, yes, yes, yes!" Jeeves ejaculated.

Bertie lost no time in echoing him in this either, although his ejaculation owed nothing to the verbal and everything to the physical.

"You know, Jeeves," Bertie murmured sleepily, moving readily as his valet mopped those regions requiring the attentions of a damp cloth and some rather extraordinary attentions from his devoted manservant, "I believe we must, as the Bible charges us to do, be ever vigilant in this battle."

"Indeed, sir," Jeeves agreed, smoothing his master's pyjamas into place and retreating a slight distance to don his own pyjamas and exquisite dressing-gown before returning to his master's side.

"Hmm, yes. In fact, I think we need to make absolutely certain that we practice every day."

"A very wise move, sir. Also, if I may be so bold, I believe it behooves us to wage an ever increasing campaign, instigating new techniques at frequent intervals," Jeeves finally merely said, too worn out by his earlier ejaculation to bother with verbal variety.

"What a brilliant plan, Jeeves, dear chap. I couldn't agree more."

Sanguine, though less spunky than usual, Jeeves was impassive as he politely disported his master in bed. Not by one flicker of an eyelash did Jeeves reveal his self-congratulation, which was probably for the better. For, unbeknownst to Jeeves, Mr. Bertram Wooster was not quite as great a fool as the world supposed him, which is hardly surprising, for a rock is not so stupid as the world supposes Bertie to be. Gosh, Bertie thought as Jeeves tucked him in again, that bally book I found in Mr. Johnson's back shop really was a treasure. I wonder what other ideas I'll find in there...

A HOLE IN ONE

None of it mattered any more—if it ever had. Raymond Doyle could no longer summon the energy to care what happened now. Couldn't even think of a reason why he should, not now. Not now that he'd lost £1.50 to Bodie on that last shot. He'd been so *sure* that old duffer was going to miss that long putt, and what had Colonel Bogie done? He'd gone and hit a shot Arnold Palmer would've been proud of. There was, Doyle decided miserably, no justice in this world. Colonel Bogie oh, sorry, the Right Honourable Geoffrey Waterstone-ffolkes, retd., DSM, DSO, VSO and bar or whatever the old bugger had after his name, mustn't forget to be suitably impressed—had missed every puttover three feet, so betting against him on a nine footer was a quick way to double his money, right? Not with bloody Bodie around. He glowered briefly at his new partner, irritated beyond all reason by the smooth face—no broken cheekbones for him, oh, no, not Sgt. William Andrew Philip Bodie (retd.), with probably a few extra initials after his name and all, if all the exploits "just call me Bodie" claimed were true. At least he wasn't wearing one of his fancy suits today, that was always something. Too goodlooking by half when he was all dolled up. Wasn't exactly ugly when he dressed down, either, Doyle admitted reluctantly, refusing to stare at the way the wind whipped Bodie's clothes tight against his body. Nice body, good muscles, solid and strong, right up Doyle's alley. Well, not yet. But he was working on it. Maybe. If Bodie showed the slightest interest. Christ, he decided as Bodie bent to pick

up a dropped club cover, he'd work on it if Bodie just didn't break his arm for him.

Meanwhile, oblivious to the beauty of both the countryside and the males around them, Cowley and the other old duffer had finished chatting over the score cards and were now meandering, deathly slow, across to the next tee.

Yet another pocket of combed grass, where not so much as a buttercup dared show its face, and the fuddy-duddy was wiggling an extremely unattractive backside as he prepared to slice the ball in the general direction of the flag.

"Aaaatchooo!"

"Gesundheit," Doyle muttered to Bodie, over Cowley's disapproving glare.

"Thanks," Bodie answered, smiling sweetly at his boss, drawing him a dirty look as soon as Cowley had turned back to fawn, quite professionally, on the old fart who had risen to be the Minister currently in charge of CI5's budget. "It's those bloody honeysuckles, they're getting right up my nose."

"It's Cowley that's getting up mine," Doyle muttered, careful to be quiet enough that his boss couldn't quite hear. "I mean, look at him!"

Cowley was currently praising the skill of the Minister, even going so far as to pat the other man on the back, smiling all the while. The sight was, as Doyle was so quick to recognise, truly revolting.

"It's disgusting," Bodie said succinctly, shouldering Cowley's golf-bag and waiting for Doyle to do the same to the Minister's. Their boss was now strolling across the undulating greens, the breeze tossing snatches of unctuous, politically motivated praise back to the unwilling hearing of his two employees.

"...would be more than happy. My men are always more than willing to..."

"Christ, did you hear that?" Doyle spluttered. "He sounds like he's pimping for us!"

"Don't be too sure he's not. We were," Bodie said with heavy handed innuendo, "specially selected to come up here with him."

"Nah, he wouldn't pimp for us."

Bodie waited, all too sure that Doyle, unfortunately, had a punchline coming.

And how could Doyle ever let his partner down? "He wouldn't want to share you, would he, flower?"

Bodie gave that the dirty look it deserved, but didn't bother answering. He trudged over the grass, automatically keeping his eyes peeled—as if there were hordes of terrorists lurking in the long grass of this hoiy-toity bloody course! Stupid, really, there being nothing in sight but green countryside, blue sky and old men in dreadful clothes. So unless they were here as fashion police in which case, Bodie thought Doyle would have to arrest himself-there was no reason for him and Doyle even being here, as far as he could tell. No reason at all. Apart, maybe, from the admiring, if surreptitious, stares they were getting from the Minister. Bodie blinked, slowly, the only sign he gave of a rather explosive burst of surprise. Nah. Cowley wouldn't. And a poof wouldn't be promoted to Minister. But then again, look at Burgess and Maclean... But still... He sneaked a glance at his partner, noted the other man's permanent air of just-about-to-fuck or just-been-fucked and the way those jeans were tight everywhere bar the groin, where there were some definitely interesting pleats and folds, and as for that faded spot just on the inside of the left thigh... Oh, yes, Bodie decided, if the Minister was bent that way as well as being a traditionally bent politician—and weren't all politicians crooks to some degree or other—then Doyle would be the very man to bring along for window dressing, temptation and the leverage of letting the Minister know that Cowley knew just precisely what a precarious position the Minister was in. Oh, absolutely, absolutely, that was what Cowley had brought them here for! And as the Old Man had, in a moment of total insanity, partnered him with Doyle, then he himself had to

come along as well. Mentally rubbing his hands with glee and being careful to show none of his wicked amusement, Bodie lowered his voice and attracted his nearly somnambulant partner's attention. "Psst! Doyle!"

"Yeah?" Sounding as bored as Bodie had felt before coming up the endlessly useful tease about Doyle's front and rear being the stuff of which Departmental budgets are made.

Then, so casually that it resounded with suspiciousness: "Have you noticed the way our boss' chum's been eyeing you up?" That should liven things up a bit round here, Bodie thought with satisfaction: Doyle was always so entertainingly outraged when people treated him like the sex object he pretended to be.

For once—due, perhaps, to the tightness of his jeans?—Doyle refused to rise to the occasion. "It's not me he's looking at, though, is it?"

Appalled, Bodie looked up, just in time to catch the Minister measuring not the length of his shot to the next hole, but the length of Bodie's cock next to his left thigh "Oh, great," he groaned, immediately staring at the fascinating shade of green the grass was, "that's all I need. Typical bloody Cowley!"

Now that finally got a reaction from Doyle. "Cowley? *Cowley's* eyeing you up?" Then he shrugged, lowering his voice as they meandered within earshot of their boss and his crony with access to HM Government's Treasury—or, to be accurate, HM's overdraft department. Doyle gave Bodie one of his cheekiest grins. "Least it explains why you're the old man's blue eyed boy."

Bodie opened his mouth to answer this outrage, and then shut it again, very firmly and with an exceedingly polite smile. Disparaging remarks about one's boss' sexual prowess, endowment and taste were never advisable—at least, not when said boss was already glaring suspiciously at two agents who had been well-lectured on the Sanctity of Golf and should know better than to chatter like schoolgirls on their way to a date.

But the promise of upping the budget allocation obviously must have been far more alluring than ripping his agents to shreds: Cowley just frowned at Bodie again, grabbed an iron—golfing, not steam—from the bag Bodie had dumped unceremoniously on the ground, and limited his nagging to the matter that should have been in hand but was, instead, afoot. "Here, Bodie, that's no way to

treat a fine set of golf-clubs! You're getting my good bag a' mucky. Pick it up, pick it up."

Bodie picked it up, smiled sweetly and thought dreadful thoughts of revenge whilst Doyle sniggered in the background.

Cowley busied himself doing the things Bodie, as his caddie, was supposed to be doing but never seemed quite able to remember. "I hope the pair of you at least remember well enough to keep quiet when we're addressing the ball."

"So if you lose it someone'll send it back to you?" Bodie said brightly. But not so brightly that his boss would actually hear him. Unfortunately, the fuddy-duddy in the tartan trews did. And smiled, also brightly, perfectly false teeth glinting whitely in the sun.

That wiped the smile off Bodie's face.

The Minister ran his hands lasciviously over his bulging belly—which he probably still rather fondly remembered as being solid muscle and flat as a washboard, which had last been true somewhere round about George Formby's heyday—and then, even worse, ran his tongue across his lips. And winked. At Bodie.

Who seriously considered turning tail and running. It wasn't actually that it was a man making such blatant advances at him. It wasn't even that it was a man of mature years. It was the fact that the old buzzard was the sleaziest thing he'd seen since he and his classmates each paid their sixpence to Mrs. Philips down the back alley.

"Doyle..." he hissed out of the side of his mouth.

Assuming Bodie had been watching too many old Bogie movies on BBC2, Doyle ignored him. "Oh, good shot," he said in his own best impersonation, which was somewhere between Prince Philip and Danny LaRue—a mature Prince Edward, you could say.

Mr. Cowley turned a truly excellent glare on his agent. The 'good shot' had gone into the rough—deliberately, so as not to give the Minister a right showing up and thus jeopardise that increase in budget he was angling for. Or should that be golfing for? Anyway, Cowley satisfied himself with a silent glare that was so much more discreet than a bawling out, but just as effective. He knew: he'd been practising long enough. Then, with suitably sycophantic—sorry, politically correct—smile, he turned towards the man he was having such a devil of a time not beating.

Which was exactly Bodie's situation, with one major semantic difference. Cowley was trying not to beat him at golf, whilst Bodie was trying not to beat the lecherous old toad with golf—a number five iron, to be precise. Trying not to look like the craven coward he was at that moment, Bodie sidled up closer to Doyle. There, he thought triumphantly, standing right next to his partner, now he'll think I'm otherwise engaged.

The Minister, well trained by a life in politics, immediately got hold of the wrong end of the stick—rather like the way he played golf. Instead of backing off with an embarrassed little smile, the old codger seemed to think it meant either that Bodie was displaying just how bent he was—or showing that Doyle was available too. Happily under the wrong impression, the revolting cad winked, flirtatiously, at the caddies. And Bodie understood the full meaning of 'screamingly funny': if it weren't so funny in a sick sort of way, he'd scream.

Doyle, meanwhile, had missed none of this: after all, he was an ex-copper, ex-Met, ex-Drug Squad, ex-Boy Scout: he was not only always prepared, but his later years had taught him how to use what his preparedness saw. "Funny, innit?" he said in a normal tone of voice, Scrooge and Crœsus several yards ahead and engrossed in conversation of a presumably fiscal nature.

"What is?" Now that *was* funny, the way Bodie could make a perfectly innocent question sound like a threat of grievous bodily harm.

"Your Minister—"

"He's not my bloody Minister, so—"

"All right, all right, don't go overboard." He managed to look severely put out, put upon and put down, all at the same time. No mean feat, really. Bodie, however, was unmoved, and Doyle decided not to wait until either Hell froze over or Bodie apologised, the former being more precipitous than the latter. "All I was going to say was, golf's the perfect game for the Minister."

Bodie looked at him incredulously. "The perfect game? Perfect? Doyle, either you want your head examined, or your eyes want it."

"No, I'm right. You just haven't looked at it from the proper perspective yet, that's all."

Oh, no, he could feel another one of Doyle's jokes coming on. "I'm going to regret this. All right, what's the proper perspective on that bent old geezer playing golf?"

"Obvious, innit?"

Doyle, in Bodie's opinion, not only came up with the oddest jokes in Christendom, but he also had the worst comedic timing since Larry Grayson. "What's obvious?" he asked with a patience that would have tried a saint.

Doyle slanted a glance at him. "Bent old bugger like him, stands to reason he'd be perfect for golf. All those men holding their long, rigid shafts of iron, chasing after their balls..."

Bodie, in Doyle's opinion, could turn such an interesting shade of puce if you told him the right joke at the right time. Especially if you'd timed it so that they were within hearing distance of their boss...

"Bodie!"

"Yes, sir?" Bodie managed, albeit sounding strangled.

"If I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times. No eating your damned sweeties or sandwiches or anything else whilst we're on the links." He glowered, yet again, at a Bodie whose eyes were streaming and whose Adam's apple was bobbing frantically. "Choking, are you? Well, serves you bloody right." Then the flint-hearted old sod turned his back and returned, with the smoothness of a spiv, to ingratiating several thousand more pounds out of the new Minister.

Behind his back, Bodie gave his boss an elegant, if two fingered, salute. Which made the Minister wink conspiratorially and smile in what was probably an attempt at friendly seductiveness, but came across as more of a bend-over-and-spread-'em leer.

"In fact," Doyle said as soon as his partner could breathe more or less normally, just for the pleasure of seeing Bodie turn puce all over again, "you could almost say it's right up his alley because all the men pocket their balls."

He might be half-choking, but by God, he hadn't gone through SAS training without learning something. Manfully, he regained control of his breathing and straightened himself to proper military bearing—if we're willing to ignore the decided list to the left caused by a well-stuffed golf-bag—and started to give back as good as he'd just got.

"Yeh, suppose it would suit the old sod to a tee—you know, a game where the winner is the one who takes the fewest strokes to score."

"I thought they scored at the end," Doyle said

perfectly calmly, years of being a policeman even more useful than SAS training for some things. "But then again, the winner's the one who sinks his balls into the shaft first, isn't he?"

"Actually," Bodie had gone very posh, toffee nose in the air, and being acrobatic, standing on his dignity while he was at it, "it's not a shaft they sink their balls into, it's the hole."

Doyle gazed admiringly at his boss and his boss' boss. "Gosh," he said, as goggle-eyed as Biggles, "and at their age! I thought the old balls shrivelled up with age." Back to his normal self, close enough behind Bodie to land Bodie right in it without revealing a whisper of what he himself was saying, "Which goes to show, I suppose, that Cowley's a bigger arsehole than we thought."

Bodie hoped that coughing would be less wrathmongering than choking. Needless to say, he was wrong.

"Are you sickening for something?"

"No, sir," Doyle said chirpily with a truly evil smile. "He's just sickening."

"Thank you for your opinion, Doyle. If I ever want it again, I'll be sure to ask." Mr. Cowley left his Minister to 'tot up' the score cards—politicalese for 'cheat'—and managed to corner his two agents despite the fact that they not only outnumbered him, but there wasn't a corner in sight. Minor details, neither of which stopped Bodie or Doyle from feeling like rats caught by a large ginger tom. "Now, there's something I'd like to know," Mr. Cowley asked with considerable charm, another one of those details that made Doyle's bowels feel weak and Bodie's bladder threaten a deluge.

"Yes, sir?" Bodie asked, edging closer to Doyle for moral—or immoral, he wasn't fussy when he was facing Cowley—support.

"D'you like your job?"

Bodie glanced at Doyle.

"Yes, we do," Doyle answered, an idea of where all this was leading sneaking up on him, until he realised it was only Bodie crowding him as usual.

"So you'd say you enjoy your work? Enjoy having a job, a regular pay-packet, a car and flat provided, ridiculous expenses?"

Not even Doyle thought this was the moment to mention that their expense allowances really were ridiculous—ridiculously poor, that is.

"Yes, sir," Bodie said, in absolutely no doubt where this was all leading.

"Aye. An' if the pair of you want to have jobs to

go back to on Monday, hadn't you better stop behaving like a pair of schoolboys needing their backsides leathered?"

He stalked away, and Bodie kept his face very, very straight. Until Doyle muttered, sotto voce: "Need your arse leathered? Told you he fancied you!" With one depressingly lithe movement—Bodie always felt like a close relative of the Chieftain tank around his partner—Doyle hefted the Minister's golf-bag and began strolling slowly after the two main players. Bodie was scowling at him, obviously trying to come up with a suitably scathing retort to redress the imbalance of insults. As Doyle went, he offered over his shoulder, "I'd watch my bum if I were you."

"I already do, Doyle."

And that made it all worthwhile. Doyle tripped over a hummock of crab grass, dropped the golfbag, balls, clubs and all, and landed, with a satisfying wet squish, on the part of his anatomy under scrutiny.

"You're never bent!"

Bodie smiled his most sweetly dangerous smile. "Want to check my wrist, do you? Or p'rhaps you want to see if I've got any pink shirts at home. And we mustn't forget the discreet bottle of lavender in my bathroom, must we?"

Doyle got the message and back-pedalled quickly before Bodie knocked his block off for him. "Don't forget all those frocks in the wardrobe either, sweetie. All right, so you don't have to be a poof to fancy men, but get off it, Bodie, you haven't done a thing—"

"Haven't I?" Voice deliberately dropped to a purr as he leant over, hand reaching out and grasping Doyle less than helpfully and more than purely platonically. "Been watching me twenty-four hours a day, have you? Been following me home after work, checking my mates out, bugging my bedroom..." The smile widened to a grin and then was doused, Bodie putting on the bedroom face he usually kept in a jar of Vaseline by the door. "Oh, yeh, hedonist like you, bet you enjoyed that."

"How could I bug your bedroom? Cowley's too tight-fisted to just hand over a pile of bugs. Please sir, can I have some more bugs? Don't be so bloody stupid—"

Abruptly, the seductiveness was dropped and Bodie started to laugh. "Christ, but you're a gullible bugger, Doyle!" He grabbed Doyle, hauling him to his feet with much dusting off of grass, dirt and other preferably unidentified squashed things.

"You mean you— You were only—"

"Lost forwords, petal?" Bodie lisped, still patting stray strands of grass off his partner. "Fuck, but you should've seen your face!"

"Great joke. Fantastic joke. With brilliance like that, you should've gone and been a boffin." Doyle was Not Amused, slamming golf-clubs into golf-bag with fine disregard for whether or not they would end up as bent as he'd thought Bodie was. As he had almost thought Bodie was, he soothed his ruffled pride. He hadn't been taken in, not completely at any rate. With another foul glare at his partner, Doyle took off his jacket—too hot today anyway—and scrubbed at the seat of his jeans. Bloody Bodie, he thought to himself, as he stuffed his rolled up jacket into some sort of long pocket on the side of the golf-bag. Face still like fizz, he shouldered the heavy bag once again and stormed off: not an easy task over rough ground with a two ton weight over one shoulder and a partner staring at your wet bum and laughing at

And that made him think. Not the bit about Bodie laughing at him, he was well used to that. But that bit about Bodie staring at his bum... He did, didn't he? And all that carry-on about dusting him off after he'd fallen—God, the man would put Oscar Wilde to shame! Doyle trudged on after his boss, nothing betraying the fact that his mind was so sharp he was in grave danger of cutting himself on it. Oh, yes, it all started to add up now, didn't it? All the camping about—"what are you getting your knickers in a twist for, Doyle? It's nothing but a bit of harmless fun, all us Army blokes do it. Why's it bother you so much—you're not bent, are you?" and himself making a big to-do, protecting a virtue he'd lost when he was fifteen and Mick Jamieson's parents had gone away for the weekend, leaving him and Mick alone in the house, each set of parents thinking they were both with the other ones—oh, all that camping about had been a hell of a lot more than the standard and usual romping of perfectly straight men. Unless they were at least six months from the nearest woman and their right hands were broken. Or unless they really were bent—or half bent, like himself—and copping a feel and covering up at the same time.

Bodie, tramping along in blissful ignorance, was too busy watching the damp patches on the

bum of Doyle's tight jeans to notice the look he was being given. Unfortunate, that. If he'd looked up at that particular moment, he might have had an inkling of the rather interesting turn his life was about to take.

But in truth, the only turn Bodie noticed was the angle that took them back onto the fairway, and in his books, that wasn't interesting at all. A fact more than noticed by their boss, whose temper was fraying round the edges. "Bodie! Wake up, man, you're not on leave yet. Here, give me—" Mr. Cowley took one look at the expression of total—real or feigned, either one was equally annoying—ignorance on Bodie's face and reached in for the club of his choice, that being quicker by half than waiting for Bodie to finally condescend to get it for him. "Och, never mind, I'll get it myself. You do realise, don't you, that the game would be over that wee bit faster if you actually did what I brought you here for in the first place?"

As the Minister chose that moment to squeeze Bodie's nether cheeks, our Mr. Bodie rightfully decided that silence was the better part of valour. Cross-eyed with the effort to refrain from shoving a number nine iron up the Minister's hole—head first, and the handle bent, just for good measure— Bodie manfully bore his burden of being a mere sex object. A rôle, by the way, he more than enjoyed usually, but being pawed by a creep tended to take the blush off things somewhat. He could just imaging waking up afterwards, turning over in the afterglow, to be confronted by those too perfect teeth floating in a glass by the bedside. Or worse, the dentures coming loose at the wrong moment, a thought that gave him the sudden, almost uncontrollable urge, to cross his legs and cover his balls with his hands.

Cowley was digging through the pouches of his golf-bag, his back turned to the other three men, and the Minister was taking advantage of this fortuitous situation in more ways than one. While Cowley's attention were focussed on pocketing two white balls, the Minister was trying to dig through Bodie's pouches, showing great interest in palming Bodie's balls, which were also firm and round but not designed to be handled quite the way the Minister seemed to think. With considerably more grace than Bodie was usually accused of, he side-stepped the amorous golfer with the enormous handicap and hastily put Cowley, Cowley's golf-bag and Doyle between

himself and the Minister that he didn't dare offend too seriously. After all, were he to outrage the Minister and bugger up the budget allocation, then Cowley would have his balls. And Bodie wouldn't put it past the Cow to simply offer the Minister Bodie's balls on a silver platter—and probably still attached to Bodie. Silver service with a difference.

"What's the matter, Bodie?" Doyle was whispering. "Wrong time of the month?"

Bodie did a glare that Cowley would have been most jealous of. "Ha bloody ha. How'd you feel if a bloke was poking you in the bum and trying to get his hands down your trousers?"

Doyle, who's brain had been going nineteen to the dozen while the Minister had been copping a feel of eggs that usually only came in pairs, answered, face impassive but the rest of his body deliberately transmitting sexual allure. "That would depend on the bloke doing the poking, wouldn't it?" He paused long enough for Bodie's ears to convince his brain that he really had heard what he thought he had just heard, and then added, as he turned away and bent over to pick up the golf-bag, his damp jeans etched across his arse, "Never complained when it was you, did I?"

At which point, Bodie could have been excused for falling over in a dead faint, if not because of what Doyle had just said, but also because someone, and not the Minister, had put his hands on Bodie's hips. Ohmy God, he wailed to himself, not fucking Cowley an' all! Then he realised he was being shifted, quite innocently, out of his boss' way.

Mr. Cowley, a man of prescience as well as presence, read the expression on Bodie's face. "If my mother were here," Cowley said very, very quietly, "she'd have a bar of carbolic soap in your mouth before you could blink."

Bodie managed a sickly smile, mind too busy bouncing around the farcicality of this entirely too surreal trip to the golf-course.

Cowley, taking this for yet another example of Bodie's army training—dumb, and therefore unpunishable, insolence being an art form in some regiments—really got his dander up. "What d'you take me for?I'll have you know I went to Edinburgh Uni, not bloody Cambridge!" And with that, in dudgeon almost as high as his dander, Cowley stalked off, so annoyed that he forgot to slice his drive and the ball flew true—and for bloody miles.

Bodie took the driver silently, stuffed it back

into the bag and began the long hike to where Cowley had, so to speak, left his balls. And as he walked away, he was aware that Doyle was staring at his arse the way Bodie himself usually stared at Doyle. Which was when it dawned on him: this wasn't exactly the first time Doyle'd ogled him. There'd been that night down the Black Swan, when Doyle'd been one over the eight and octopussed with it, his hands everywhere as Bodie had tried to steer him towards home and up the stairs. In fact, now that he stopped to think about it—and stopped pretending, for safety's sake, that it had all been his imagination and Doyle's drunken affection for anything living—that was the night he'd been fairly sure Doyle was going to kiss him at one point. When he'd dumped Doyle on the bed, and Ray'd grabbed on, not let go of him and he'd fallen on top of his partner, discovering that those hips really were as fleshless as they looked. Only thing was, now he couldn't remember if he'd felt two hard arches under himself that night, if those hip bones had had another hard arch between them \dots

A glance over his shoulder, and Doyle was following, smiling. The Minister was also following, not smiling; seeing that, Bodie was surprised that there were no bruises visible. Doyle was a vicious fighter, an absolute joy to watch. Which reminded him of that day outside the warehouse down Limehouse way. Doyle'd not complained when Bodie'd 'helped' him up the steep stairs with a hand on a certain very pert part of Doyle's anatomy. Hadn't complained whenever Bodie threw his arm across Doyle's shoulder. And had actually snuggled closer that time in the car when it'd been freezing and three o'clock in the morning and Bodie'd thought Doyle was asleep...

Well, well, well. Or, as he would say when trying to get right up Doyle's nose: 'ello, 'ello, 'ello, wot 'ave we 'ere then? Deliberately, Bodie slowed his pace, falling back until he was beside Doyle, and walking so slowly the Minister had no choice but to catch Cowley up.

A surreptitious look at Doyle, but all he could see was a tangle of curls, the tip of a nose, and an occasional, wind-swept glimpse of broken cheekbone.

"You know," he began, "the Minister was lucky he didn't hit his ball into the rough."

"The Minister," Doyle replied haughtily, "is lucky I didn't remove his balls and toss them into

the rough."

Bodie couldn't keep the impassive façade up: he grinned, delightedly, not to mention delightfully. "Chance his arm, did he?"

"Chanced more than his bloody arm. He's lucky he's not singing soprano by now."

Considering Doyle's reactions to the Minister, Bodie thought it just might be prudent to not go on blithe assumptions but actually check that Doyle wasn't entirely averse to a bit of dalliance with him. Or even better, was positively keen on bonking. "Now, the question is, was it the poking you objected to, or the poker?"

Sidelong glance, wickedly amused. "It was more a pocket knife than a poker."

Which didn't answer Bodie's question at all. Which was unfortunate, because his body was rapidly leaping to conclusions of its own and was threatening a coup attempt—coup being the French word for a blow, English being a versatile enough language to turn that into a verb, and one that was entirely appropriate, given the state of Bodie's cock.

Oh, well, he'd just have to follow the example of Bruce's spider. "Bit on the disappointing side, was he?"

"I didn't bite him on any side!"

The bastard, Bodie decided, was obviously doing it on purpose. "Wise, that. Never know what you'll catch from these politicians, do you? Probably why our mums warned us against strange men."

Doyle sniggered, amused by something he chose not to share with Bodie. After all, a frustrated Bodie is far more amusing than a mocking Bodie. "Is that what *your* mum meant?"

"And your mum didn't? Come off it, I've met yourmum and she's—" He stopped, re-evaluating Doyle's mum. It wasn't that she was dippy or anything, it was just... Well, once you'd met Doyle's mum, you understood where Doyle got his...uniqueness from. Actually, that really weird conversation he'd had with Mrs. Doyle would make sense if he assumed that she thought that he and her son were... Nah. A mother wouldn't think that, not without getting all hot under the collar. Well, his mum wouldn't think that without having an attack of the weepies and ordering him never to darken her Christian threshold again. But then, Mrs. Doyle happily accepted a West Indian son-in-law, and she had been disappointed—

disappointed, she said!—when Ray had dropped out of art school to join the police, so maybe she wouldn't be bothered if her son... He dredged his memory and deep in the murk of his brain, he found verbatim snippets of a conversation that he'd had three weeks ago when he'd literally bumped into Ray's mum on Dawes Road. And Doyle never had explained how come his mum had recognised Bodie. Funny, that was the day Ray'd actually come up with two girls, the first time they'd ever double-dated. Hindsight was making that look more like distraction than entertainment, now. And if Doyle were willing to fork out a small fortune—'my idea, my treat', he'd said, which should have set Bodie's alarm bells ringing, Doyle far outreaching Cowley in the tightfistedness stakes—to distract Bodie from—

"Earth to Bodie, come in Bodie."

Bodie blinked, but enthusiastic as his cock was, he was a long way from coming in anything. "What?" he asked.

"I see you're still your usually scintillatingly brilliant self as always," Doyle said dryly. "But if you don't get your finger out, Cowley's going to blow his top."

Bodie wished Doyle wouldn't use words like that right now. Not when he was trying to think and his balls were conspiring with his cock to prevent anything resembling cogency from entering his mind. "What's he after now?" he grumbled, strolling over to meet Cowley halfway, a gesture that was entirely lost on a boss whose temper was not so much frayed as disintegrated.

"What the hell is the matter with you today? I asked you for my putter and you're standing there catching flies—"

The putter now gainfully employed in missing an easy shot, Bodie turned to examine the only flies he was interested in at the moment. Doyle was standing a more than decorous distance from the Minister, the golf-bag strategically placed between them. "Your shaft, sir," Doyle said, all innocence.

"Thank you very much," the Minister replied, all frustration.

Bodie actually found himself sympathising. He wished there was somewhere nearby where he could slip away and adjust himself before his Y-fronts cut his circulation—and other, less fluid but no less pulsing, parts—off forever. There wasn't

even one of those little wooden huts anywhere in sight, just flat grass, sand bunkers and a very unwelcoming water trap.

Doyle, meanwhile, had noticed Bodie's predicament, and was enjoying himself enormously, so to speak. With a very calculated roll to his walk, he strolled across the obsessively smooth green and bent from the waist, bum presented for the admiration of the world, to retrieve the Minister's ball from the cup. Still walking as if he had something wonderful and hard up his rear, he went over to Bodie and dropped the ball into Bodie's right hand. "There you go, mate," he whispered, "you can hold my balls for me."

And then he turned and walked away.

At that moment, Bodie seriously considered dropping the golf-bag, balls and shafts and all, and tackling Doyle to the ground, where he could grab balls and shafts and all, not leastly Doyle's delectable rump which was twitching in front of him, flanks hollowing and rounding with every step, the jeans drying until only the crease down the middle of Doyle's arse was still wet. The dark line wasso pronounced, so like looking at the shadowed cleft between Doyle's buttocks, Bodie was hard pressed to control himself. A panted groan from the Minister told Bodie 'hard pressed' wasn't a purely metaphoric turn of phrase. Hurriedly, and with a supremely quelling glower at the Minister, budgets be damned, Bodie lifted his hand from where it shouldn't be and put it where it should. Golf-bag once more over his shoulder, Bodie caught up with Cowley, not coincidentally putting Doyle out of his immediate vision and certainly out of his immediate temptation. Frowning fiercely in his concentration not to ravish Doyle right here in the open, Bodie accepted his boss' jacket, not even hearing the complaint about how hot it was and how he could use a drink.

He may not have been able to see Doyle, but he could hear him. Staccato words cutting the Minister off at the knee, but Doyle was careful how he phrased everything: the only way the Minister could complain about anything Doyle said would be to mention the fact that said Minister of Her Majesty's Government had just propositioned a member of Her Majesty's Security Forces. Needless to say, Doyle was having a whale of a time.

"You certainly put Casanova in his place," Bodie murmured as Cowley lavished praise on the Minister's rather feeble tee off shot. Doyle gave him a look that could only be described as sexy as hell. "Bet you wouldn't mind me putting you in a certain place, would you?" And then, cheeky bugger that he was, he looked, pointedly, at where Bodie's cords were showing signs of extreme stress.

"Right, this mucking about's gone far enough. What's your game, Doyle?"

An arched brow and a filthy chuckle. "Thought this was golf."

"I'm not talking about those two old farts, I'm asking you what you're up to."

"Oh, I'm up to anything," Doyle said, his hand drifting casually past jeans that were straining even more than usual. "I've been up to anything you fancied any time you were ready. Just didn't think you were that way inclined."

Bodie didn't believe a word of it: it was far too clear-cut and simple to be coming from Doyle. "No, come on, seriously. What are you playing at?"

"Told you. Golf." Then before Bodie could strangle him for deliberate obtuseness, he added: "You remember. Men chasing after each other trying to get a better score with their hard shafts and tight balls."

It really might be that simple and clear-cut, but still, in their line of work, and considering that Doyle could easily kill with his bare hands, it didn't do any harm to be extra-specially careful. "What are you saying?"

"Christ, you must've washed your brain this morning because you can't do anything with it! D'you want it in words of one syllable? Want me to spell it out, or d'you need visual aids?"

Certain specialised marital aids might not go amiss at this moment in time, but perhaps he should save such refinements for a later date and a less indiscreet location. "Yeh, knowing you, I do want it spelled out."

"Eye double-u a n t—"

"Stop pratting about, Doyle."

"I thought you wanted it spelled out? All right, all right," as Bodie paled with temper, "words of one syllable then. Right." He put the golf-bag down, planted his hands on his hips, and as aggressive as hell, declared: "I fancy you. Want to fuck?"

And now that it was on offer, Bodie wasn't quite sure what to do about it. Oh, he knew the whys and wherefores—he had, after all, been a

merc in Africa and an exceptionally pretty young man in the merchant navy and a particularly well-muscled man in the army, and let's not forget the fact that he was about as straight as a kirby grip—but now that Doyle was offering what he was offering, and in such a manner... Well, if all Bodie wanted was a casual encounter, there were dozens of places he could go for that—and get paid for it, if he weren't careful!

"Now what's the bloody matter?" Doyle snapped, more than a little put out: it wasn't exactly every day he offered someone his charms, and it wasn't even once a year that those charms were greeted with such an expression of knotted-brow distaste. "Don't tell me you don't fancy, for I shan't bloody believe you. Not with the way you've been playing tent-poles in your trousers today. So come on, give."

"This is going to sound really stupid."

"And coming from you that *is* going to be a shock." Sarcastic as always, but Doyle lessened the pugnacity of his pose, turned some of the threat of aggression into the promise of pleasure. It was, he conceded, bloody stupid to expect someone to confess passion when you were confronting them as if gelding was your main hobby in life. "Come one, Bodie, we haven't got all day. They'll be at the green soon if we don't get a move on."

Bodie refused to think about Cowley and absolutely refused to even remember that the Minister even existed. "As I said, this is going to sound stupid, but..."

"But?" Doyle said encouragingly, even going so far as to smile matily.

There wasn't a way to say this that wasn't going to make him sound like a complete wally. So he just opened his mouth and let his belly rumble. "I don't want a quick leg-over and then drop it."

"Don't know about you," Doyle whispered conspiratorially, "but I can't drop mine. It's attached."

"Pack it in, Ray, I'm trying to be serious here!"

"Yeh, but you're worse than a wet weekend in Largs! For fuck's sake, Bodie, it's not the future of the entire planet we're talking about. So you don't fancy a casual shag in the back of the motor. What d'you take me for? D'you think I'd risk my career for something I can get any old place and with half the risks of having it off under my boss' nose? With the amount of surveillance that goes on?" His

expression was a masterpiece of disgust, and the way he 'accidentally' bumped into Bodie was a masterpiece of subterfuge and seduction combined. Amazing, really what can be done in plain view when one is picking up a golf-bag, isn't it? Grabbing Bodie by the wrist and dragging him along, all of which was a very convenient excuse to rub his thumb along the racing pulse on the tender inner side of Bodie's wrist, Doyle started them off in pursuit of two now-distant figures who were showing disturbing signs of coming back to get them. An unnerving prospect, to put it mildly.

"So you're not just after a quick fuck?"

"Oh, I want that all right, but I want slow fucks and long fucks and you to suck me and me wanking you off in the bath..."

Bodie wondered if the rotten sod had done it on purpose. The recitation had barely ended when they were in full view of Cowley and the Minister. And it wasn't only the view that was full: Bodie's underwear was in a very similar predicament, one that Bodie knew was all too apparent. Not too many things he could do about that...

"Bodie, is that any way to carry my good jacket?"

"Sorry, sir," he muttered, but smugly, secure in the knowledge that Cowley would have liked the view even less if Bodie had *not* been carrying the tweed jacket clumsily in front of himself like that.

"Daft as a stick today. Sometimes I wonder what I was thinking when I signed you on. Here, let me have that club."

Then Cowley was off putting about with the Minister, and Bodie and Doyle were left to their own devices. Or vices, as the case may be.

"Where were we?" Bodie asked, distracted by the discomfort of being too big for his breeches.

"Wanking you in the bathtub," Doyle said with remarkable aplomb, considering that his breeches weren't faring any better than Bodie's.

"Christ, Doyle!" A deep breath, a wiggle and a wriggle, and while it didn't come close to solving the problem, at least that reinforced seam wasn't digging into him any more. "But d'you mean it? You want more than just a quick fling?"

Doyle had a wonderful joke on the tip of his tongue, but then he noticed the bead of sweat on Bodie's upper lip, and the sternly clenched expression on the face. Oh, well, there'd be other chances to use that punchline. "Course that's what I'm saying. You were the one who wanted us to be

serious, and then there you go, rabbiting on as if all it would be is a quick wank in the bushes. Typical, bloody typical. Listen, I don't know about you, mate, but I don't mess about with someone my life depends on."

"No," Bodie said, a beatific smile wreathing his face. "No, you wouldn't, would you?"

Doyle looked at him askance. "You aren't expecting a ring and me down on one knee, are you?"

"Don't know about you, mate," Bodie imitated him cheerfully, "but I find it's easier if you go down on both knees, less chance of losing your balance that way. And it's so much more reassuring for the bloke whose delicate prick you've got between your jaws."

Doyle grinned back at him, but any comment was forestalled of a very chuffed Minister and a grimly sycophantic Mr. Cowley.

"On to the next hole," Cowley said innocently, preferring not to know what puerile reason his two agents had for turning beetroot and sniggering. He had a fairly good idea, and that was more than enough for him. Especially since joining in wouldn't exactly fit with the image of the dour, canny Scot he was cultivating with the Minister. The things he did for CI5! All that, and losing at golf too. Life, sometimes, was a bitter row to hoe.

This, however, was not what Bodie and Doyle were thinking.

"Interested in sports and games, are you?" Doyle asked with spurious innocence, as if he were simply making idle conversation, for they were still well within earshot of the other two men who were consulting over the score cards. "Golf appeal to you?"

Bodie edged them a bit farther away from their boss. "The only physical activities with balls and men running around scoring that appeal to me, angelfish, can't be done in public." There, he thought, nicely seductive, and that should put Doyle in the hot seat for once.

Doyle, unfortunately, hadn't been made privy to Bodie's plan and therefore not only didn't do as he was supposed to, he turned the whole thing on its head. "Can't be done in public, eh? Says who?"

Horrifying suspicion dawning, Bodie answered: "The laws and the courts and Cowley and the rule books and—"

"Since when have you gone by the book?"
It was all too obvious what Doyle was doing,

and Bodie felt hysterics coming on. "Whenever it makes sense."

"Last time a book made sense to you," Doyle whispered from far too close, "was Lady Chatterly's *Lover.* And I'll bet it's the only time you've ever gone completely by the book in your whole life."

"That's not true!" Bodie spluttered, wounded to the core. "It was my Dad's illustrated volume of Fanny Hill that he kept in the shed on his allot ment. Anyway, that's not what we're talking about. We can't do anything in public, Ray, that's insane."

It had, of course, started as nothing more than a joke, a means to getting a rise—humourous to match the sexual—out of Bodie. But Doyle was perverse in numerous ways, and this Puritan insistence on being so chaste in public was a challenge and a dare. And if Bodie had known the unfortunate Davy Bleckinsop in first form, then Soppy would have told him just how dangerous it was to dare Raymond Doyle. Unfortunately, Soppy was off happily being a crofter in the wilds of Scotland—no, not Glasgow—and so Bodie carried on as if he himself had no idea of how quickly Doyle would dig his heels in the minute he was told he could not, must not, dare not do something. There was no such thing as a pause whilst Doyle weighed the pros and cons. A dare was a dare, and it was Bodie daring him, and what's more, the dare was something he'd always wanted to do.

Bodie: "And Cowley's all over the place with that revolting Minister of his, not to mention other golfers and caddies and groundsmen..."

Doyle was thinking about that also, but not in the danger of being caught, but the thrill of exposure, of being seen, caught in the moment of ecstasy, so vulnerable and truly naked, not merely nude. Oh, yes, something he'd fantasised about for years, ever since he and his pals had wanked each other off in the school sports' equipment shed on a Saturday afternoon. Me and Bodie, he thought hazily, lust happily drowning out the small timid voice of rationality. Doing it out in the open, not fifty yards from Cowley. That'd get the relationship off with a bang.

"What're you giggling about? You haven't been listening to me, have you? For fuck's sake, Doyle, get your brains out of your balls!"

"Scared, Bodie?" Doyle asked coolly.

"Of being caught by Cowley? Of course I'm fucking scared! What d'you think he'd do to us if he—"

"Watch?" Doyle asked languidly, walking slowly over to where Cowley and the Minister were preparing to tee off. They were at the ninth, leading off to the tenth, a long swathe of lush green grass sweeping off into the distance, the bordering stands of trees arching gracefully over it.

"Watch what, Doyle?" Cowley asked, having to come over to Bodie to sort out his golf-clubs yet

"Nothing, sir, nothing at all. What would there be for you to watch, sir?" Bodie covered for him.

Cowley was in no mood to find out why one of his top agents, one who had previously shown such promise, had suddenly taken to babbling inanely. "Never mind," he said. "I'll find out from Doyle later. Minister, I believe you tee off first at this hole."

The Minister smarmed his way over, and Bodie bore down on Doyle like an avenging angel. "What the fuck are you doing—apart from trying to lose us our jobs?"

"Don't be such a sissy, Bodie," Doyle said dismissively, knowing precisely which buttons to press to distract Bodie just long enough for them to have gone beyond the point of no return. A point which was, in Doyle's opinion, only about twenty feet away. That was where the trees began, those wonderful big trees with thick trunks. Trees that were on slightly uneven ground that sloped downwards just enough to hide them from sight, if they got it right. And if no one sliced their ball right here the way the Minister had thirty yards ahead. Doyle could see Cowley and the Minister thrashing the rough to shreds, looking for the Minister's ball.

"Just goes to show you how worked up you've got me," Doyle said, taking Bodie by the wrist and leading him off into the copse. "There's the Cow in the grass and the Minister having trouble with a bit of rough, and I'm not even going to bother making a comment." He had come to a suitably large tree, one surrounded by relatively dense undergrowth and best of all, one that had a trunk wide enough to hide a multitude of sins. Although Doyle thought they'd only have time for the one sin today. "Got other things on my mind," he whispered, taking the jacket from Bodie's hands, "haven't I?"

Bodie swallowed, hard, and opened his mouth to protest, to say they couldn't possibly do this, this was totally loony, it wasn't even comfortable. And then Doyle kissed him. Which put paid to all rational thought. He'd been on heat for too long today to simply shrug off the tactile contact, even a stranger would have been grabbed voraciously, but this was Doyle, who was doing a bit of voracious grabbing himself. Bodie reached down to the bum that had been the apple—or should that be apples?—in his Eden all day long and smoothed his hands over the lean arcs, fingertips finding the dampness where Doyle had landed so ignobly but so satisfyingly on the wet grass.

Doyle pushed his hips forward, canting them until he was plastered to Bodie, and could feel every detail of Bodie's body. Naturally, the fabric was a real nuisance, and Doyle scrabbled at it, fumbling with Bodie's trousers and underwear until the best bits had been exposed. He filled his hands with Bodie's cock and balls, and felt the leap of arousal under his hands. "You going to just stand there?" he demanded, light fingers playing with Bodie's balls, strong hand stroking Bodie's prick. "Get these fucking jeans out of the way. I want you to touch me, come on, Bodie, hurry!"

Bodie, for once in his life, did precisely as he was told. He hurried and then he touched Doyle, hot heat in his hands, hot tongue in his mouth, hot hands on his own cock. Enough heat, in fact, that he didn't notice the decidedly cooler breeze around his exposed assets. He was consumed by and consuming Doyle, completely forgetful of the delicacy of their situation, of the risk of being caught, seen by strangers.

Doyle hadn't forgotten, not at all. In fact, even as he kissed Bodie to within an inch of their lives, he was listening, listening, for the sounds of footsteps or voices, for encroaching danger, for the added high of discovery. His lips encountered a particularly appealing morsel of Bodie's neck and he fastened his teeth to it, biting and sucking, vampirically feasting on him. He let go of Bodie's cock, and stifled the moan of frustration by pressing his groin against Bodie's, Bodie's hands trapped between them, so that every move of Bodie's hands on Doyle's cock was as if Bodie were wanking himself as well. Doyle was trying to get his hand in Bodie's pocket, which Bodie wondered about fuzzily, but then Doyle's mouth fastened on his earlobe, and a tongue slid inside, and then there were kisses all down his neck, and Bodie basically gave up thinking as a useless pastime.

"Got it," Doyle announced breathlessly.

As neither of the hands on either of their cocks belonged to Doyle, Bodie begged to differ. Until he saw what it was Doyle was laying claim to. And laying suddenly became a very important and pertinent verb indeed.

"Sun-tan lotion?" he said, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"It's wet and it's slippery and it's the best we can get our hands on," Doyle answered, filling his cupped palm with the lotion and slathering it on Bodie's cock. "You're going to fuck me," he said. "Right here, up against this tree."

"What if someone sees us?"

Doyle kissed him deeply, his hands working magic down below. "Then you'll have to make sure you make it hard and fast then, won't you?" Another kiss, and then he was turning, his jeans lowered just enough to expose his arse, shirt tucked up under his armpits. Eyes half-closed in his arousal, he watched Bodie near him. "We can do each other slow and easy later. But I want you, Bodie, and I'm not going to wait. C'mon, Bodie, fuck me, get it up me—"

His voice melted into a groan as Bodie began the slow push inside him. There was no pain, Doyle too experienced for that, only an exquisite pleasure that spread from his arse to every inch of his body. His back was bowed as a saddle, a concave hollowed out by pleasure of having Bodie inside him and he leaned forward to give Bodie a better angle—and discovered one of the 'joys' of sex in the great outdoors that no-one ever mentions. Tree bark scrapes worse than five o'clock stubble, especially when it was a man's tender cock meeting the bark. Doyle didn't quite bark, he more howled, but it was enough to register with Bodie. "Here," he said, shoving something at Doyle. "Put that between you and the tree. Nice and thick, take care of it for you."

It was nice and thick and it was taking care of things for him—the jacket was helpful, too. But it was Bodie Doyle was concentrating on, Bodie inside him, Bodie's hand up inside his shirt, twisting his nipples, Bodie's hand down low on his belly, stroking his cock. A thrust inward, and Bodie pressed down on the base of Ray's cock, so that Doyle's belly was compressed by the hardness of his own cock without and the hardness of Bodie's cock from within. Deep in his arse, the heat from Bodie's cock spread up Doyle's spine, exploding in his brain.

Doyle's curls were a real nuisance, getting in Bodie's mouth, an unwelcome distraction, so he buried his face against Doyle's shoulder, mouth open and tasting skin. The pressure was building in his balls, and his cock was purest pleasure, a focus for all the good feelings in his world. He was close, and wrapped his arms around Doyle's waist, anchoring his friend as he fucked him, hard enough that Doyle was up on his toes every time Bodie buried himself in Doyle's arse. Against his forearm, he could feel the occasional brush of Doyle's hand as Doyle blurred caresses onto his cock. It was heaven, pure, unadulterated Heaven.

And then they were cast out, by the sound of a muffled but still obviously irate Scottish voice.

"Christ!" Bodie groaned fervently, torn between the necessity of stopping and the driving need to go on.

"Cowley!" Doyle corrected, pushing back, taking Bodie all the way inside himself again. "C'mon, fuck me, do it, Bodie, fast, fast, before Cowley finds us, come on, oh, yeh, that's it..."

He couldn't help himself, Doyle made him do it, by the simple act of sheathing Bodie in lush flesh. He thrust, hard, fast, and all the while, he could hear Cowley coming closer. But closer still was the stifled cries of his friend, Doyle fucking them both, inflamed by the joy of Bodie inside him and the excitement of Cowley threatening them with exposure. Faster, Bodie thrust, in a race to see who would come first: themor Cowley. Bodie fucked the clinging arse, until Doyle came with an aching groan, his spasming arse milking Bodie into tumultuous orgasm.

Cowley's voice, too close, too near, barely time to catch their breath, the aftereffects of sex still rippling through them, their hands shaking and trembling as trousers were pulled up, zips were re-zipped and shirts were tucked neatly away along with spent and limp cocks. Nothing to give them away, but flushed cheeks and a seeping dampness inside Doyle's jeans.

That, and a drying stain on the jacket Doyle had used. He looked at it in sheer disbelief. "Cowley's?" he squeaked. "You gave me Cowley's jacket? Fucking hell, Bodie, I thought it was yours!"

Dumbstruck, Bodie stared at the jacket in abject

horror. He had been beyond thinking, and Doyle hadn't even opened his eyes when the jacket had been shoved at him. Not the sort of excuse he fancied giving to his boss to explain how they'd managed to ruin his jacket with cum of all things.

And Cowley was coming closer and they were standing there with that self-same cum-stained jacket. They looked at each other in horror for a long moment that wasn't long enough, for now Cowley was only a tree away. Quickly, Bodie dropped the jacket and stood on it, grinding it into the undersoil, hoping to hell that it was the stained spot that was getting covered in concealing grime.

A second later, and Cowley came round the tree in time to see, not his two agents fucking themselves brainless, but Doyle looking detached and sullen, his mouth swollen and his face flushed as if he and Bodie had had a scuffle. And Bodie was standing there looking relieved and smug and just as flushed, which meant there had, indeed, been a scuffle and Bodie had won. It was then that Cowley saw what was in Bodie's hand, and saw the very large stain on the silk lining of his best jacket.

"BODIE!" he roared.

"Yes, sir?" Bodie answered with the sort of bland innocence that always raised Cowley's suspicions.

"What have you done to my jacket? And while we're on the subject," Cowley asked none too sweetly, golf-club held rather threateningly in hand, "where exactly is my golf-bag?"

Good question, that, and Bodie had some vague memory of abandoning the hideously expensive pair of golf-bags at the same time as he had abandoned all his common sense and inhibitions.

"Well?" Cowley snapped, literally hot under the collar.

In unconscious, sympathetic reaction, Bodie lifted his hand to own collar with well-loved neck below, and remembered at least part of what Doyle had done to him.

"Answer the question, Bodie!" Cowley barked. And that, for all who wish to know, explains why, with Doyle sniggering in the background, Bodie was left to contemplate that Cowley's bark truly was worse than Doyle's bite.

FIRST

KISS

Here are four tales set in three different universes, all exploring the general theme of first kiss. We begin with a bitter *Professionals* tale from the Glaswegian and end with a slightly more upbeat Bodie/Doyle piece from Tallis. In between are Jane Mailander's sweet story of Avon and Vila, and M. Fae's look into coming out. This story, "A Public Display," focuses on Detective Sergeant Wield from the Pascoe/Dalziel mystery novels. It is set in approximately 1992—about where the series currently stands—and remains faithful to the characters as they have been presented in the books.

A CALL OF NATURE

He was whistling to himself as he wandered along the evening street, the sunset warming the building around him into beauty, the glow of the fading sun gilding the edges of cars and softening the brutal angularity of the city into blurred comfort. Hands stuffed in pockets, he kicked idly at a bit of stone fallen from a renovation site, the muffled whistled tune rising into clarity. He ticked his mental list off: washing dropped off at the launderette, banking sorted out, gas bill paid, food got in for the next few days. The carrier bags with the new jeans and trainers to replace the ones ruined on Thursday had been dumped into the boot of his car, parked safely several streets away whilst he continued on foot into the garish hilarity of the entertainment district.

There was a film on he quite fancied seeing, one that Bodie would be bored to tears by. He could, he supposed, pulling leaves from someone's garden hedge and shredding them into fragrant green strips, have phoned one of his birds up, but he didn't really feel like company tonight. Couldn't be bothered making conversation, didn't much feel like going through the long slow slog of seduction—was even less inclined to go through with the motions of sex if he succeeded in persuading her into his bed. Nah, he thought, sidestepping an arm-in-arm couple, a night at the pictures, then a pint, then home to bed, all of it alone, all of it without having to make any effort to please anyone but himself.

Strolling languidly as he was, the cinema—and its toilets—was a good fifteen minutes away, and

nature was presently calling. He nipped into the local Gents, one hand resting lightly on the wellused polish of the brass handrail as he skimmed down the stairs two at a time into the remnants of Victorian wealth. It was the usual contrast, so common that, with the familiarity of the native, he didn't even notice the luxury of the brass and marble and tile and porcelain as their rich glow clashed with the modern-day fiscal poverty of broken light-bulbs and boarded-up frosted windows. Half the stalls had lost their doors, the rolltowel was long gone and there was a draught slithering through a chink in one cracked windowpane. He stood, legs astride, relaxed as relief flowed, barely glancing over as a young man walked up to stand beside him at the urinal trough.

Doyle was tense now, looking down at the pinkness of his own flesh so that he wouldn't look at the exposed flesh of the young man beside him. One of the minor things he had to guard against, of course: it wasn't looking that got a man in trouble, it was the *way* he looked. It was too easy to give himself away by whatever indefinable something it was in his gaze, so he no longer allowed himself the luxury of looking, unless he were swaddled in the safety of a very careful group of friends.

Well, it wasn't often he let his caution slip. But the young man really was good looking, and almost involuntarily, Doyle found himself snatching a brief look, the quickest flicker of the eyes, as if it were nothing more than the casual curiosity of any straight man comparing himself favourably in size with the man next to him. And then he was looking away, quickly, quickly, mind racing, for the young man beside him wasn't peeing, but just standing there, cock exposed, long fingers cradling firming flesh, tacit invitation waiting for Doyle's RSVP.

Dry mouthed, heart thumping viciously the wall of his chest, Doyle knew what answer he wanted to give. Tearing at him, tugging at the cortex of his mind, was the acid knowledge of the answer he ought to give, the answer he should give, the only sane thing he could do: zip up and walk out without a backward glance, stop standing here with his cock sticking out of his trousers like the tongue of a begging dog. But his hand was immobile with conflicting desires, his fingers hot on his cock, his fear cold in his belly, his lust licking the edges of his eyes as he caught sight—tiniest glance, barest glimpse, devastating lure—of the young man's cock, the foreskin cowled round the head, there, just there, sliding back another fraction of an inch as the man's arousal grew.

Undermined by his own desires, Doyle licked his lips.

The man beside him turned, no more pretence of being here for anything other than sex. Yammering panic screamed in his head as Doyle conjured up de-sexing images of Cowley's mouth pursed in disgust, of Bodie flinching away from the fairy's touch, his mother's shame flailing him when his name was in the paper, HM Government agent fired for having sex in a public toilet with a man—

But Christ, he wanted it! Wanted that cock in his mouth, wanted a man's hand round his own, a man's tongue licking his balls. Unwise, to let himself get this far gone, to try to suppress his own needs for such a length of time. He shouldn't've come in here—doubt assaulted him: had he come in here because his body knew the need his mind hadn't conceded yet?—should've gone to one of his safe friends' houses if he were this desperate for malesex. Go and visit Mark, release some of the pressure, do the sensible thing. Leave, he should leave, had to leave, had to walk out of here—

But he stayed where he was, not walking away, not turning away from this temptation, this offer of instant, no-strings satisfaction, no need for seduction or long conversations of friendship. He wanted, he admitted with a flare of adrenalin that was his own personal drug of choice, the edge of

danger, the seductive fingernail of risk caressing him. His cock was rising, excitement sexual and dangerous filling him. In his turn, he moved the small degree that would bring him round to face the handsome man who reminded him of himself, and of Bodie, and of so many of the men he knew in the real world, far away from this pocket of fantasy sex come to technicolour

Insanity, not to leave.

But Christ, the man was gorgeous, all blond hair and wickedly twinkling eyes, solid, welltrained physique and heavy, thick cock.

Dangerous, to do it in a cottage.

But it had been so long, too long, and the hunger was raw in his belly and the need a gaping ache in his mind.

Stupid, downright bloody stupid, to yield to the need here, with all the risks of doing it in public with a stranger. But that—his cock flickered a finger of desire through his belly and back into his balls, daring him to admit the truth—that was part of it, that was much of the sudden onslaught of lust, of this rock-slide of desire. To have a man again, to taste male, to suck him in, consume him, possess him, be filled with that distillation of masculinity, with the peril of discovery shivering up and down his spine: he wanted that—needed it, desperately, now, right now, here-more than sense, more than all the boring banality of skulking around pretending and hiding and doing the right thing and never taking a single chance when it came to his more esoteric sex life.

This man facing him with such a knowing smile was temptation itself: ripe with sex, balls lush and full, trousers pushed down now far enough to display the golden down of thighs, shirt pushed high enough to reveal the satin planes of belly and the flawless smoothness of chest, gilded by the tight pucker of pink nipples. Doyle stared at him, fucking him with his gaze, hands clenched into fists to keep himself from testing the warmth of skin and firmness of muscle. Desire burned him like madness, but he was still sane enough not to touch. Not yet. Not quite yet.

But the young man's hunger was consuming him, and Doyle felt himself to be dangling over the edge of a cliff, fingers scrabbling to keep him from plummeting down the dizzying heights into the pounding sea-surge below. He wanted to look away, to free himself from the conspiracy the other man's lust was building with his own body's

needs, his cock stretching out to touch the other man's faintly tanned skin, his mind trying to pull away from this *liaison dangereux* and back into the security of his tidily compartmented life.

But that moment was when the handsome young man took the decision for him. Intensely blue eyes never blinking, the man smiled, slowly, a half-quirk of invitation, and peeled the foreskin back from his cock, revealing fully the tender, moist head. His hands were darker than his belly, tanned by daily exposure to the elements, and so different a colour from the sun-protected cock.

Another moment, another movement of beautiful hand on beautiful cock and the attraction was too strong for him to resist. Knowing he should be running from this, instead Doyle lowered his trousers enough that the handsome man could cup his buttocks, palm to the cleft, fingers pressing between, index finger finding his hole unerringly. He sighed, lifting up on his toes, dropping his head back so that the long curls tickled through the thin shirt that stretched across his shoulders, breath quickening as his body was stroked. Then the hand was taken away from him, and he clutched at common sense as arousal subsided marginally, and he told himself again, like a child reciting the useless history lists of monarchs, that he should leave, run, seek refuge in the smothering consolation of his special, discreet friends.

But the man was still smiling at him, confidence seeping from him like precum, slicking Doyle, making him ready for fucking. And almost before his mind knew he was going to yield to the temptation, Doyle had dropped to the hard, cold tiles, mouth wrapped around the hard, hot cock, immobile marble pressing into his knees, mobile flesh pressing into his throat. His own hands were trembling as he splayed them, slow moving, on the supple motion of the handsome man's hips, the sharp point of pelvic bone filling the arch of Doyle's hands, each forward thrust into his hands matched by the thrust into his mouth as he opened, ever wider, taking in more and more of this man. Half grudgingly, he left the lissome belly, one hand sliding round to the litheness of buttock, fingers delving into the crease, brushing against hair that hinted at such an exciting secret. His right hand was tight on his own cock now, pleasuring himself as he sucked the pleasure out of his partner, his hand neither tight enough nor wet enough

on its own, but such a libidinous feast when in counterpoint to the delight of having a cock in his mouth again.

There were hands in his hair, controlling him, pressing him down harder, telling him what this man wanted, letting him give what was needed, hands that were clutching at him, syncopating the muttered obscenities of arousal being poured over him. Those hands, those cries, the convulsive thrusts into his mouth, all warned him that the man was going to come soon. Visceral decision taken, Doyle had no intention of letting his partner pip him at the post, and then, perhaps, walk away and leave him curling in on himself in an agony of uncompleted desire. His hand blurred on his cock, thumb sliding quick and sweet over the slitted head, his own orgasm rushing in on him, his cum splattering out to glitter, white, viscid, on the polished blackness of shoes seconds before hot wetness splashed the back of his throat, tide ebbing as he swallowed, again, and again, until he had taken everything his partner could give.

The hands gentled a path from his hair to cup his face, and Doyle closed his eyes, not wanting to reveal himself to this man. Sex was one thing, a physical convenience for mutual benefit, but he was too open after, too many barriers lowered in the aftermath of orgasm. The man had only one hand on him now, thumb rubbing the slick, wet evidence of his sucking into Doyle's skin, sliding a stray droplet of cum between his lips. Doyle nipped the thumb between the sharpness of his teeth, laving the small hurt with his tongue, languorousness still tingling through him.

"Aren't you going to look at me?" he heard the man say.

Doyle smiled, released the thumb with a last, lingering lick, and opened his eyes. The blond was smiling also, tracing his wetted thumb over the faint sheen that ringed Doyle's mouth.

"Guess what?" the man said.

"What?" Doyle asked, playing the game, readying his next card, deciding whether to play a trump and take another chance with this appealing man, or whether to let his brain kick in again and give the bloke the brush-off. "Go on, don't be a tease, tell me!"

The blond tapped him playfully on the cheek, reached into a back pocket, black wallet falling open before Doyle's widening, horrified eyes, as the other man's smile widened viciously. "You,

mate, are nicked."

Then the only sound was the rasp of the undercover policeman zipping his flies and tucking in his shirt, and Raymond Doyle, member of Her Majesty's Security Forces arrested for public indecency, struggling to breathe as the familiar litany washed over his head, words he'd used himself so many times when he'd still worn the blue uniform. Words he'd never imagined being on the receiving end for, especially for the damning charge of indecency in a public place.

First, he'd spent too long in a holding cell as aged as the site of his downfall, but far less luxurious. Then, he'd spent far too long sitting in another holding cell—this one disguised as someone's office, but Doyle recognised it for what itwas, for him, under these circumstances—before being prodded into an undistinguished Government-issue car, driven by someone far too junior to augur well for the impending interview.

If he'd been Bodie, he'd probably have at least tried to strike up some sort of conversation, but he wasn't Bodie, so he sat there, in the back seat of the car, staring grimly out the window as they passed from the bright lights of expensive entertainments into the dim warren of official offices and discreet brass plaques.

The drive itself, and the hang-headed trip up the lift, didn't take anywhere near long enough, although he was spared the ignomy of meeting anyone he knew well. Too soon, and he was sitting in Cowley's office, the ceiling light blanking the night windows with brightness, cutting him off from the outside, locking him in yet another holding cell. In the distance, he could hear the traffic, and people walking along the corridor, and telephones ringing. And inside himself? All he wanted was silence, but he couldn't quiet his mind, couldn't stop the endless stream of justifications and excuses and cogent argument, pleadings of entrapment and innocence, the injustice of the law of the land. Futile, all of it. No matter how unfair, no matter how immoral, the simple, bitter truth he had to swallow that the charges alone were enough to ruin him, and that it would be his word against the policeman's. CI5 weren't exactly the blue-eyed boys of the traditionbound establishment, being seen as fly boys with no respect for the 'proper' way of doing things: not many judges would believe his long hair and tight jeans and bracelet over the fine upstanding policeman with his short, tidy hair and deferential smile. No, the charge was enough, being caught was enough. He didn't stand a chance, any more than Cowley had a choice. Caught, literally with his trousers down, in a compromising position, one he could scarcely have bettered, given the haste of his encounter.

Christ, a career fucked up for the sake of a few minutes! He exploded into motion, prowling round the desk, pacing the perimeter of the room, too restless and tense and furious with himself to sit still and wait patiently for the axe to fall. He picked files up, discarded them, his own reports on his own cases meaningless now: someone else would be finishing them, someone else would be following through on his groundwork, someone else would bring in the bastards he'd run to ground.

And someone else would be guarding Bodie's back. Not something he wanted to think about, Bodie on the streets without him, with maybe that green around the gills first-former who'd driven Doyle in tonight. He went to the cabinet where the drinks were, turned away, suddenly feeling that he no longer had that privilege: not one of the Bisto Kids now. He wouldn't even qualify as Oxo, after his stupid stunt this afternoon. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, tugged them free, ran his fingers through his hair, slammed himself down with a creak of the old chair. A minute, then he was on his feet again, forearm leaning on the coolness of window, forehead leaning on the spurious warmth of his arm. He was finished, that he knew, that he would have to accept, that he could eventually manage. But he was going to have to face Cowley's wrath, and the fact that he'd let Bodie down. Christ, there would be rumours abounding after him getting caught like that today, God knew what the blokes in the squad would say about him and Bodie, once they found out he was bent. And it was Bodie who was going to have to put up with it all, sort it out, because Doyle had let him down and wouldn't be there.

Gnawing on a fingernail, he went over, and then over again, the question of who Cowley would partner Bodie with now: it was easier, and harder, than thinking about himself, and about what he was going to do, starting tomorrow.

He didn't have a watch on, didn't much care what time it was, but knew it must be creeping into the early hours of the morning. So where the hell was Cowley? Not like the old man to keep someone waiting out of petty spite. Of course, it would be just like Cowley to make him cool his heels while Cowley got his temper under sufficient control to actually speak to him without degenerating into the gutter. Doyle felt a sudden chill then, a shiver of apprehension: there was another possible explanation for Cowley's continued absence. There could be questions being asked, enquiries being made, a net being cast wider, catching all sorts of minnows in its mesh. Willis was paranoid about queers, a definite crypto-queer basher, and if one of his pet policeman had told Willis that CI5 had a man in custody for having gross indecency in a public place...

If that was where Cowley was, then Doyle would consider himself lucky to get out of this office with his head still firmly attached to his shoulders. He went back to the chair, sitting down slowly this time, as if all his life had been lived and he was an old bundle of arthritic bones. One thought had been chasing him through his mind, trying to catch him and trip him and demand its answer.

What was Bodie going to do?

Doyle didn't know, but he had his fears, more than a match for his hope. Eldritch imaginings crept over him, as he envisioned what his partner might say, what his partner might do. No, he told himself firmly, get a grip on yourself. He hadn't been fired yet—and look at Cowley's reaction over that gay youth organisation oppo. And all the A squad swore Cowley knew how often they changed their socks, so surely the old bastard must have known about the other side of Doyle's life? That was it: Cowley must have a report on it somewhere, names, dates, places, and a notation that as long as Doyle remained discreet, his homosexual tendencies would not provide a security risk.

As long as he remained discreet. Not a word that immediately sprang to mind to describe a man caught loaning a man the use of his throat in a cottage. Doyle wanted nothing more, at that moment, than to simply get up and run far, far away, to skip the dreadful scene he was sure was going to hit him any minute now. And if he were to run away now, he'd be able to avoid Bodie and the gut-rending fear of Bodie's friendship proving too insubstantial to survive such a revelation.

Footsteps, loud in the deserted silence of the

corridor, then the door handle was turning, and Doyle was turning, to look his fate in the eye.

"Sir," he said, getting to his feet, showing more respect than he had in all his years at CI5.

Cowley barely glanced at him, going round to take his customary place, ordering the files on his desk, ignoring Doyle consummately.

"Sir," another voicesaid, and Doyle had whirled around, meeting blue eyes that he was nowhere near ready for. Coldness raked him, and then he was dismissed from that gaze also, as Bodie handed a triple whisky to Cowley and sat down with his own glass.

Doyle was not about to make any joking comment about not getting his fair share. He sat down then, quietly, biding his time, trying very hard to gather his anger and his sense of injustice round him, a hard shell to cover the vulnerable softness of his underbelly.

"The charges haven't been filed yet, I've done that much for you," Cowley said to the plain manila folder on his desk. "But that's all I'll be doing for you, you realise that, don't you?"

No, Doyle thought, he didn't stand a chance. But when had he ever given up without a fight? And when had he ever kept his mouth shut over an injustice? He stared, insistently, at his boss, and began to fight. "Even though he approached me?"

He was looked at then, and immediately wished for Cowley to look away. "All you had to do was say no."

"Oh, come off it, sir!" he half shouted, fanning the flames of his protective anger, using the heat to stave off the chill of Bodie staring at him with such winter cold. "He was all over me—"

"I," Cowley said, very, very soberly, "have no desire to hear the sordid details of your...dalliance, if it were a dalliance as you say and not the heavy-handed come-on the constable accuses you of."

"D'you honestly think I'd be stupid enough to come on to someone in a public—" He broke off, the words crashing headlong into the stone wall of Cowley's sour-faced distaste.

"I believe lavatory is the word you're looking for. Or would you prefer public convenience?" Cowley sipped from his glass, the unhurried movement of the man who refuses to yield to the urge to gulp whisky down until it numbed him beyond feeling or thought. "You may have noticed the important word there is *public*."

"No, the important word here is *unfair*—not to

mention *lies*. He came on to me, sir, he was the one who started it all, and he let me—"

The voice was even quieter, low enough to stifle Doyle's shout. "I've already warned you. I am not interested in hearing the dirty things you claim happen." There was scorn there now, and the first glimmer of an anger that went beyond even Cowley's stern control. "As if it would make it any better if you really had had sex in a public toilet." He was shaking his head, in disbelief and dismay, and, Doyle was quietly, secretly, horrified to note, betrayal. "Is that supposed to ingratiate you to me? Is it supposed to make it 'all better'? That you weren't guilty of asking a man for sex, but you are guilty of performing lewd acts with him, in a public place, with no thought as to who he might be, nor the consequences of your stupidity? Well? Is that supposed to make you pure as the driven snow?"

"It's supposed," Doyle said, forcing himself to sound calm and reasonable and to keep his voice from wavering, "to make you think twice about chucking me out, sir. Come on, Mr. Cowley, you've always been fair before—"

"Have I? That's not what I seem to remember you saying on many an occasion." A pause, just long enough for Cowley's gaze to assess Doyle and find him lacking, and for that flicker of betrayed trust to wash Doyle in acid. "I'd not taken you for a boot-licker before."

Bodie shifted, minutely, in his chair, his silence speaking loudly: Doyle could almost hear the familiar voice say 'maybe not boot, sir, but now we know all about Doyle and arses'. But Bodie didn't actually say a single word. He didn't need to: his silence said it all.

"Look, sir," Doyle ploughed on, trying to ignore the Himalayan disapproval sitting not three feet from him, "being homosexual is not a criminal offence—"

"Aye, but committing homosexual acts in public is!" Cowley snapped at him. "It's the stupidity of it I can't believe. To do it in a public place, in a bloody toilet—" He shook his head, and Doyle got another demoralising glimpse of the older man's disappointment. "For God's sake, man, there are discreet clubs for the likes of you—and 'escort' services, and a dozen other outlets." The older man stopped, paused for a moment, then went on, total bemusement filling his face. "What possessed you to do it in a toilet?"

There were a wealth of unspecified questions behind that one plaintive cry, but how the hell was Doyle supposed to explain it all, when he didn't have an adequate answer for himself? Nervous, uncomfortable, he picked at a loose inch of thread on the inner knee of his jeans, concentrating on Cowley, devastatingly aware of Bodie's stony silence and lowering glare. "I honestly don't know." He fiddled with the thread, glanced up at Cowley, looked away again, his gaze skimming over Bodie's slick iciness, a sickening hollow of loneliness emptying his stomach. "I wasn't even thinking about it—sex, I mean—and then he came and stood beside. Started touching me and next thing, there I was—"

"Ach, don't play me for a fool! D'you honestly expect me to believe that you didn't know the sort of place you were going into? It's been a cottage for over thirty years!"

Doyle's voice was very tight, his eyes narrowed. "But I've never been into that way of doing things, so I wouldn't know that, would I?"

"And I'm hardly the type to frequent homosexual sex areas myself, but even I knew."

"Are you calling me a liar? Sir?"

"I'm calling you a fool. And a liar forbye, if you think I'm going to swallow a fairy tale like that."

The comment dropped, malodorous as vomit, between them. The anger was back in Doyle now, festering with his pain, poisoned by the glower in Bodie's eyes. "Interesting choice of phrase, that. An' is that what you think I am? A fairy?" He was in a fine temper now, the anger explaining away the glister in his eyes. "D'you think the minute I'm off the job I turn into a lisping pansy who'll bend over and touch his toes for any man that asks?"

Cowley's anger was a match for Doyle's, his voice rising along with the colour in his cheeks. "I won't tell you again! I don't want to hear any of your filthy little details."

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" He was on his feet again, running his hands through the tangle of his hair, stalking the perimeter of the office, anything to put some distance between himself and that gimlet stare of Bodie, who was watching him still, and with all the affection of a gardener uncovering a slug amongst his roses. "Look, it's not as if me being queer is new—"

He felt, actually felt, that statement cut into both men, the admission, the actual saying of the word, burning every single bridge behind him. Too late now, too much already said for him to retreat back, to claim the unsafe sex as momentary madness or confusion brought on by a job that turned morality on its head. Well, he'd said it now, he wasn't going to crawl away with his tail between his legs, apologising for what he was, for what he had always been. "Anyway, it's not as if it's new, is it? I've been like this all my life..."

He waited for Cowley to say something, to admit that it was all on file somewhere, safely tucked away until it had been pulled out tonight, and the dust blown off it. But nothing was said, no lifebelt was thrown to him; Cowley wasn't going to give him so much as a straw to cling to. Doyle laughed, an ugly, painful sound. "Oh, come off it, you're not going to claim you hadn't the faintest idea, are you?"

Cowley sat back, his emotions wiped from his face, impassive professional bureaucracy a mask for him to hide behind. "Regardless, I'm telling you not another word of CI5 business."

"In other words, you've known from the start, and ignored it as long as it didn't interfere with the job, is that it?" Doyle voice was a shout shot through with hoarseness, and the hurt of having Bodie sit by silently whilst he fought his last desperate battle with Cowley. "You know the names of every woman I've ever slept with, including some that I'd forgotten, so how the fuck can you pretend you didn't know about the blokes as well? Can you tell me that much at least, or is that all covered by the Official fucking Secrets Act an' all?"

"We're not here to review CI5's security checks, we're here to get you to do what little you can to make up for the damage you've done."

"The damage I've done? The damage I've done? What did I do? Oh, yeah, sucked some bloke's cock in a toilet. Not the cleverest thing ever, I admit, but at least I didn't trick him into it just to bugger his life up. All I'm guilty of, *sir*," and the last was a sneer, such an agonised sneer, all the tearing and rending of this ugly end twisting his voice and his face, "is being taken in by a pretty face, and I'm not the first man in this department to to that, am I?"

"No," cold, damning, "but you are the first to do it with a man."

He leaned on the desk in front of Cowley then, the battle long since lost, nothing left him but the dregs of revenge. "Don't you mean that I'm the first one to get caught doing it with a man. Sir."

Doyle had the briefest of satisfactions: Cowley looked away. But then Bodie shifted behind Doyle, and without thinking, new habits not yet learned to break the old habit of trust and friendship, Doyle turned round, and was impaled by the bleakest distrust.

"The statistics aren't what matter, Doyle," Cowley was saying, the unexpected use of his name calling Doyle back to his boss. "What matters is that we can't afford the scandal. The Minister's already had to answer to the PM, and to head off a full-fledged investigation of Departmental security, he promised her that you'd be out on your ear before morning."

"Before Fleet Street get to hear about it, isn't that what you mean?"

"Aye, it is—and before the Opposition get their hands on it, and before the budget makers get a whiff of it, before the do-gooders can use it to bash us over the head with more accusations of corruption and moral turpitude."

Doyle sat back down again, all the fight gone out of him, his belligerence shown for all the bombast it was. "In other words, I'm to be made an example of. Nice to know how special I've been to you all these years. Glad to've been able to risk my life—"

"For God's sake, man, can't you see?" and Doyle did see, for a moment, the conflict in Cowley's eyes, the distress that all this mess was causing him. "We're CI5. The Untouchables, incorruptible, never outside the law, never above the law, but beyond the law. And beyond normal human weaknesses and temptations, because we're the only ones that can't be bought or blackmailed. We're the last defence, Doyle. We're the only ones who are beyond reproach, lily-white and perfect."

"And smelling ever so faintly of roses? As long as you don't scratch the surface, that is."

"Aye," Cowley said, sadly, fingers flipping through page after page of Doyle's file, exemplary reports glowing upon exemplary reports. "Aye, as long as you don't scratch the surface and expect to find Eden before the Snake."

Then, eventually, to fill the emptiness of Cowley staring so bleakly at so many years of excellent service and even more years of aborted promise, Doyle spoke, grasping at straws: "So because of one thing about me, just one thing, you're going to

turn on me? You're going to write me off as worthless because I'm not poker straight?"

Cowley wiped his hand across his eyes, his face abruptly etched with every second of his age. "I'm going to write you off, Doyle, because you're no use to me with a stain the likes of that against your name. And for being so bloody stupid, I have to write you off as a bloody bad risk for the department."

"So nothing I've done matters, compared to one moment of weakness today? That one thing is going to change how you see me that much?"

There was silence then, angry, bitter, furious, from Bodie, old, cynical and sad, from Cowley, and the immobile silence of defeat from Doyle. An ending, then, and one he'd known would come from that first lurching instant when his handsome young stranger had said, so blithely cheerful, 'you're nicked'.

"Is there anything I can do?" Doyle asked, not hoping, knowing too well the politics that hounded CI5 and the politicians that hovered like vultures over Cowley. "Anything at all?"

Cowley shrugged, looking at the words written about Doyle's past instead of at Doyle himself. "There's only one decent thing you can do."

Doyle laughed again, and this time, looked straight at Bodie when he spoke. "Why, do blokes like me still shoot themselves?"

Bodie blinked, slowly: yes.

"You—" Doyle started, hot anger burning through the pain. But what was there to be said? Nothing, with Cowley sitting there, and the truths too caustic to be heard.

Cowley was speaking again, coming between what had become a former partnership. "Will you do it, Doyle, or are you going to force me into a very public and very messy dismissal proceeding?"

There was an echo of the old gleam of Doyle's smile. "Do I have a choice?" He answered himself, as he began going through his pockets, keys and ID and security tag piling on Cowley's desk. "Haven't had a choice since I bollocksed things up this afternoon, have I? D'you need it in writing?"

Unspeaking, Cowley edged a small pile of printed forms across the desk to him.

"Always prepared, eh, sir?" But for all his attempts at joking, his hand wasn't entirely steady as he signed his name, in triplicate, often enough to sever all ties. His fingers fumbled, going to unbuckle a gun that wasn't there, unworn because

off duty, and then, because arrested, and now, no longer his to claim.

"I know a car's out of the question," Doyle was saying, his voice exceptionally steady, only the very placidity of his expression betraying his utter turmoil, "but how long do I get before I have to get out of the flat?"

Cowley, for the first time in all the years Doyle had known him, looked ashamed. "The Minister..."

"The Minister?" Doyle prompted, resigned even to this, knowing that CI5 took care of its own, and losing CI5 meant losing everything.

"It's to be immediate. The Minister's adamant that you should claim all small personal effects immediately, furnishings and the like by the end of the week."

This was already Thursday—no, Friday by now, morning too short a time away. "The Minister," Doyle muttered, "should fucking apply for a job as fucking Santa." He was digging his house keys out of his pocket, tossing the metal in his hand, looking atitinstead of Bodie's arctic presence.

"Your pay will be docked for the usual expenses. I'll make sure the wages clerk gets his skates on." A pause of awkward delicacy. "You'll be in a hurry to get your money?"

Doyle smiled a little at that. "Oh, don't you worry yourself about me, sir," Doyle said, the bitterness in his voice flailing Cowley. "It's all right, I don't need a loan. Anyway, the only thing you can do safely is spit on me, isn't it? Wouldn't do to let anyone get the wrong idea and think CI5 cradles queers to its macho bosom, would it?"

It was getting worse, too much coiling round them all, entangling them in things they should say, hanging them with words that should never have been spoken.

Doyle got to his feet, the keys clattering too loudly as he dropped them onto the desk: relinquishing control of Government property, handing them over to be taken by whichever escort Cowley gave him, now that he was no longer CI5. "D'you think it would compromise CI5's pristine image if I used your phone to get a taxi?"

Cowley was obviously reigning himself in, had, perhaps, decided that he deserved far worse than Doyle was throwing at him, the vitriolic joke no subtle reminder that Doyle was supposed to be rushing to leave before he soiled the department any further. "Bodie'll take you back to your flat

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and on to a hotel after." Voice suddenly sharp with condemnation fed by his own shame. "And you can wipe that look off your face, Bodie! You'll do as you're damned well told, so don't you start any of your arguing."

"But-

Cowley came to his feet, an implosion of fury. "I don't want any of your stuff and bloody nonsense! He watched your back, and covered your backside more times than I've had hot dinners, so you just shut up and do him the common courtesy of giving him a lift."

"But—"

"Oh, it's not that bad, Bodie," Doyle murmured in a viciously gentle voice, throwing salt on wounds. "You could always look on it as seeing me off the premises. That should keep you happy." Smiling sweetly, green eyes glittering murderously, he tapped Bodie delicately on the cheek, smile vulpine as Bodie flinched away from him.

With a pointed expression of disgust, Bodie wiped the skin that had been touched by Doyle's hand. With military precision, he turned towards his boss, voice stiffer than his back, "Is that an order, sir?"

"Aye," Cowley said, sitting down heavily, wearily, so wearily, pushing a hand through his hair. "Aye, treating your partner with human dignity is a fucking order."

It was, remarkably, the first time either one of them had heard Cowley lose control enough to swear in front of his agents. Or agent, and one exagent, Doyle reminded himself, a shaft of sympathy for his boss—Christ, it was ex-boss, now—cutting through his own self-pity and temper. "So, that's it, then?" he said, postponing, like a child at the end of too long a day at the seaside, the final moment that would make it all over and done with, tears and all.

"It's over, laddie," Cowley said, rising to his feet once more, coming round the edge of the desk. He put his hand out, and it took Doyle a second to realise that despite the circumstances, Cowley wanted to shake his hand before he left for good.

Ridiculously, there was a lump in his throat as he looked at this man who had been such a bastard to him at times, and so close to a fatherly mentor at others. "I'll miss..." he swallowed and, faintly misty eyed, looked round the room, "well, I'll miss all of it, sir."

"You'll be missed yourself, Doyle."

And then, the handshake was over, and the words were all used up, and there was nowhere for him to go but out.

Heels clicking loudly on the corridor's linoleum, Doyle was agonisedly aware of just how silent the building was, the loudest silence of all the absence of Bodie's footsteps to echo his, a sound that had once been so familiar he never even noticed it. On the lift, by himself, the brightness obscene in the darkness of his mood, then the front desk, and final signing-out in the log.

Out the front door, to stand, reluctant, on the steps. He considered laughing, or yelling, but there was no strength left for that. All he really wanted to do was go home and crawl into bed for a month. But there wouldn't be time for that. He had to get a taxi—don't think about Bodie, don't remember his face, don't think what it would be like when Bodie showed up at the flat, don't think of the bittersweet misery it would have been to be trapped in the smallness of a car with Bodie—get over to his flat and start packing the basic essentials. He supposed he could stay with his mum and dad for a while, or there was always Simon: Simon would be glad to see him, would welcome him with open arms and open legs, cradle him in warmth and fuss over him until all this began to fade into sharded memory. Or he could move in with Susan for a bit—oh, and wouldn't that be sweet? Rub their noses in it, the Minister and that fucking copper, Cowley and Bodie and-

No, he wouldn't use Susie like that, not, for that matter, that she'd let him. Best to either go running home with his tail between his legs, or go running to Simon with his tale between teeth, and let Simon smother him with affection until he got his feet on the ground again.

He began walking towards the only phone box he knew of round here, it being too far to walk back to his flat. Now he wished he hadn't gone shopping today—and he suddenly wondered if along with the wages he was due, he'd get his personal stuff back out of the car, handed to him in a brown paper package like a man coming out of prisonbecause he'd spent a fair bit of money he could do with now. Maybe he should have taken the Old Man up on his offer of a loan: knowing you could die tomorrow tended to put the mockers on saving. Nah, he was going out with some pride. He'd manage on what he'd got, and the dole, and it wouldn't take him too long to find a job, even

given the figures released just this morning. Just *yesterday* morning. Tomorrow had already come.

A car pulled up at the kerb beside him, an unsmiling Bodie leaning across the front seat to push the passenger door open.

Doyle stood there, impassive, waiting until he had some idea of what Bodie was going to hit him with.

"Look," Bodie said, "I've got my orders, and I've had my lecture from Cowley, so just fucking get in and let's get this over and done with."

Only, Doyle didn't want to get this over and done with. How many years had he sat on his desire for Bodie? How many years had he allowed common sense to rule his passions and his emotions? His entire time with Bodie had been dictated by the need to not rock the boat, to not chance his arm and end up getting his hands cut off for his efforts. No, Doyle didn't want it to be over and done with: if he had to give up CI5, then he was going to be bastard enough to try to take Bodie with him and grab a long life for both of them. Always supposing Bodie could be persuaded, by fair means or foul, to leave CI5. And, perhaps, to share his bed with Doyle. There had to be something in all the hair ruffling and bum-feeling, hadn't there? Had to be something real behind all the affectionate nicknames, and the risking everything to get Doyle out of a tight situation. Had to be more than just the job.

Or was he clutching at straws now he didn't have CI5 and Bodie to lean on?

"So you're going to be glad to see the back of me, then?" he asked, ever so casually, while his fist was clenched by his side and the muscle in the side of his jaw jumped.

"What do you fucking think? Oh, but I forgot, you don't think, do you?" From silence to full spate, no middle ground, a flood of words spewing from Bodie. "You just open your mouth and swallow, don't you? What was it you said? Oh, yeh, that's it. You fell for a pretty face. A pretty face." Gears crunched as the car was wrenched round a corner, headlamps sliding light across net curtained windows. "And any pretty face would do you—as long as it's attached to a prick, of course."

"Then how come I haven't had you?"

Bodie spared the contempt for a glance at Doyle, making a point of ignoring that Doyle was calling him both a pretty face and a prick. "Because I'm

not bent the way you are, am I?"

"That a question?" Doyle asked, the anger in his belly warming away the chill. "Aren't you a bit on the old side not to've worked it out yet?"

"You'd twist anything, wouldn't you. Well, if you think you're going to get me wondering about myself, then you've got another think coming, mate. I know what I am, and a poofter like you isn't one of them."

"Ooh, what a shame, and here was me thinking you wanted to sweep me off my feet and take me away from all this."

Bodie took the roundabout too fast, tyres protesting, Doyle bracing his foot against the dashboard to save him from landing against Bodie. "I'll knock you off your feet and sweep you under the fucking carpet."

"Like it rough, do you, butch?"

The car came to an abrupt and noisy halt. "D'you want to walk the rest of the fucking way, or are you going to shut your trap and leave me alone?"

Real danger, there, in the way Bodie was looking at him. Serious threat, serious risk, the kind of eggshell-framed violence usually reserved for real scum. "Sorry," Doyle muttered, looking out the window, withdrawing as far as possible from his erstwhile partner, the man he had once been able to trust with his life. "Just get me home, will you?"

"And let's not forget on to a hotel after, shall we?" Bodie bit out, hurling the car forward again. "Orders are orders."

And sitting beside Bodie in the fraught quiet, Doyle began to ponder just precisely why Bodie was quite so angry and why there was such an enormous well of hurt roiling under the surface.

In the car outside his flat, the streetlamps gleaming on the carved profile of his partner, Doyle admitted that he hadn't given up completely after all. Painstakingly, he dredged up the last of his strength, returned to the fray, and began gluing together all the jumbled puzzle pieces: the excessive anger, the lowering silence, the simmering violence, the hurtfilled, betrayed looks that were so quickly cemented over.

It was, he confessed to himself, as he walked up the stairs behind Bodie, a faint hope, but it was better than nothing. In front of him, Bodie was using the keys, opening the door, doing his official duty as minder to a former CI5 agent, fulfilling his unofficial duty to lend Doyle as much a helping hand as Cowley could manage.

"You going to wait here, or're you going to go and sulk in the car?"

In answer, Bodie went over to the sideboard and poured himself a very healthy measure of whisky. Sidestepping Doyle with ostentatious indifference, he sat on the sofa and began, slowly, to drink.

Doyle went through the bedroom quickly, stuffing enough clothes for a couple of days in his hold-all, grabbing shaving kit and essentials from the bathroom, hurrying through it all before the real impact of what was happening hit him. Back then, to the living room, where Bodie, with glass still in hand, was sitting in the light from the hallway and the faint glow that spilled in through the windows. Another hint: Bodie usually only drank this much either at parties or when he needed to get drunk. And that bespoke pain. Which meant, Doyle metaphorically crossed his fingers, that there really was something under this furious indifference.

A click of the light-switch, and the brightness made them both blink. "That's better, innit?" Doyle murmured pleasantly as he began to gather a few things to fill his old blue suitcase. His mind was only half on the job, not really paying any attention to the records and tapes and books he was packing. Guardedly, he watched Bodie, choosing his moment with care.

"You know, for a grown man, you're being a right spoiled brat about this."

Slowly, Bodie turned to look at him. "And what d'you think would be the mature way to handle this? Blow your brains out and put us all out of your misery?"

"But I'm not miserable, Bodie." That was too much a lie for him, even given the current circumstances. "Well, I wasn't miserable, before today. Yesterday, now, I suppose." Barely acknowledged, tiredness scoured him until his muscles were aching and his head pounding. It dawned on him that it had been a long time since last he'd managed to get some food down him: stupid, that. He should have eaten what was offered him, kept his energy up, staved off this terrible feeling of weakness, this horrible desire to just give up. But he wasn't going to give up without one last battle. Instead, he dragged his reserves together, turned them into a smile for

Bodie. "I wasn't exactly in seventh heaven either, but life was all right."

"Until the truth came out," Bodie said, harsh and flat, a blunted edge of betrayal still there, if you knew where to look to find Bodie's secrets. As Doyle had thought he had known, until tonight, when he was gambling on secrets as yet uncovered. "Your dirty little secret."

"Yeh, well, I didn't think it was that much a secret."

"What?" Genuine amazement, Bodie's face an absolute picture. "You weren't just having Cowley on, you honestly thought he knew?"

Doyle drew in on himself, defensive. "Be reasonable, Bodie. He knows everything else, so why shouldn't I think he knew that and was just turning a blind eye to it?"

"Because being a poofter isn't something you can turn a blind eye to! It's not something you can just ignore."

"Tell me something I don't know." Abruptly, his own bitterness was back, outreaching anything Bodie could display.

"So if you couldn't ignore it," Bodie was saying, looking at the way the light scintillated across the surface of his drink, "then why didn't you say anything about it?"

"Because," Doyle answered in simple honesty, "I thought you knew."

Bodie nearly dropped his glass. "Don't be so fucking stupid! If I'd've known, what was I doing camping it up with you?"

Christ, it seemed so stupid now, and he wondered how he had ever illuded himself into believing it. "Thought you were being nice."

That stopped Bodie dead in his tracks. "Being nice? How'd you work that out?" Suspicion drowning out everything else, and Doyle noticed the way Bodie's face grew pinker, and the way he licked his lips in something akin to nervousness, and the guilty start that was immediately subsumed into casual indifference. Oh, yes, Doyle told himself, desperate to believe anew, Bodie had something to hide.

"I thought that, seeing as how you knew I liked blokes even more than I liked women, and seeing as how you and me were friends..." He shrugged, made it lighter than it was, giving Bodie an illusion of safety. "Hell, Bodie, I thought you were giving me a bit of a treat, feeling me up like that."

"Abit of a treat?" Bodie's voice rose, a crescendo

of outrage and broken trust. "A bit of a fucking treat? What d'you think I am, a fucking ponce? Christ, Doyle, I thought you were my mate, I thought you were straight like me—I thought I was *safe* with you." He was on his feet, pacing as Doyle had paced in Cowley's office, and the very uncommonness of that coiled energy forcing movement made Doyle all the more convinced that Bodie was driven by stronger emotion than yet spoken. "I thought you were the same as me, I never for a second thought... Fuck it, Doyle, I thought I could trust you, and there you were, getting your jollies at my expense, laughing at me behind my back—"

"Any time I laughed at you, mate, I did it to your face. Come on, Bodie, it's not exactly life or death here, is it? So you messed about with a mate, and now you've found out that he liked it." A pause, just long enough to drive his point home. "And I wasn't the only one who liked your little games, was I?"

"What the fuck are you trying to insinuate, Doyle?" He answered himself, words tumbling out so rushed that it cracked Bodie's mask, and Doyle was surer and surer of what that hidden something was. "You can just forget it! There I was thinking I was camping it up with a good mate, someone I could trust—trust! There's a joke, isn't it? But you—Christ, you sick bastard, you were getting a cheap thrill, weren't you? Get you all worked up, did it, when I was messing about with you? Get you all hot under the collar?"

Doyle got to his feet with his customary grace, his walk deliberately lissome, the same gait he had noticed Bodie watching during their time together. "Wasn't under the collar that got me all hot and bothered."

That was when Bodie hauled off and hit him. Hard. A roundhouse swing against the face, and the only thing that saved Doyle from a jaw that matched his cheekbone was all the years he had fought side by side with this man. "Nasty," he said, picking himself up off the floor, fingers working his jaw to make sure nothing was too badly damaged. "In fact," he said, facing Bodie with more courage than he had ever needed to face a sworn enemy, "this is definitely turning into a case of methinks the lady doth protest too much."

Bodie closed in on himself, pulling back physically from his ex-partner. "Clever, Doyle, very clever. If I argue with you, then I'm trying to hide that I'm as bent as you are. If I keep my trap shut, then I'm admitting that I'm as bent as you are. Well," and then he leant forward, threateningly large, so close Doyle could see the shadings of blue in his eyes and feel the warmth of his breath on his skin, "you can think what you sodding well like. But I know the truth, and you can go fuck yourself for all I care. Or I suppose you'd rather get one of your fairy friends to do that, eh, ginger?"

Doyle's eyes narrowed, the sharpness of his gaze impaling Bodie. "Is that all it's going to be, after what we've been through together, mate? You calling me names and hitting me for what I am?"

There was a flicker there, the tiniest tightening of lips, obvious when you've lived in someone's pocket and fought at his side. "Yeh? Well, what the fuck did you expect?"

"How about a bit of loyalty, eh?"

"You're a fine one to talk. Loyalty? Ray Doyle, you wouldn't recognise loyalty if it came up and bit you on the arse. Loyalty? Don't make me laugh. You weren't interested in anything but a quick grope."

"Wasn't I? How would you know? You never fucking asked me, did you?"

"I don't believe this. You're trying to turn this into a lover's quarrel. 'You never asked'," he lisped, an ugly expression on his face. "I wasn't *supposed* to ask, Doyle."

"If we hadn't been partners, would you?" Pushing the limits, trying to attack hard enough that whilst denying the major question, Bodie would answer the lesser. And that would be enough for Doyle to work on. "Well, would you?"

"Doyle, I don't think you've got your brains out of that bog yet. I'm straight. Always have been, and I've never fancied you. So no, even if we hadn't been partners, course I wouldn't've fucking 'asked' you." He sat himself down, reclaimed his glass, and picked up yesterday's paper. "So shut the fuck up, and get your stufftogether. You've got half an hour, and then I'm leaving, whether you're ready or not."

Time, Doyle decided, to backpedal, to think about what Bodie had revealed, and what he had shown by skipping over certain things.

Everything that could be readily packed until he shifted the rest of his stuff, Doyle went over to stand in front of Bodie.

"You finally done?" Bodie asked.

"No."

Bodie snapped a glance at him, then skittered, uneasy, away. "Then you'd better get a move on, hadn't you? I'm off in five minutes."

"Oh, the packing's done."

Bodie was on his feet and at the living room door before Doyle could blink. "Then let's get this fucking show on the road."

"Not so fast, Bodie. There's something else."

"Oh, yeh?" So wary, so shuttered.

"I've been thinking."

"Pity you didn't do that yesterday, innit?"

"Yes, it is. But I didn't think, and now I'm being booted out for no good reason."

"You resigned, Doyle. All official and above board."

"Is that what you're going to tell yourself when your conscience starts nagging you?"

Bodie stared him out, refusing to admit to the slightest regret. "My conscience's got nothing to worry about."

"No? How about not backing your partner? How about sitting there like a fucking clam while your mate got the rug pulled out from under? And how about turning on me like a prima donna just because I happen to be bent?"

Bodie sighed, made a face. "We going to go over all that again? We've been through it once, and that's more than enough for me. Come on—"

Doyle stopped him, very simply. "You owe me, Bodie."

"I owe *you*? And how the fuck do you work that one out, eh?"

"After what we've been through, you can ask me that? Get off it, mate. You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"Mutual support, Doyle, watching each other's backs, which makes us even stevens. I don't owe you fuck."

"Not even for Jimmy Keller?"

"You trying to say I never covered for you?"

Doyle took his time, sensing that he was close to getting past Bodie's defences, knowing this man well enough to see the minute cracks in the façade. "You've covered for me, I'm not denying that. But what I'm saying is that with what we've done for each other, what we've been to each other—"

"You make it sound like we were fucking married!"

"Weren't we? Apart from the sex part," he threw in, managing to make it sound quite surprising that they hadn't done the 'sex part'. "Wasn't that what Cowley kept on telling us a good team should be like, a marriage?"

There was an odd expression on Bodie's face, as if he were trying not to think.

"But the way I see it, the crux of the matter is this: I owe you, and you owe me." Doyle saw how Bodie was backing away from what he was saying, and scrambled to bring the man back. "Which means that it'll never be over, not till the scores are settled."

Bodie was still framed in the doorway, but he was listening. "But you've got something up your sleeve, haven't you, Doyle?"

"Never could fool you, could I?" Then quickly, before Bodie could start in on him for that. "I think we should clear the slate," Doyle said, heart in his mouth, playing his final opening gambit, placing his last bet. No going back after this, no second chances... "I think we should pay off what we owe each other."

"And then walk away and have it be really over?" Giving nothing much away, but the anticipatory glee was conspicuously absent.

"Got it in one."

Bodie took a couple of steps back into the room; his eyes narrowed as he stared at Doyle. "How?"

Doyle shrugged, making a convincing pretence of not caring. "You do one thing for me, and I'll count that as balance for everything we've got on each other."

"Nah, you're never that simple. What is it you're really after, Doyle?"

Another shrug, and this time he draped himself casually across the arm of the sofa. "I'm serious! D'you think I want to have CI5 hanging over my head? D'you think I'm not in a fucking hurry to shut the door on what my so-called friends and colleagues have done to me?"

Guilt, ineluctable, showed on Bodie's face. "Yeh, well, suppose not..."

"You owe me, Bodie."

Bodie swallowed, visibly, and it was obvious he still wasn't entirely sure he could take Doyle at face value on this.

Doyle, however, was banking on Bodie wanting to sweep all this under the carpet where he could pretend it had never happened, and where he could hide all the feelings and confusions—and regrets? "It's not as if I'm asking much, is it?"

"Just one favour? Just the one, and then that'll

be it?"

"You do one thing for me, and yeh, that'll be us even."

Bodie was thinking about it, his gaze never leaving Doyle. "How can I trust you?"

"You what?" Doyle couldn't believe his ears. "I've risked my fucking neck for you and you—"

"Yeh, and you lied to me, Doyle, you lied to me for years, pretending to be one thing when you were the opposite. I trusted you, and you fucked me over royally. So yeh, I think I'm entitled to ask how I can trust you."

"Suppose you've got a point there. Look, I wasn't deliberately lying to you—Christ, I thought I was being sensibly discreet. And I honestly thought you knew."

Bodie's expression was a *magnum opus* of disbelief.

"For fuck's sake, Bodie, you met Simon once, outside that pub!" Doyle shouted and watched, interestedly, as that hit home.

"Simon was one of your..."

A hellbent grin for that one. "Don't know what to call him myself. Boyfriend sounds a bit limp, and lover's a bit grand for what we were, so...Well, anyway... I've never broken my promise to you, have I?"

"No, don't suppose you have."

"Then I promise you, do one thing for me, and that's us finished."

Bodie was still watching him, measuring him. "One favour then, and that's it, that'll be us quits?"

"All I'm asking for is one thing. And it's not something impossible, either."

The tension abruptly left Bodie, and Doyle caught his breath when his partner smiled at him for the first time in far too long. "So you want me to get hold of some of my old mates, get you a job, get you an in somewhere—"

"Oh, no, I can stand on my own two feet, mate, thanks all the same for the vote of confidence. I'll find my own way when it comes to jobs. Anyway, I've given you my promise, you going to give me yours?"

"I'm not the one who fucked up here, Doyle." Hard-eyed, wild and demanding. "Promise me, Bodie."

"Always after more, that's you, isn't it, Doyle? Greedy, demanding little bugger. But to shut you up, you have my word as an officer and a gentleman."

"And d'you give me your oath as an SAS man?"

Bodie shrugged, honour not a matter of degree with him. He had already given his word once, he couldn't go back on it anyway. "I swear on anything you like, Doyle. Right, you've got my promise, so what is it then, this huge favour?"

A silence then, as Doyle volunteered nothing, and Bodie refused to ask. Time stretching, tension building between the two men, an almost tangible bond.

"Come on, Doyle, I've not got all night. What is it you want?"

Still no answer, just Doyle looking at him with knowing eyes and half smile. Then Bodie went to walk away, as if the conversation were over, as if the reckoning had been met.

"Bodie."

Bodie turned, slowly, more unnerved than he cared to admit by that odd timbre to Doyle's voice, and held his peace, not participating, so that he could pretend, later, that it was all Doyle's fault that things had gone so sour, all Doyle's fault for being a queer and lying to him.

"You knew what I wanted the minute I opened my mouth."

A laugh, nervous; eyes, wary, and Bodie was still trying to run away, even as he stood facing Doyle down. "Don't be daft—how could I know what was going on inside that mop-top?"

"Because you've known from the very start, haven't you?" So bland a voice, so disassociated from the fear that was running down Bodie's back, so unrevealing of the terror in Doyle that he might lose.

"Don't know what you're going on about—"

"Don't you?" Doyle said sharply, killing all attempts at levity. "Never took you for that much of a fool, Bodie."

"You're the fool, Doyle, sucking a fucking copper offin a toilet. Christ, what got into you?" A sudden redness on the pale skin, then almost stammering: "Apart from the obvious, that is. Look, will you just cut the crap and tell me what the fuck I have to do to get rid of you?"

Eyes warm, gaze flickering over his ex-partner, Doyle smiled, and his voice was very gentle when he spoke. "Bodie."

So little. Just his name, but turned into a caress, which made it the greatest threat Bodie had ever faced. "Ray?" he whispered.

The same lingering smile, eyes half-closed. "You promised me, Bodie. Gave me your word of honour, your oath as an SAS man. Can't go back on that, can you? Not and still be a man."

A swallow, Adam's apple bobbing like a man hanging from the gallows, all the air squeezed out of him, as Bodie began to wonder what he had got himself into here. "Goes without saying it can't be anything illegal—I'm not twepping that copper for you."

"Oh, it's legal enough. Here, at any rate."

"Then fucking tell me, or so help me, I'll decide you broke the bargain and I'll walk out of here."

Doyle smiled at him again, tongue dampening his lips, until the light caressed them, picking out the beauty of them, illuminating the invitation of them. "Just one thing, Bodie."

No question from Bodie then, only the fear of the answer.

Doyle was walking towards him, crossing the living room as if they were both on their way out to the car and the job and the world outside. But Doyle's eyes were pulling Bodie in, shrinking the universe and the world until it was nothing bigger than this small room and the two men in it, one gravitating inexorably closer to the other. So close now, they could feel each other's breath, could see the faint up-thrust of beard pushing through the softness of skin. Could see the fear in one and the ending in the other one.

Doyle was the one who broke the silence, his words drowning out the roughness of Bodie's breathing. "A kiss, Bodie. That's all I want from you."

"No." Denial, instant, complete, full of fear.

"Oh, but yes," Doyle murmured, letting his desire show. "You promised, Bodie."

"No." Harsher now, breath scarce, voice a low whisper.

"You gave me your word." And he rubbed a fingertip over his own nipple, the small peak shadowing through his shirt.

"No. No, I can't." Desperate now, eyes addicted to the sight of Doyle's finger on his nipple, only to have his gaze dragged back up to that mouth Doyle was demanding he kiss.

"You gave me your oath." And now, terrifyingly, last gamble, biggest risk of all, Doyle let show what could, so easily, be love.

"Don't ask me, Ray, please—" Stepping back, retreating, scrabbling around to find the anger to

get him out of this, finding only fear, and a dark coiling desire unfurling in his belly, all the years of life and death and danger commingling with things Bodie had no name for.

Doyle reached up and brushed his fingers across Bodie's forehead, a curiously gentle, almost sexless gesture, soothing his friend, even as he tried to make them lovers. "If you break your promise, then what kind of man would that make you?"

And Doyle could almost see the words screaming in Bodie's mind: And if I kiss you, what kind of man would that make me?

Time. Do it now, before the panic gave flight to Bodie's feet and the chance was lost. Not rushing, Doyle leaned forward, slipping in under the cover of confusion. Moistly parted lips touched Bodie's lightly, tongue tip pressing inwards, demanding entrance, wet tongue caressing the dampness of Bodie's mouth, Doyle pouring himself into Bodie, making them no longer separate, making them no longer autonomous, but one, however briefly. He kept his eyes open, watching the fluttering fear in Bodie, watching every detail of the change in Bodie as they kissed, as Doyle joined them together more deeply than they had ever dared before. Ecstasy rushing through him as Bodie's eyes faded closed, as there was a brief, tentative press of tongue against his own, the faint brush of hands on his rump—

Then blue eyes snapping open, filled with pain, fury overflowing from Bodie's mouth into his and he was kissed, viciously, with anger and resentment and fear and chaos, hands digging bitterly into the tenderness of his arse, hands tugging at his hair. And then Bodie was finished with him, wrenching free, pushing him away so hard Doyle fell backwards across the sofa.

Then Bodie was gone, running, door slamming behind him, the noise ricocheting through the flat. Then that sound too, faded, and Doyle lay on the couch, refusing to cry, refusing to run after Bodie like a catamite on heat. Eventually, he got to his feet, went to the phone, ordered a taxi. Suitcases and hold-all piled ready at the front door, he went back into the living room to wait.

He sat there in silence, benumbed and becalmed, mind protectively blank from everything but the deadening knowledge. Bodie was gone, leaving nothing behind but bruises and the misery of the final gamble lost.

BENCHMARK

Look, what a horse should have he did not lack, Save a proud rider on so proud a back.

—Venus and Adonis

he doubled length of leather belt fell on the reddened buttocks with a sharp smack. A muffled squeal of pain mixed with pleasure was wrenched from the prone Kerr Avon, face buried in the pillow and held in place by an iron grip on the back of his neck.

"Filthy scum," Vila Restal snarled, and whacked him with the belt again. "Worthless little piece of shite. This is all you're good for, innit? Just a pretty arse for someone else to fuck, aren't you? Aren't you?" Another whack. "Answer me, you little

"Yes!" whimpered the muffled voice, almost sobbing, "yes, yes, yes..."

"You're goin' to lie quiet while I fuck you, won't you? Eh?"

"Yes!"

"And if you move or yell while I'm doin' it, I'll kill you!" This time the belt fell across the prone man's ribs, this blow more like a slap than the previous hits had been. Vila made his voice as menacing as possible.

"You get me, don't you, little shite?"

"Yes..." This reply was exhaled from the pillow; a sigh of relief hidden in the surrender.

Vila rested one hand on one wounded buttock; the heat from the welts twisted his heart. Ah, Avon, why's it always got to be like this with us, eh? The Delta thief's chameleon ability to change demeanor and tone for every situation harshened his voice again,

made him sink his fingers into the sore backside till a whimper rose from the pillow again. He couldn't harden his heart, but he squeezed back the stinging tears and threw all his anger at Avon into his voice. "Right. So you just lie there with yer arse up like a good little bitch and I'll give you a servicing you won't forget." With a shove meant to convey contempt, Vila released his grip on the man's nape and took hold of Avon's ass with both hands, spreading the cheeks and exposing the puckered anus. So beautiful. Like a little rosebud... His gripping hands eased for a moment, fingers stroking rather than digging into the flesh beneath them. A little scented oil and a lot of time; Avon, I could show you what these fingers of mine can do when they're not opening safes. I could unlock you so sweetly, touch you *just* there, and there, and—

"Vila!" Avon hissed harshly—this tone his usual imperious snarl.

Vila yanked apart the cheeks, and spit unerringly on the little rosebud he had been admiring. "Shut up, you," he snapped, throwing his anger at his target with the same accuracy. "Or I'll stick something worse than this up you." And he drove his way in, to the gasps and sighs from the cowed man beneath him. His words came out harsher, heavy with his gasping exertion. "Oh, yeh, you like this, don't you, you little shite? Like being treated like the piece of filth you are, don't you? Come on, tell me!" He slapped a buttock hard, feeling the impact in his buried cock.

"Yes," sobbed the voice of the catamite. "Yes yes yes..."

"Yes *what*?" Vila hissed menacingly, playing his role perfectly.

"Yes, sir!"

"What are you?"

"Nothing. I'm nothing, sir. A pile of shite. Someone else's toy. An arse to be plugged up..."

Vila turned his head away, set his teeth and drove in; if any of his tears fell on Avon's back, he hoped the man would think they were sweat droplets. Want to hold you, Avon, want to tell you pretty things. Want to see you face to face. Want to kiss you. You're so beautiful. I feel safe when I'm with you. I want to thank you... He slapped the man's other cheek, hard, and kept up the stream of vicious words aimed at the beaten creature beneath him.

And he got his reward; Vila clung to the body beneath his as it shuddered in the grip of orgasm, the voice a high-pitched whine. His teeth set, Vila withdrew from the relaxing body beneath his, took hold of his rigid cock with one hand, and finished himself off, hissing joylessly as the shudder ran through him and letting the ejaculate soak into the covers beneath the still-parted legs he knelt between. He rested one hand on the sweat-covered back, breathing heavily, till Avon rolled over and dislodged him. Vila lay beside him, unmoving, gauging his reaction. As usual, Avon did not speak at all afterwards, as if to distance himself from the whimpering, pleading creature he'd been during the sex act; nor would he look at Vila. He rolled stiffly to his side, his back to Vila, and pulled up the blankets.

Vilalistened as Avon's heavy breathing slowed toward exhaustion-drugged sleep; he dared to pat the man's shoulder, wishing he could put his arms around him instead. He sat up and went to clean himself before leaving the cabin; it was understood that he would not stay the night. The warm water cascaded down, and Vila let the dejection have its way with his spirit for the time being, as it did more and more often afterward.

What he did *not* do was deny that he got a thrill from the game Avon insisted on them playing. The opportunity to lord it over his daily tormentor, to give back the harsh words he received in public every day from the *Liberator*'s computer tech, provided an outlet that kept Vila healthier than he would be without it. And 100% disgust at the game would never have provided Vila with the erection that he used to complete his role in the scenario.

Don't mind a bit of nasty now an' then—but that's all it ever is. Me hitting you and sayin' filthy things to you. I want to make love to you, not just stick it up yer bum...

Avon was soundly asleep when Vila emerged from the shower, pulling on his jumpsuit; he carefully reached out to stroke the back of the man's neck and run his fingers along the rumpled, sweat-dampened brown hair, to gently caress the smooth skin between his shoulder-blades, tracing the welts left by the beating with careful fingers. Is this the only way you can get it off? Don't much care for it, I'll tell you that for nothing, mate. Been some other bloke's chicken too many times in prison, got too many bad memories. Where d'you think I learned to play me part so well, eh? You make me do this to you every time, whether I want to or not. Vila turned away from the sleeping tech, his tiredness and melancholia carrying him away and out of the room. Shouldn't rape me like that.

Tolin was an outermost world not very loyal to the Federation; it accepted its aegis only because a world peopled exclusively by pirates and killers was bad for business. The few troops that drew the shortstraw that sent them there provided a nominal force to keep the world from tilting into complete anarchy. Their main job was to protect the commerce, legal and otherwise, that homed in on Tolin and made the planet a byword for a place where anything could be bought or sold.

Checkmate, Orac said tartly. *Again. Would you like to humiliate yourself by playing another game?*

"Stuff it up your crankcase, Orac," Vila said wearily, turning away from the chessboard and gloomily surveying the deserted flight deck. "It's not fair."

That is the forty-third time you have repeated that phrase within three hours. I find it extremely annoying.

"Good. Maybe you'll get so annoyed you'll teleport me down to join the others."

*You were specifically ordered to remain aboard the *Liberator* while everyone else teleported to the planet's surface."

"Yeah. *Tolin*." Vila exhaled mightily, in profoundest self-pity.

"Home of the fattest wallets and the tiniest police force in the galaxy—and I'm stuck up here babysitting a talking toaster." *That is a completely inaccurate and insulting depiction of my function and abilities—*

"That's right, you can't make toast, can you? Completely useless, then." Vila pulled the key off Orac to save himself a spectacularly blistering reply from the little computer.

At least there was one advantage to having played chess with Orac and losing four times in a row. Now the silence of the flight deck was peaceful and pleasant, not empty and lonely. Vila strongly suspected the machine of taking lessons in public relations from Avon.

"Vila," Avon's voice reported briskly from the intercom, as if realizing that Vila was thinking of him. "I need to be teleported back.

Now."

"Avon?" Vila leaned over the speaker. "What about the others?"

"Now, Vila. Teleport me now." That was the tone of voice only Blake argued with—and not very often.

"Let me get to the controls, then," Vila replied, and scooted off the flight deck, wondering. Had the others disappeared? Had Avon lost the others? Had he gotten hurt? That would explain his curtness, if he was in pain. Maybe he just wants to go to the loo...

He certainly wasn't expecting a table. At least it looked like a table, at first, when it materialized beside Avon in the teleport chamber. "Help me carry this to my quarters," Avon snapped.

Found a piece of furniture down there he wanted? Then why be so abrupt about getting it up here? And why the hell didn't he ask Blake to help him lift it? Vila asked himself the latter question again as he hoisted one end of the heavy awkward thing and staggered with it back to Avon's quarters, urged on by the tech's snapped comments about his clumsiness—but not as he set down the object in Avon's room and took his first good look at it.

No wonder it was heavy; it was made of real wood, good wood, beautifully smoothed and polished to a dark glossy finish—and for that reason alone it would have cost Avon a small inheritance. It was not a table, though it bore a superficial resemblance to one; it was narrower and shorter than a table, and the legs splayed in an inverted V, longer in the front than the back, decorated with long strips of brown leather. The top was contoured for concavity, and covered with a fine even cushion of padded burgundy

velvet. An oval hole near the lower part of the device appeared in the center of the concave surface; the wood around the hole was also smooth and polished, the velvet padding neatly finished all around the hole. It was a beautiful piece of furniture.

Vila recognized it from visits to brothels that pandered to a wide variety of customer tastes—but had only seen them made out of synthewood and plastic padding before. The customer lay in the concavity of the long "table" with his cock and balls dangling through the oval hole, and was tied to the stool's legs while he was beaten by the dominatrix (or dominator), leaving his genitals free to whatever torments or delights he wished from the professional he had hired.

No wonder Avon had wanted immediate teleportation rather than have one of the others help him with his purchase. At Avon's demand, their sexual relationship was kept a secret from Blake and the crew. Blake, clean-cut defender of peace and freedom that he was, might not be openminded enough to accept the fact that his cold, arrogant computer expert liked being verbally humiliated and beaten by someone he gave every indication of despising.

Avon was glaring at Vila—or icily appraising his reaction to the thing he had bought on Tolin.

Vila told the truth. "It's beautiful, Avon. Never seen a finer looking Berkeley Horse." He quelled the ache inside him. If it was what Avon needed...

"Then your education is not as limited as I had previously assumed," Avon replied tartly. If he felt any anticipation about trying out his new toy, he covered it completely. "Now teleport me back to the surface."

"Say, Avon," Vila said as they strode back to the teleport, "there's nothing really happening up here in orbit right now. Orac can handle the teleport and keep an eye out—well, a tarial cell out—for anything suspicious. I've never been to Tolin. Like to see if the stories are true, I would. Once in a lifetime chance, innit? 'D I tell you I've never been to Tolin...?"

The subtle hints fell on deaf ears; Avon stepped into the teleport chamber and stared until the thief worked the controls in an ill-humor, and sat in the empty room. "It's not fair," he muttered for the forty-fourth time.

Well, on the bright side, he could get back at Avon tonight...the way he got back at Avon every

night. Whether he wanted to get back at him or not.

Vila rested a cheek on his fist and unhappily contemplated the empty room, thinking about the beautiful wood-and-velvet device in Avon's room. Beatings, verbal abuse and pain...the only way Avon could have sex—or was it the only way the tech would allow himself to have sex with a man? The only way he'd known how?

As a collector of fine things, Avon would certainly appreciate the bench as an improvement on his makeshift clinging to the bed. Probably a genuine antique. Vila mused on its graceful lines, the sturdy legs, plush padding, and the long leather straps.

Vila straightened up at the thought that casually strolled in after that final observation. He looked at it. And he smiled.

Once the landing party had accomplished its purpose—contacting a rebel connection who sold machine parts as his cover—all teleported back, obviously at Blake's command alone, for Jenna was complaining vociferously about having to leave so soon; even Cally questioned the need to hurry away. Vila took a little pleasure in not being the only one who wanted to explore Tolin for nonrebellious purposes. Avon was the only noncomplainant as the flight deck filled again; but as he kept to himself so much to begin with no one noticed anything unusual. How he had gotten away from the others, found and purchased the bench, and secreted it aboard the Liberator, was simply one minor mystery joining the cloud of mysteries buzzing around the enigmatic tech.

The *Liberator* left orbit, and Zen was ordered in a direction based upon the information gleaned from their Tolin contact. Vila didn't care much—only that he knew it would be dangerous, possibly deadly; he remembered Gan, but kept his ache to himself. Nothing would stop Blake from finding Star One—not even Avon could sway the driven man. All he could do was keep himself as safe as he could. Avon would do the rest.

Avon always kept him safe; had smoothly stepped into the terrifying void left by Gan's death without a word. Of course he had ulterior motives—Vila would have been extremely suspicious if Avon had professed to having none. Avon had a sexuality he would entrust to no one—except someone who owed him too much to hold it over

him for blackmail purposes, someone who was not a threat to him.

In private moments Vila wondered, fleetingly, if Avon felt anything else for him. It was a thought at which he warmed his hands once in a while—the thought that he might be considered different from the others in a special way to the tech, thought of with pleasure or with liking because of the service he provided. But not even in his deepest thoughts did Vila hold the notion that he might be loved. And he was grateful; people who said they loved him hit and hurt him the most: his mother (he was grateful there had been no father around to add to the welts she'd given the boy); a few boys he'd known in the Domes; nearly everyone bigger than him in and out of prison.

Gan had almost changed his mind; the man had been gentle and kind, and the two of them had looked out for each other. Then Gan had been killed, and had at last managed to hurt Vila.

No, it was better this way. Avon protected Vila for the value of his talents, in and out of bed. He didn't hit him, and he didn't like him either. A perfect balance. So what if Avon's version of a mutual sexual pact left Vila aching and lonely every night?

"Vila," the object of his thoughts cut in sharply. Vila started and looked up at the tech, who was standing by his station. The heavy-lidded brown eyes stared at the thief almost expressionlessly; but they shifted to the flight deck's entrance once and returned to him. Their code—Avon's code, to be precise. Letting Vila know his services would be required in Avon's cabin that night.

Vila responded in the usual way: a curt nod. Avon turned and strode back to his station, for all the world having simply cowed Vila out of a daydream.

Dreams of happiness. Dreams of desire...

Vila glared defiantly at the retreating tech. You bought the bloody thing—I'll show you how to use it.

Vila made his way to Avon's cabin without being seen. Another one of Avon's rules. As if he believes that Fed crap about "subversive desires." If the Feds 're so dead against men doin' it with each other, how come the cellkeepers looked the other way every time I got passed around? Vila shook off the bitter recollections with the ease of practice—most of his memories were now a merciful blur.

Avon's door was locked, as usual, and as usual

Vila bypassed it in seconds.

"No one saw you?" Avon snapped.

"No one saw me, Avon," Vila said, exasperated at the tech's usual warm greeting. "I don't *get* seen when I don't want to be seen."

"Which would explain why you disappear every time there's work to be done," the tech sneered.

"Wasn't hired on to lift boxes and kill people, was I?" the thief responded tartly. He walked over to the mahogany and velvet birching stool and gave Avon a leer. "I'm here because of me magic fingers, eh? The way I have with opening things?"

"Then get to it and stop wasting my time," Avon snapped.

Vila deliberately turned his back on the tech and strolled to the bed, stretching out comfortably on the coverlet, lacing his fingers together on top of his stomach and inspecting Avon from halfclosed eyes. He set his teeth, and his expression changed, became harder, colder: the face of the abuser. "Strip, you little shite," he snapped.

Avon visibly relaxed as soon as the familiar roles were assumed. He turned his back on Vila to undress, setting the boots together near the bed, folding the layers of leather clothing and laying them neatly over the chair at his desk.

"Stop!" Vila barked when the naked man started toward the horse. "Haven't seen you yet, have I? Want to see what I'm going to be soiling meself with." He dropped his voice into a menacing range. "Turn around."

The man turned around, head lowered, eyes averted so as not to trigger aggression by a full-on stare. Avon couldn't see Vila's own eyes close in a rush of feeling that began to distend his cock. It was the accepted and allowed vulnerability of the man that aroused Vila, not the pale flesh, exposed genitals or the power-game, as he assumed Avon thought. It was a promise of delights other than a hardhand and harder words. "You'rea nice-lookin' little piece, ain'tcher?" he said sarcastically, playing his role with accustomed ease. "Eh? Say something when yer spoken to!"

"I have nothing to say, sir." The quiet, even, small voice of a frightened boy.

They beat the hell out of you in school, didn't they? You'd be small, good-lookin'—ah, kids 're cruel, Alpha or Delta. You learned, didn't you? Like I did. You snarled till they left you alone; I gave in till they despised me and left me alone. Whatever works. They still leave

us alone, for the same reasons. Oh, you know how much we're alike, Avon—that's why you're so mean to me!

"'Nothin' to say sir," Vila mocked, imitating the quiet voice. "'Nothin' to say sir?' Oh, you're a nice 'un, all right. Think you can say whatever y'like, don'tcha? It's a good thing you got that bench—not goin' to let you get away with a crappy answer like that, am I?" Vila waved an arm at the man who was already starting to come to erection. "Get on it. Assume the position."

Full erection; seen just for a second before the back was turned, Avon draping himself into the luxuriant lap of the birching horse, carefully aligning himself as he settled in. Fitting himself through the hole. Grasping the legs of the bench, near the binding straps.

"Good, good," Vila purred. He walked up to the prone figure and loudly slapped one buttock; the crack echoed in the room, and the body jolted, gasping. "You know your place, don't you, little cunt?" Another smack, to the other cheek.

"Yessir," gasped the little voice. The hands gripped the horse legs tighter, moving enough to catch Vila's notice.

"Well, I'll just make sure you don't get any ideas of your own," he hissed, squatting down to secure Avon's wrists to the bench legs with the leather straps, nimble fingers tying an elaborate-looking knot. He tied Avon's ankles in the same fashion.

There. Oh, there...

For a moment Vila was terrified of the power he held. He considered backing down. Because once he started, Avon would say...

Nothing. Avon would say *nothing*.

Vila strode to the bed and from underneath it pulled out a small locked metal box. Avon had a small supply of illegal sex toys, painstakingly acquired piece by piece. They were completely safe in there, because there was no key to the box. In seconds Vila had it open, and he pored over the cache. Enough here to send us all to Cygnus Alpha on perversion charges alone. Think it's eight months in solitary just for ownin' the cockring... Vila selected a padded leather gag, remembering how carefully Avon had saved a torn black leather tunic after a disastrous planetfall, dirty and bloody as it was; he'd managed to turn his shirt into several ingenious devices. He also gathered the leather belt out of Avon's discarded tunic.

Stay in character...

He strode back to the bound figure on the stool and gave the ribs a whack with the doubled belt. "Now I've decided I don't want to hear any more from you tonight. Open up." He managed to force the gag between Avon's teeth and tie it snugly in the back, after a token struggle (and a near-biting). Want to earn your beating, do you? He sneaked a glance under the table as he finished the job, and nodded; Avon was rock-hard.

Vila stepped back, in full view of the bound and gagged man, and undressed slowly, letting his clothes slide to the floor in a crumpled heap, until he was dressed in nothing but his courage.

Avon's eyes closed tightly. In rapture?

"Now," Vila hissed menacingly near Avon's ear, "now, the fun begins."

And he kissed Avon's cheek, caressing the brown hair.

The eyes opened wide, the body jolted; but Vila had done his work well. Avon was well and truly tied down to the birching horse. A muffled snarl came from the gag. The eyes snapped.

But Vila's fingers did not stop their caresses through Avon's hair. Now his other hand began to lightly massage the nearest shoulder. Love your skin. It's so smooth and—Hell! Vila laughed out loud. "Avon," he whispered in the tone of passing on a lovely secret, "I love your skin. It's so smooth and warm. It feels so good to touch it. A beautiful color—like fresh cream." He licked along the neck to the ear, taking the lobe between his teeth for a light caress.

The head yanked away from the fondling teeth; but their hold was so light that the ear slipped free painlessly. Muffled squeals worked their way past the gag. Brown eyes glared. Muscles knotted tightly under Vila's fingers.

So Vila simply began a full massage of the man's back, starting with the scalp and working down the rigid neck, along the arching, twisting spine, down to its termination above the ass. The sounds coming from the makeshift gag sounded like cursing, angry sounds, screaming. The round twin globes lifted up as quickly as possible under Vila's hands, in a feeble try for the sharp blows that had always been given before.

"Oh, no," Vila whispered harshly. "This is my fun we're having, remember, you little shite?"

Oddly enough, the tech relaxed immediately, calmed by the use of the familiar code phrase.

That gave Vila the idea of how to make this

work for Avon.

"That's right," he said coolly. "Now you just play along with me—I want to see if you're man enough to take this. Eh?" And instead of the fierce spank that usually punctuated his deliberations, Vila gave the buttock under his hand a squeeze, and a quick little lick.

There was a muffled whine, but no other sound from the bound man.

"Now you do your part right," Vila whispered, "and I'll do mine. You make me happy the way I want to tonight, and when we're done I'll give you a thrashing you won't forget. You won't be able to sit for a month. But first you're going to let yourself respond to me doing this to you tonight. Deal?"

The entire body was knotted from wrist to ankle. Baleful brown eyes glared at Vila over a shoulder. Vila only smiled and bent to kiss the sweet curve of shoulder-flesh. "Deal?" he said again, sweetly. "Of course, I could start calling you all sorts of names if you don't give in." He paused to give Avon a chance. "Darling—"

Instantly the eyelids lowered in agreement.

"Right, none of that then." *I know the limits of* this scene, Vila thought gleefully. No pet names...

Avon's head sank down between his shoulders as if he were trying to disappear into the horse. He looked as if he was mentally preparing himself for a gruelling round of torture, girding himself for the ordeal to come...

"I think I shall start by giving you the Flower Bed," Vila said in the tone of the Top deliberating on the proper abuse for his Bottom. "You haven't experienced that, and I have to keep you in line."

The Flower Bed was apparently Vila's term for covering every square centimeter of exposed skin with kisses.

The resigned brown eyes stayed closed after Vila had reverenced the eyelids—although some strange twitchings went on under their thin skin at the tiny, delicate kisses Vila used to cover Avon's entire nose. And when Vila paid careful attention down his sides, Avon spent a deal of time squirming—and making highly suspect grumbling noises.

That's right, Avon. Just pretend you're not getting any fun out of his... Vila paused now and then to caress the ribs and back, making sure his touches were firm; tickling was a particularly nasty form of torture and he wouldn't have that any more than he'd have any beating this night.

And he kept up the stream of language that was a vital part of his role in their conjoinings. This one was slightly different than his usual spiel...

"I've thought about this for a long time, Avon. I've wanted to treat you with gentleness, and show you I can do more than hit and curse you. I know you like the other, I know it, and it's all right, really. I like it too, sometimes. But I've been getting bored. This is what *I* like to do. You never asked, did you? This isn't just for *you* we're in this room together right now." More kisses, outlining each shoulder blade, firm gripping of the ribs. "Don't worry, Avon," he whispered intensely to the whimpering man. "I'm going to fuck you, like I always do. I love fucking you, I really do, and you trusting me enough to do it means a lot to me. The difference is," and he squeezed the man's ass hard, knowing how good that felt at just the right moment, "you're not going to feel any pain at all. Let's see how brave you really are, Kerr," he whispered. "Let's see if you can take me fucking you without hurting you. And if you can, you get your reward." This with one brisk, tantalizing pinch to one buttock, eliciting a deep groan. "Promise, Avon—no little sick-making names from me tonight. No endearments. No love. Just two blokes having a good time."

Gradually, the knotted body relaxed under the expert fingers and lips, the flow of words...

"You know how sexy you look in your leathers. Don't just wear 'em cos they're warm, do you? My favorite's the black outfit goes right up to your neck as if it's your outer skin. The times I've wanted to just *jump* you right on the flight deck when you were wearing that, and peel you like a banana...

"I like the way your hair curls in at your neck, just *there*. Very sexy." And he kissed the nape of the neck, sucking on the damp ragged fringe of brown hair.

"You have lovely feet." Vila sat on the ground near the strapped ankles and worked the tension out of each bound foot, careful not to tickle. "I like the way your toes are all lined up nice and neat," he continued, thumb and finger rolling each long straight toe before taking it between his lips and darting his tongue into the sensitive skin at its base. "Mine are all crooked. I suppose that sounds a bit silly but I really do like the way your feet look." He leaned in and kissed the hollow of an ankle just above the leather binding, following

that with a long lick up the curve of the calf to the soft skin at the back of the knee. He stayed at that tender spot for a long time, tongue and lips ravishing the area, gathering essense of Avon like a greedy bee tongueing up pollen.

Perhaps it was Vila's imagination that the sounds coming from the gag were changing in quality. It wasn't his imagination that Avon's entire body seemed to be shivering constantly.

He looked under the bench, where Avon's cock and balls protruded from the soft-mouthed hole as if emerging from a mahogany-and-velvet vagina. No wonder Avon was trembling. He was hard, swollen so badly he wouldn't be able to withdraw from the hole without serious injury to himself. This evidence that Avon was not repulsed by Vila's tenderness was like a series of fireworks going off inside the thief. He grasped the cock firmly and gave it a good pull. The squeal that came from the gag was not out of outrage or pain. "So, what shall I suck first? Your cock or your arsehole?" Vilashook his head and gripped Avon's shoulder. "No pain tonight, I said. First things first." He scooted under the stool—of course, it allowed plenty of room beneath its surface for just such activities—and sat with his legs crossed tailor-style, contemplating the swollen penis jutting out in front of him. The organ was thick and throbbing, the head bright red and flaring, the tightly-drawn balls well-defined through their velvet pouch. He let free an appreciative whistle. "Avon, for shame—keeping me away from this for so long. Shouldn't be hiding this in the bedclothes just so's I can see your pretty arse. You're hung like a donkey."

The gurgled comments were angry ones—but now the timbre was of impatience not outrage.

"Right, get to it." But first Vila buried his face in the genitals, rapturously taking in Avon's perfume with every pore, open mouth drawing in the fragrance just before lips caressed the softly-haired balls. He stroked the side of the swollen cock with his cheek and lips and the side of his nose. He exhaled in rapture; the penis and testicles quivered at the feel of his hot moist breath. "You're hard as a rock," he breathed. "And the skin is so soft. Delicious. Can't wait to eat this all up."

The sound from the gagged man was not one of pain.

Vila gripped the sides of the stool for leverage as he moistened his lips. Then the angry hard flesh was surrounded and soothed and taken into Vila for the first time.

Vila had learned the skill by necessity, first on the streets as a money-earner and later in prison as a bargaining chit. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd performed the activity because he'd personally wanted to. Starting with this time.

Vila suckled the penis with a real pleasure. Avon was a nice clean fellow. And judging from the sounds he was making, Avon was enjoying it. Bolder, Vila moved further along the shaft, swallowing it down, breathing through his nose as it buried itself in the prickly dark curls of hair, heavy with Avon's scent. Be damned—it is nice to do this when you choose to do it ... A little thrill of amusement coursed through him at what he must look like, and the sudden image of an ancient sculpture he'd once seen in a house he was robbing—a wolf nursing two human infants—

The cock was quivering, hard as stone; the balls tight and tense. High-pitched cries squeaked past the gag. By now anyone else would have lost control. Was Avon deliberately holding back to increase the pain? Did he want permission? Vila mentally shook his head at his stubbornness—but he went along with it. He pulled away and rubbed his cheek against the rigid organ. "It's all right, Avon, go ahead," he whispered fiercely. "Let go, blow it, shoot it all. Put it all down me, I want it— " and he gulped the cock down again.

With a screech and a gurgle, the bound man convulsed. The cock in Vila's mouth went even harder, quivered. A quick seize of the testicles finished the job. Vila stayed where he was, taking in Avon's sperm for the first time. Good. Good lad, you did it. He wasn't sure if he was thinking of Avon or himself.

When Vila released his prize, he saw that it was still swollen, and moist now from his mouth. He himself was aching fiercely with need—a sweet, pure sexual heat of a type he had not felt with Avon before. He touched a kiss to the shaft, careful not to touch the hypersensitized balls or the tip; gripping the edge of the Berkeley Horse, he pulled himself unsteadily to his feet. He looked over the broad pale expanse of Avon's back, still quivering and damp with sweat in the aftermath, down to the round firm rump.

"Oh, God, Avon," he said hoarsely, overcome with passion. "All the times I hit and hurt this,

when this was what I really wanted to do." Vila caressed the buttocks, mouthing them, squeezing and nipping them all over as they tensed and hollowed at the touches; he was finally able to adore the sweet flesh he had abused so often.

Vila caressed the luscious ass a little more firmly, then harder, squeezed the cheeks and parted them. "Oh. *There*'s the little rosebud," he breathed.

A snarl came from the other end.

"Not you, you Alpha-grade idiot!" Vilasnapped at Avon, realizing just then the term might get mistaken for a pet name. "Your bung'ole!"

The prone body subsided with ill grace; a single leery brown eye glared back over one shoulder at its un-dominator.

Vila responded by grinning slyly, and held up a little glass vial of pearlescent fluid before the resigned, suspicious features. "Something better than spittin' on it this time," he whispered huskily, waving the bottle in front of Avon's impassive face. "Go ahead, Avon. Try to keep that look on yer face while I'm gettin' you ready. I dare you." With that, he uncorked the tiny bottle and tilted it to dampen one fingertip; one small droplet pulled away reluctantly from the mass of fluid and clung, quivering, to the finger. He touched the finger to the tip of Avon's nose and carefully traced around each nostril; they automatically flared to take in the odor of the fluid.

At the sight of Avon's dilating pupils, escalating breath and mouth falling slack around the gag—a quick glance underneath confirmed the instantly rigid cock—Vila grinned and brushed the remainder under his own nose, taking a deep breath. "Lovely, innit? Like the smell of your sweetest wet dream." He gently tipped the vial back and forth before Avon's widened eyes so he could watch the slow whirl and tilt of the thick liquid. "This, Avon, is genuine Varresdo dragon semen. Worth its weight in diamonds. One of me treasures. When I put this on me and in you, it'll feel like both of us are making love to a bolt of silk."

Avon's mouth fell even more slack; his eyes closed. Fucking gag was in the way, he couldn't-So Vila made do by kissing the closed eyes again, sweeping both sockets with wide swaths of his tongue.

And then Vila returned to his promised task. One fat drop of dragonsilk bounced into his palm. The other hand set down the vial, fingers dabbling in the viscousness and coming away clinging white. The whiteness clung voluptuously to the softening anus as the wet fingers went in, touching Avon open as easily as an unlocked door, touching him just *there, and there, and*—

The sounds from the gag were frantic, choking. Can't let him suffocate, worth a few nasty words flung at me for—Pausing only to wipe his damp fingers along one cheek, Vila reached over and untied the leather gag, pulling it free of Avon's mouth.

Avon spat it free and glared at Vila.

"God damn you," he snarled. "Don't stop now!" And he heaved, thrusting his rump as high in the air as he could.

Vila didn't even stop to reply—was back at his task before Avon could settle. He took more of the dragonsilk, moistening Avon inside and out, silking both cheeks of his ass, tracing one wet finger down Avon's spine to let the man's body heat bring out the fluid's odor of musk and animal sex. Then himself, eager cock sliding through both hands, wallowing in the precious fluid that trickled onto the quivering, tightly-drawn balls. To hell with saving any of it—past the wild lust and passion of the moment was a cold tiny grain inside Vila that whispered that this would be the last time for him with Avon. He was going to make it magic.

He paused, poised over the splayed rump and welcoming orifice exuding dragonrut, fitting himself, mounting the whimpering, cursing Avon. Then there was only soft moist sounds of flesh joining flesh, slowly, luxuriantly, to echoing groans of passion wrung from both.

Vila clung to the sides of the birching horse as if aboard a rocking seagoing vessel as Avonwrithed and twisted in his bonds, plunging deep and pulling back, cock held snug in twisting bolts of silk, belly riding a silken ass.

"Fuck," Avon gasped, "oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh fuck." He strained at his bonds, hauling hard on his wrists, and now desperation was in his voice as he wailed breathlessly "free—free me—freeeee—"

Amid sensation, billowing odor and heat, Vila heard the distress and leaned forward all along Avon's length, hands groping for the leather ties to Avon's wrists. Two single tugs, one on each side, and the elaborate knots melted away. Vila gripped the horse, ready for an attempt to fling him off now that Avon had partial control back.

Avon gripped the sides of the Berkeley bench and carefully lifted his upper body up and away from the plush velvet padding, groaning like splintering wood as he pulled free of his velvet cockring—and suddenly arched his back, sealing both men together from shoulders to knees in a split second. "Now fuck me, idiot," he snarled hoarsely, heaving backwards; his freed cock swayed wildly. "Fuck me. Finish it!"

Vila didn't ask questions. With Avon's arms bracing both of them against the bench, his own arms went around Avon's freed upper torso, both hands immediately seizing the orphan cock. His open mouth fell on the side of Avon's neck; his hindquarters drove forward into satin fire. He felt the cry through his body before he heard it. "You love it," he exulted, pumping and pulling wildly. "Love it, don't you? Tell me you love it, Avon!"

"Yes!" came the gasping cry from the man he was coupled to. "Yes yes yes..."

"This is good too," Vila grunted out between thrusts. "You can get fucked without getting beaten and like it too. Something for me too!" He pushed forward, harder. "Promised..." he grunted, eyes rolling back, toes curling, "thrashing of your life...turn that sweet arse red—Avon!" he shrieked, body bowing backward. His hips pistoned forward one final time, cock scraping against the hidden prostate; the world turned white as Avon's head arched back against Vila's chest, a cry sounding from the bottom of the man's gullet as orgasm possessed him as well.

Vila collapsed between the spread, still bound legs of his lover (lover lover first time it feels right usin' that word with you Avon's me lover), utterly demolished. The floor rose up to cushion his spinning head; one leaden hand maintained just enough presence of mind to tug loose the slipknots on Avon's ankles before sinking into sleep.

He stretched and yawned luxuriously, nestling deeper into the lovely warm bedclothes. A few more hours of sleep in Avon's bed was just the thing after a night like—

Avon's bed.

Vila sat bolt upright. He was in Avon's bed, a rumpled sheet tossed over him.

The Berkeley horse was still where it had been the night before, innocently obeying the laws of gravity and profoundly unaware of the sea-change that it had catalyzed the previous night.

Avon was conspicuous by his absence.

Then again, Vila thought wildly, glancing at the chronometer, the hour was late and Avon was an

early riser. He'd be on the flight deck, of course; his way of showing Vila that nothing had changed between them, that's what it was-

Except he was in Avon's bed. He'd never slept over before. Don't even remember getting in. He must have dragged me, or I woke up just long enough... Maybe he didn't want me waking up in the middle of the night on the floor—or too much trouble to kick me out.

He kept telling himself that things were fine as he bathed and stole a robe to make his way back to his room to dress. I'll go right back to the hitting and stuff he likes, swear I will. Just wanted a change, that's all...

He told himself that as he came out onto the flight deck. And saw everyone there except Jenna, who'd had late watch. He slipped into his seat with a jaunty "Mornin', all," and glanced at Avon.

Expressionless brown eyes looked at Vila, and resumed their perusal of other matters.

Had they seemed colder? Vila certainly felt colder. Swear, Avon, I'll make it up to you. Just wanted somethin' besides all the hittin' and the dirty talk, just for a change, his mind babbled. He had to take Avon aside and explain, before the stubborn bastard decided he couldn't trust his sexuality to Vila any more...

"Ah, Avon...could I—"

"Maintain your position," Avon said sharply. "And no inveiglings to get out of your work this time, Vila." With an abrupt move, Avon turned back to his own work and did not glance over again.

Vila stayed at his post while the warmth he'd carried inside since he'd awakened withered and died. 'Sit, then. Knew it couldn't last. He'll never trust me again. I was just a Top who couldn't blackmail him, that's all I ever was. He thought back on their night, and everything came over him in waves. I was all over him, usin' those words 'ud scare off anybody like Avon, can't deal with it. An' he never said nothin' back to me. It was all just me, an' what I felt.

The morning was a long one. Vila sat in silent misery, not looking again over at the unmoving Avon across from him. Avon said nothing except curt responses to Blake's queries for information.

Oh shite, Vila thought, glancing around at the puzzled looks Blake and Cally exchanged about the atypical silence. Shouldn't be so quiet, cos Avon's quiet, they'll put two and two together and find out what we do—what we used to do. Promised I'd keep it a secret, I'll do that even if it's all in the past now. I'll just jolly along and—

"Well, it's all very well and good sitting around staring at each other," Vila said heartily and a bit loudly, judging from the little starts Blake and Cally made, "but it isn't a patch on a cuppa." He made himself lean over to Avon, because it was the sort of thing he'd do in his usual moods. "Does that fit your approval, Avon?" he said loudly. "Me getting summat for myself? That all right with you?"

Avon did not move or turn around.

"Fine." Vila squelched the black ball of misery inside him. "Be that way." He rose, just as Jenna appeared at the flight deck entrance. As she walked down to take his place, Vila passed Avon's console out of necessity. "Yes, actually, it is," came a voice from that console.

Vila stopped and looked at the motionless back. "Eh?"

The voice drifted back without Avon turning around. "I said it is quite all right for you to get something for yourself now and then, Vila. As long as other people's desires are also taken into account." No inflection at all.

"That's a strange remark coming from you, Avon," Blake said with a small chuckle.

Vila was still looking at the back of the tech's chair. He wasn't sure if he should start feeling relieved or if this was going to be one of Avon's nasty jokes—of course I meant about the tea, what else could I have possibly meant by that, Vila? "Right. I'll just... get me tea then." He turned away and headed for the entrance of the flight deck.

His arm was taken in a firm hand and he was turned back to face a standing, coolly appraising tech. Avon looked like he'd just finished making a decision.

"Oh, what the hell," Avon said casually.

And there, in front of everyone aboard the Liberator, Avon pulled Vila close and covered his mouth with his own, wrapping his arms around the thief.

The silence of the flight deck was deafening.

It was a good thing Avon had a firm grip on Vila because Vila knew his legs would not support him. He couldn't think, except that this was Avon changing the rules and this was the first time Avon had ever kissed him and god what a beautiful kisser Avon was, all warm and moist and lovely and making him feel safe and making his head spinFrom the corner of his eye, Vila could see everyone staring at them: Cally looking curious, Jenna smirking, and Blake—well, Blake looking a bit like a stunned trout.

Avon pulled away from Vila's mouth only to lean in even closer and whisper fiercely in the man's ear, "I can't have you displaying more courage than I, you idiot. And you fell asleep last night before giving me something you promised. I intend for you to keep that promise. Tonight." Another fierce kiss, and a swift grope of Vila's bottom—and from the strangled sounds Blake was making, the rebel leader had had a front-row seat for *that* one.

When he released a dazed Vila moments later, Avon had not changed expression by one iota. "Bring me a cup of tea as well, Vila," he said calmly and sat back down, as stone-faced as ever, eyes once again on his work, his demeanor daring anyone to make a comment about what everyone had just witnessed.

Vila made his way off the flight deck toward the rest room in a light- headed fog, a fog that soon transmuted into a spring in his step, and a sprightly and obscene melody tumbling off his lips. *Tonight*. There would be a "tonight" and tomorrow night and the next night... And he didn't have to hide it any more. And now it would be for both of them. How long *had* Avon wanted to fondle his bum?

And as he made his blithe way to the rest room, Vila sent a silent thanks to whatever dirty deity had created the birching horse.

For the Red Dwarf, and of course Madame Berkeley

A PUBLIC DISPLAY

Why the hell am I doing this to myself? Detective Sergeant Wield wondered, staring morosely into the remains of his pint. I've been here once already and a miserable bloody experience it was an' all, but here I am, setting myself up again. Funny, what loneliness can do to a man.

'Here' was the Jolly Waggoner, or the Gay Galloper as it was universally known. This was only Wieldy's second venture into 'the gay lifestyle' as the trendy magazines and disapproving tabloids called it, and this evening was shaping up to be as humiliating a disaster as the first one. He knew what the problem was-him. He positively ponged of eau-de-police and he was as ugly as sin to boot. He'd heard it several times that first foray, and he'd heard it more than once tonight: variations on 'the police must be really desperate if that's the best they can come up with for entrapment duty' and 'they're really scraping the bottom of the barrel for agents provocateurs these days, aren't they?' Only thing was, he was here on his own time, and if not exactly with his superiors' approval, then at least with their knowledge.

It was a bit pathetic, as far as Wieldy was concerned, that so far his coming-out had resulted in his two immediate superiors and his boss' wife knowing he was gay and that was it. Oh, Maurice knew, of course, but Maurice used to be in the closet with him, before he went off to the bright lights and liberalism of London. And Cliff Sharman had known, God help him. Now that he was long gone, Wieldy found it hard to remember that Cliff had enjoyed having sex with him, lusty enthusiasm transformed in his mind to dull duty, the payment due for being allowed to stay at Wieldy's flat

and eat Wieldy's food and tap Wieldy for money.

Pack it in, he told himself sternly. He enjoyed it, you know he did, so stop playing Ophelia. To take his mind off its endless cycle of self-denigration, he swivelled around on his stool, his gaze sweeping the room. It was only when several heads ducked uneasily that he even realised that he had done it like a policeman: still hiding behind his official identity, staring out at people instead of inviting them to look. Christ, small wonder they all took him for a plant. Wonder what they think I'm investigating, he thought, trying to relax and eye the talent up like everyone else in the pub.

And there was a lot of talent. Must be having a beauty contest tonight, he thought, amused. Be nice if they have a bathing suit part... Then the good mood was wiped bare by one man leaning over to talk to another man, heads bent close together, whispering, one finger pointing at Wieldy in silent but unmistakable accusation. Tempted to look away, to hide in his beer, Wieldy kept on looking. One of the men raised his head and Wieldy understood the whispering. Couldn't have been more than six months ago that he'd picked the bloke up and interviewed him in connection with that forgery case; with a face like Wieldy's, not much chance of him being forgotten, was there? Only place he could blend in was the bloody quarry. Or the freak show at the fair.

Pack it in, he told himself again, a bit more sternly. You're here for a nice social evening, just getting yourself used to being publicly gay, just learning how to blend in, let people see your face, slow intro so that eventually you'll be able to come in here and have them know you're one of them...

Which was all a lie, of course. He didn't see himself as being one of them, part of this group. As for all his high-minded reasons for coming here, well, if he were to be honest... If he were to stop lying, then he'd admit it: he was here because this pub was that bit safer than cottaging, and not only from the AIDS point of view. There was—impossible to ignore—hanging over him, a cloud of purdah, the simple fact that he was a copper, and there were some things he simply could not risk doing. Cottaging, for one. Rent-boys, for another. Even though a rent-boy had an appeal greater than this pub. After all, if it were a straight—he smiled at his own poor pun-business transaction, then there was no risk of him being turned down, was there? No risk of another one of those pitying looks he was getting from the barman. No risk of no-one wanting him.

He'd grown maudlin the first time he'd come here as well. Bad habit, that, but one that was going to be far too easy to fall into, given the way he was about as welcome here as Garry Bushell in full bigoted flight.

"Well," he said, out loud to no-one in particular, "if I'm going to be maudlin, I'd best enjoy it." He beckoned the barman over, smiling nicely, although the barman, just like the rest of the world, didn't notice that he had anything but his usual carved and graven expression. "I'll have a double whisky," he said. Then, in a sudden wash of indulgent self-amusement: "And make it the best single malt you've got." No two ways about it: if he was to end this evening as miserably misfit as the last one, then he was bloody-well going to enjoy himself doing it. And the amber glow of good booze was the best anæsthesia he knew.

He was picking up his change—a fiver didn't go far these days, did it?—when a figure appeared in his peripheral vision. Expecting the worst, Wieldy turned, to be greeted by a friendly smile and an apparently sincere: "D'you know, your eyes are the most amazing colour?"

Wieldy narrowed those eyes and stared at the very handsome man standing in front of him. Automatically, he catalogued him: 5'10" or 11", about 11 and a half, 12 stone, hazel eyes, brown hair, curly. Straight nose and nice teeth, very pleasant smile. Decent musculature, broad shoulders—definitely a swimmer—and a slim waist. Crotch veiled by pleats, but just enough revealed to be interesting. Good clothes, not too flash, but showing off the well-kept body without screaming 'available'. Very fashionably old-fashioned shoes, laceups, well polished. Respectable, Wieldy decided, and definitely not on the game. Which begged the question: why the hell was a man as good-looking as this one

chatting up someone as ugly and old as Wield?

"Oh, aye, lad?" he said with some hostility, being baited a too-familiar part of his life. "And what's the punchline then?"

"Punchline?" The nice face frowned, the man obviously really taken aback. "Christ, that's the last time I pay you a compliment! Look, I couldn't help but notice that you've got eyes that are a really unusual colour and they're nice." A sharp look, a tightening of the mouth. "A hell of a lot nicer than you, as a matter of fact."

Wieldy looked at him for a minute, completely at a loss what to say. For all he wasn't one for following instincts—too haphazard for his taste, and something reserved for those with the rank to back their hunches up—there were times when experience combined with an indefinable insight: this man was telling him the truth. If this were a murder investigation, he'd be willing to bet his boots on it, and although an outing into gay life was a bit more serious and a hell of a lot more personal for him than any investigation, he was still willing to trust his instinct on this one. It was, he thought with stunned amazement, the first serious compliment he'd had on his looks since he'd gone through the windscreen of that car, and that was more years ago than he cared to remember. It suddenly dawned on him that he was sitting here gaping like a roast pig waiting for the apple in its mouth. "Buy you a drink?" he asked, feeling clumsy and tongue-tied and completely out of his depth.

"If you promise not to bite my head off every time I open my mouth," the man said, perching himself on the next stool. "I'll have a Guinness, please."

Wield called the barman over again, ordered the pint of Guinness and another pint of bitter for himself. What he really wanted was a nice stiff whisky so that he could knock back that and his double in one long blur of Dutch courage, but better that he be nervous than plastered. Drinks ordered and paid for and put in front of them, he had no excuse for not talking to the other man. Only question was: what the hell was he supposed to say in this situation? 'Do you come here often?' Or, 'Who do you fancy for the Cup?' Or, mebbe, 'Fancy coming round my flat for a quick fuck?'

Bright, curious eyes were watching him, puzzlement and surprise lurking, but the comment was innocuous. "The name's Keith, Keith Rankin."

"I'm Wield."

Keith grinned at him. "Just plain Wield?"

"Well, some of my friends call me..." 'Mac' was on the tip of his tongue, but that was a name used only by his very few lovers, a name that Wield always thought of as being almost his gay identity and something he had used to keep that part of his life firmly hidden away. Wieldy was what all his colleagues and his few friends called him, and he had promised himself he wasn't going to hide any more. "Wieldy usually, or Mac sometimes."

"So I've got two nicknames to choose from or your surname? Man of mystery, eh?" Eyes twinkling to let Wieldy know that it was only a joke; that puzzlement was still hovering and Wieldy suspected that his new friend wasn't so stupid that he hadn't realised that Wieldy was new to all this. "Fair enough, then, Wieldy or Mac it shall be. Your first name must be as bad as my middle name is."

"Oh aye?" Christ, he mocked himself, better not stun him with your scintillating conversation, you might make him feel inadequate.

Keithleaned forward, whispered to him, and Wieldy didn't hear him for the sudden thunder of his heart; it had been a long time since anyone had been this close to him, and longer still since it had been someone so good looking, and who smelled so wonderful. But he should respond, say something witty, make the bloke—make Keith—laugh. But he couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Keith sat back, looked at him for a moment, then sighed. "Okay. We'll do this the hard way. I haven't seen you here before, and Phil," a nod in the general direction of the barman, "says you've only been in the once. He also says you're a copper. So..."

Here it comes, Wield thought, here comes the punchline, stupid bastard, believing a stunner like him would fancy an old fart like you.

"Are you being strong and silent because you're on the job, or are you nervous, or are you just the strong and silent type?"

A quick swallow of his whisky, and then, eyes averted: "Clint Eastwood's got nothing on me." And was rewarded, Keith laughing, just a bit, just enough. He looked up then, and tried a smile.

Keith didn't notice.

Oh, well, Wieldy thought, can't expect two miracles in one night. Unless it was just a pick-up line... His mum always had said he was like a bull in a china shop. "Did you mean what you said about my eyes?" he asked flat out, breaking every rule of good manners and gay etiquette ever written.

"Actually, yes, I did. You're really not used to compliments, are you?"

"With a face like mine? Oh, no, lad, I get so many

compliments people have to queue up to deliver them."

"Got your own special sub-post office in your garden, have you?"

And it was lovely, being teased so nicely about his looks, especially when Keith's gaze kept wandering over his body, lingering appreciatively here and there. What do you see, he wanted to ask, when you look at me? You noticed my eyes in this wreck of a face, and you go beyond that to look at my body and see that I've not let it fall apart. What do you see? He knew how he saw himself. A fairly tall man, solid, muscular, and on the wrong side of thirty five. A face that had lost too many arguments and hadn't been exactly Michelangelo's David to start with. Hair that was thick and dark and crinkly, close-cropped to keep the wild curls from escaping into riotous chaos. And eyes, apparently, of a really unusual colour. "Sorry," he said, filling the silence, "was just thinking." He played with his glass, glancing all the while at Keith, wishing he could think of something they could talk about, something to make Keith laugh again. Nice laugh, that. Warm, seductive, the sort of sound that would shiver through you if he laughed when you were holding him. Sexy, very sexy.

And perhaps willing? That idea shot a surge of arousal to his prick. Wieldy didn't half fancy this man, and there was even the bumper prize of Keith being nice. But, he told himself, being stern again, it's a bit early in the game to start hankering after settling down and happily-ever-afters. Have to get him talking first. Go on, think of something!

But Keith came to his rescue. "Are you a copper?" "Fraid so," he said, hanging his head in mock shame. "A dirty job, I know, but someone's got to do it."

"Sad, but true. But never mind, if you're a good boy, maybe they'll let you out early for good behaviour."

"Fat chance," he said, thereby bringing his obese boss to mind. "I'm in Mid-Yorks, and Superintendent Andy Dalziel adds years if you're a good boy."

"Or it just feels that way."

Another pause, another frantic search in Wieldy's mind for something to say so that this handsome man wouldn't walk away and leave him nursing his drink like an aging queen. "What d'you work as?" he asked, and winced, not at the painful banality of it, but at the intrusive personalness of it. Not the sort of question one asked of a would-be pick-up in a pub.

"I'm teaching at the College."

Wieldy's heart sank. "The College? You wouldn't happen to know an Ellie Pascoe, would you?"

"How could I not? Quite a character, our Ms. Pascoe," Keith said, smiling. "Nice, though, but I wouldn't want to get in her bad books. I take it you know her as well?"

A question he could answer, a conversation he could keep going. Perhaps there was a God after all. "Know her through her husband, mainly. Peter, he's my Inspector."

"You work for Ellie's husband? God, I meet two policemen and they know each other. Incestuous bunch, aren't you?"

He prickled at that, ready to snap.

"Keep your hair on," Keith butted in. "I wasn't implying anything like that."

He could kick himself and would, later. "Sorry."

"It's all right. But he seems a fairly decent bloke, her husband." A wicked smile, something remembered. "Even if he does have a talent for putting his foot right in it."

And that was it, they were off and running. Mutual acquaintances and shared tales of Peter Pascoe putting his foot in it. Which led, naturally, to funny stories of disasters in teaching and absurdities in policing. Two hours later, last call being sounded, and Wieldy realised he had done more talking in one evening than he usually managed in a week. Or maybe a month. But now it was the last drink, chipping out time, and all his words ran away and hid. He knew what he wanted: to invite this man home with him, and spend the night with him. Sex, glorious sex. A surreptitious glance, and he added a bit of affection to his list of wants.

How did you ask someone home these days? Flat out, blunt, or circuitous, flattering? And how did you establish limits? This bloke wasn't the youthful type he usually went for; closer examination showing him to be early thirties, so he wasn't likely to just lie there and let Wieldy be boss from start to finish.

And then there was the not-so-small matter of AIDS.

He had a box of condoms back at the flat, so it wasn't a problem from that point of view. But he would want to know, before he did anything, before he considered certain things, just what the situation was.

Keith beat him to it. "It's been great talking to you," he said, sounding hesitant for the first time all evening. "Listen, if you're not doing anything Friday night..."

Wieldy almost laughed out loud. So that's how it was done these days! Going out with each other like straight teenagers, all awkward requests and fears of rejection. "I've got plans that night," he said. "Or I will have, as soon as you tell me where we're going."

"You're a bastard, you know that, don't you, Mac?" Keith said good-naturedly. "I thought you were going to give me the brush-off there. Or confess that you were on a bloody stake-out."

"Not me, lad," Wieldy replied. "It's the pretty ones they put on duty in places the likes of this. So did you have anywhere in mind for Friday, or are you open to suggestion."

The comment invited sex in and made it at home.

"And if you're open to suggestion," Wieldy said carefully, "you're welcome to come home with me tonight."

"I..." Keith swallowed, visibly, and licked his lips, his gaze involuntarily going to the soft woollen trousers that draped so beautifully across Wieldy's groin. "Oh, don't tempt me, Wieldy," he said. "I promised myself I'd be careful..."

"It's all right, sweetie," Wieldy came back, "I promise to pull out in time—"

The old 'I won't get you pregnant' joke fell flat, a tangible miasma of unease between them. It wasn't just pregnancy all those enthusiastic little sperm caused any more, was it? "Friday, then," Wieldy said, and the discussion of details kept them distracted all the way to the car.

He snatched another quick look at his watch.

"Christ on a crutch, that bloody watch had better be a self-winder on its last legs, or I'll shove it down your bloody throat!" Chief Superintendent Dalziel positively roared. Fat Andy's opinion was that if he had to deliver briefings and receive debriefings, then by God and Andy Dalziel, his officers were going to have to sit through them as well.

"Sorry, sir," Wieldy said, fidgeting, which was an unusual sight in and of itself.

"What's the matter that you're in such a rush to get out of here and can't sit still while you're waiting? You got piles or summat?"

That was the sort of question that Wieldy was never quite sure how to answer. Not much point in looking to the only other person able to squeeze into the room with himself and Dalziel: Inspector Pascoe wasn't going to be much help, not when Fat Andy was in one of his moods, anyroad. Still, Wieldy had an almost irrational desire to bless Peter Pascoe for being the bridge to what Wieldy hoped was going to be a beautiful friendship. If he could get out of here in time. If Fat Andy didn't keep him late. If his car didn't break down. If, heart plummeting into the pit of his stomach, if Keith showed up at all. If Dalziel didn't rip his head from his

shoulders for letting his mind wander like that.

A hefty hip, revoltingly close, settled itself on the corner of the desk in front of him. A long, lush scratch, the sound setting Wieldy's teeth on edge, and then Fat Andy was after him again. "So what is it then? Piles or don't you love me any more?"

Depending on his boss' mood, there was either a lot he could say to that, or nothing at all. Wieldy half considered just touching his metaphoric forelock and putting up with Dalziel's usual crap, but then, he thought, resisting the temptation to check the time again, if he did that, then not only wouldn't he have time to go home and get himself as dolled up as he could manage, but he'd be late for Keith as well. "I've got a date," he heard himself say, and winced, waiting for the sarcasm to drop as ungently as acid rain.

"A date?"

It was probably the first time in known history that anyone had seen Andrew Dalziel lost for words. "My ghast has never been so flabbered," Fat Andy said half an octave higher than usual. "A date? You?" Then they were back to the old, familiar and oh-so-irritating Dalziel. "Well, don't just sit there. Do I know this mad bastard? Precious little petal is he, or is he the butch one and you're anxious to run home to press your frock?"

With gritted teeth, Wieldy reminded himself that it was Fat Andy who had smoothed over his coming out in the somewhat Neanderthal ranks of the Mid-Yorks police force.

Pascoe, on the other hand, had obviously decided to take a leaf out of Dalziel's book, and give Wieldy a chance to regroup while he attacked from the flank. "Don't be stupid," Pascoe said, a phrase known to distract Dalziel even in the middle of a murder investigation, never mind in the middle of a routine debriefing. "No-one wears frocks these days. Next you'll be asking if I want to buy Ellie some nylon stockings on the black market."

Dalziel smiled, not a pretty sight. "If you're trying to winkle our Wieldy out of having to answer, then you'll have to do a far cry better than that, Peter my boy. You'll be glad when you get to my age-actually, after the way you went in after Hacclesford, you'll be lucky if you see your next birthday. But that," he went on, just as Wieldy nodded his thanks at Pascoe, "is something Ithink I'll save for later, when I can savour chewing you up and spitting you back out again. I was talking to our Wieldy here. Who's the lucky feller?"

Wieldy shrugged, his face its usual impenetrable self. No harm in naming names: not only would Dalziel find out even if he didn't. Keith had said he was well

and truly out. It was only Wieldy having trouble getting used to this lack of privacy. "Bloke by the name of Keith Rankin."

"As in the new history teacher up at the College?" Pascoe, interrupting again, but Dalziel was content to sit scratching his enormous belly and listen to his two juniors disperse information in what he would gleefully call gay abandon, as soon as he put his tuppenceworth

"None other," Wieldy agreed, glad that his blushes never seemed to show. "He says he knows your Ellie."

"I'll say! He's all she talks about half the time these days. Told me he was gay, even said she fancied setting you two up together, but..."

Wieldy wasn't going to ask why she hadn't, didn't think he really wanted to know. Of course, Andrew Dalziel wasn't about to let so minor a detail as another man's discomfort stand in his way. "Then why the fuck didn't she?"

"Rankin's gorgeous," Pascoe blurted.

"Ey, lad," Dalziel said to Wield, "you should' ve toldme this queer thing was contagious. I should have put you with the unmarried blokes then."

"No, I didn't mean that," Pascoe said, and unlike Wield, his blushes showed beautifully.

"Then what did you mean?" Dalziel again, never one to leave well enough alone.

Pascoe obviously didn't know where to look.

Taking pity, Wield stated the fact that was, literally, as plain as the nose on his face. "Keith's absolutely gorgeous," he said, "and I'm pot ugly. Can you just imagine Ellie saying she's got the perfect friend for him? He's older, ugly and for the cherry on top, he's a policeman and all.'

No-one, naturally, argued with him.

"If that's the case then," Dalziel said, sighing happily as he used the corner of the desk to scratch the itch between his buttocks, "how come you've landed him as your lumber tonight?"

Wieldy shrugged, wishing he could just go back to pretending he was the same as everybody else. At least then no-one dug into his private life with a bloody bulldozer. "Met him in a pub."

"I thought you said you hated going to the Gay Galloper?" Pascoe asked, trying to be sensitive to make up for the gaffe about Rankin being too good-looking for Wieldy.

Another shrug. "Wanted a bit of company."

Dalziel roared with laughter. "Is that what they're calling it these days? In my time, we used to call it a good hard shag."

This time, even Wieldy's blushes were visible.

"Oh, get on with you," Dalziel said. "Go get your crystal slippers on."

"The report?"

"It'll keep till morning. Oh," as Wieldy was opening the door, "unless something other than you and your new chum come up, then I don't want to see your ugly mug before ten."

Wieldy grinned at that, too pleased by both the extra time and the acceptance to be offended by Fat Andy's legendary crudeness. Right behind him he heard Pascoe start to apologise, until Dalziel put paid to that.

"He's a big lad, Peter, and I don't think he needs you holding his hand and giving him pointers on where to stick it. You can bring your pretty face back in here and explain what the fuck happened with Hacclesford."

Door shut before he could hear the start of that minor war, Wieldy was whistling as he got out of the building in record time.

He had half an hour, less if he wanted to be sure of not being late. All right, all right, so it was considered fashionable to be late, 'cool' to show a veneer of unconcern. Wieldy was more interested in making sure Keith didn't get bored. Keith had been very understanding about changing tonight's arrangements from meeting at the restaurant to Wieldy picking him up, but having messed Keith about once, he didn't much fancy doing it again. Seven, he'd told Keith, and seven it would be. Splashing water on to get rid of the last traces of shaving cream, Wieldy paused, his attention caught by his own reflection.

As Dalziel had implied, why the fuck was Keith interested in him? He made the back end of a bus look positively roseate with beauty, and although he was fit, his body wouldn't exactly give Arnold Schwarzenegger a run for his money. Getting his belly wet on the edge of the washhand basin, he leaned forward, peering at himself in the mirror. His eyes were a nice colour, but not something you'd expect to be noticed in a pub full of luscious young men on the prowl. Good teeth as well, but as it wasn't a horse Keith was buying, he thought ruefully, pulling his y-fronts away from his body and staring down at his very average endowments. Wouldn't give Arnold a run for his money in this department either!

"You," he said to his reflection, "are an idiot. Bad as a spotty schoolgirl. Anyone'd think you were going out with your first boyfriend."

And that stopped him dead. He paled, visibly, and his hands trembled faintly as he ran them over the close-cut crinkles of his dark hair. Christ on a crutch, he thought, I amfucking going out with my first boyfriend! Helplessly amused, he started laughing, and the self-mocking humour kept him going long enough that he was dressed and in the car before his nerves ambushed him with a vengeance. His palms were sweaty on the steering wheel and he wiped them, one at a time, on the soft grey wool of his brand new trousers.

"Bad as a schoolboy," he said aloud, to practice a voice that threatened to squeak embarrassingly. "Keep this up, and you'll end up as stern as the bloody headmaster."

Which of course led to more thoughts of Keith, and the unmanning worry about Keith and Ellie Pascoe sitting together in the staffroom discussing Wieldy over a cup of coffee and a chocolate biscuit, as if Wield weren't important enough to warrant the cafeteria at lunchtime, never mind a private discussion later.

"Pack it in!" he said, rather startling the dear old lady on the pavement next to him, who was waiting for a bus. The lights changed and he was on his way again, never having even noticed that he had stopped the dear little old lady from lifting the businessman's wallet. Ellie Pascoe, he reminded himself, wasn't the type to gossip—well, not maliciously, anyway. And she was a friend, one of the very few people who ever even mentioned him being gay. She wouldn't be unkind, she wouldn't laugh at him.

It was the not being sure of Keith that made him miserable. How the fuck did he know that Keith wasn't setting him up for something? Mebbe it was a bet, one of those dog-parties he'd seen in that film with the ever welcome Tom Cruise. He didn't know, and that was the problem. Years on the Force had him so that he could find his way anywhere, even about the one-way system round Keith's flat. There weren't many cars parked round here, not that he would expect there to be in an area best known for its bedsits and short-term rentals. He was stopped now, parked right outside the right door. He should get up and ring the bell, say hello, keep it light and breezy, and even if it did end up being fodder for elevenses, well, at least he'd have had a night on the town with a handsome man. There were, he told himself, worse ways of finding your feet in the ways of the gay world.

Still, he wished he hadn't changed his mind about partaking of the gay life. It had been so much more comfortable to pretend that he didn't want any of it, that he'd rather stay as he was, nice and safe and secure in his little bubble. But he'd refused to be a coward any longer. He had promised himself. Had sworn to take

the chance, even if it meant having his fingers burned a few times.

So why was he still sitting there like a shop dummy?

A tap on the side-window, and there was Keith, grinning, making daft faces at him. Wieldy leaned across the car to unlock the door, his uncertainty and surprise turning into a scowl.

Busy with seat belts and buckles, Keith hadn't noticed the expression yet. "And there's me, even picked my dirty socks up off the floor for you." The belt was fankled round, his voice muddied as he twisted in the seat to get himself sorted out. "I expected you to come in, but I suppose you were waiting to be issued a warrant."

"Nah," Wieldy said, mood lifted by the presence of this man and the easy comfort of him, "Fat Andy would kill us for being that soft. We just kick the door in, beat up a few citizens and then bugger off home for a nice cuppa."

"Fat Andy?" Keith asked, not surprisingly.

"Ah, Fat Andy," Wieldy said, cracking open his vast store of wicked, insubordinate and absolutely true stories about his superior. "Also known as 'That Fat Bastard', 'That Mad Bastard' and 'That vicious bastard'."

"Or 'Bastard' for short."

The last Bastard Tale, as they'd been christened somewhere between the shopping centre and the new church, still had Keith in stitches by the time they reached the restaurant. It was a nice place, nothing particularly fancy, but the food was good, the service better, and best of all, no-one turned a hair at the sight of two men having dinner together. At least, that was the reputation it had.

Didn't stop Wieldy from being nervous as sin when they walked in.

"What is it?" Keith whispered as they waited to be seated.

Not looking at him, Wieldy didn't say anything, simply shook his head. He'd always been taciturn, a trait worsened by the need to keep so much of himself secret, but Keith wasn't used to the old Wieldy, he was becoming accustomed to a very different man from the one colleagues knew.

"There has to be something," Keith persisted as they draped napkins over their laps and Wieldy hid behind his menu.

Nothing.

A heavy sigh, and Keith leaned back in his chair, making it clear that he wasn't going to play any of Wieldy's games, whatever they might be. The atmosphere, to employ the perfect cliché for the occasion, was fraught. In between deciding over the French Onion Soup (a distinct possibility, now that it looked as if he wasn't going to have much chance of kisses later) or Brie en Croûte and weighing the relative merits of Bœuf Bourguignon or the basic Coq au Vin, Wieldy kepta wary eye on the other diners. He wasn't expecting anything, not really. But still, for all this place's reputation, all the couples he could see were the standard one of each. Even speaking to the waiter, he couldn't help but notice one or two looks coming his way, and he didn't know how to take it. He was well used to having people look at him—he had that kind of face—but he wasn't sure if it were only that, or if it were because he was sitting here with a man and a dirty great big pink triangle stuck to his forehead.

"I'm sorry," Keith said out of the blue.

"What for?" Wieldy asked, knowing full well that when it came to apologies due, he was very much in arrears.

"I'd forgotten," he leaned his elbows on the table, which brought him close enough to make Wield glance around nervously.

"Forgotten what?" That he didn't really fancy Wield, that this was all a joke—what?

"That this is all a bit new to you."

Wieldy became engrossed in tearing his dinner roll into the tiniest of shreds. "To tell the truth," he began, thenstopped, swallowed, began again, feeling as foolish as a virgin. Pathetic to be this unsure at his age. "Well, it's not a bit new. It's sort of, well, completely new."

Fortunately, their wine hadn't been poured yet, because Keith came close to choking as it was. "You mean, you've never done it with a bloke? Fucking hell, I knew you weren't exactly a Gay Gordon, but I never thought—"

"And you don't have to," Wieldy snapped, his male ego more than a touch bruised by the implication of complete inexperience. "I had a lover of more years than I care to mention, but we were both in the closet, so we had to be a bit on the careful side."

"With you a policeman, I'd've thought it was a bit on the paranoid side."

"Aye, well, that and all," Wieldy said, smiling against his own intention to be stern and butch over the slur to his manhood. He was too charmed and too infatuated by Keith to hold onto any sort of annoyance, not when those brown eyes were smiling at him, and the lips were parted, just a little, barely enough to show the glimmer of teeth and the moist pinkness of tongue.

"Are you still with me?" Keith asked, but nicely, flattered by the effect he was having on Wieldy.

"Sorry," Wieldy answered, trying not to embarrass himself farther by actually panting over his companion. "Was thinking..."

"Nice thoughts?" Soft, seductive, welcoming as a light in the window.

"Very nice thoughts." He cleared his throat, more to stopper the words than anything else. Oh, you've got it bad, haven't you? he said to himself, uncaring of whether or not this was desperation or lust at first sight: he was in serious danger of falling for this lovely man with the wonderful laugh and the best bum in the Western Hemisphere. "But as I was saying," before I almost kissed you right here in front of everyone, "I've had sex with blokes," and he was so proud that he'd actually come right out and said it, flat out, the way he'd never dared before, "but I've only just come out..."

"Yes, I thought I could smell mothballs. Oh, don't look at me like that, I was only kidding and you know it." A pause, while the waiter fussed over food and plates and glasses. Then: "Look, I've never even been in the closet, so I never had to come out—"

"But what about your family? Your mother?" It burst from him, driven by memories of his chapelgoing mother and strap-wielding father. "How did she feel when she found out?"

"She didn't find out, Mac," Keith said gently, slowly realising how carefully he was going to have to handle this man, "because it was never a secret. I've known all my life, and it never even occurred to me to not tell Mum and Dad when I had my first crush." He stopped then, continuing when he saw the longing in Wieldy's eyes to hear more about something so wonderfully foreign. "They didn't bat an eyelash. Accepted it the same way they accepted it when my older sister came home and told them about her first boyfriend. Although," dimples appeared, inviting Wieldy to share the humour, "they didn't tell me how not to get pregnant. How did your parents take it when you told them?"

"Never did tell them. They died years ago," his tone very off-hand, so that it was impossible to tell if he were sad or glad over it, "so it's only me and my sister now. She's in Canada, moved there with her family a while ago."

"So how did she take it?"

Wieldy finished his Brie, sipped at his wine, fidgeted about a bit. "You know," he finally said, "you've got a brilliant interrogation technique. You'd make a great copper."

"Was hoping I would, tonight."

Wieldy knew that he had suddenly developed a most fatuous expression, but he was too delighted to care. "I think that could be arranged."

"I think so too, so go easy on the booze. I don't mind you relaxed, but I don't want brewer's droop getting in the way of my plans."

All set for a discreetly libidinous chat, Wieldy was very put out indeed when the waiter, all efficiency and smarmy smiling, chose that moment to start them on their main course. By which point, Keith was back on one track Wieldy would happily forget.

"You were telling me how your sister took you coming out."

He mumbled his answer round a tender chunk of beef.

"Pardon?" Keith asked, not taking the hint.

Wieldy chewed, swallowed, accepted that sex with—and was that really all he was hoping for?—this man was worth being vulnerable. "I haven't told her."

Keith simply stared at him. "Let me get this straight, if you'll pardon the pun. You've come out, but you haven't told your family? What about your friends."

"Not in so many words, not really, no." His confession to Fat Andy didn't count; benign that mad bastard might be, but friend was pushing it. "Anyroad, I tend to keep myself to myself."

"All the better to hide yourself."

Shame crept up his spine. "Suppose you could put it like that." If you were feeling vicious, he wanted to add, not realising that he was, for once, visibly upset.

"Christ, but you've had it rough!"

The unexpected sympathy made him jerk his head up, startled him into looking at Keith. "Not as bad as some," he said, a lifetime of not complaining too ingrained to let sympathy pass.

"But not half as easy as it's been for me." A slight shake of the head, barely enough to move the thick, straight brown hair. "There's a lot you need to tell me, Mac, isn't there?"

"What? You mean, do I like whips and chains and all that sort of thing?"

"No. I meant why you could never come out. You're no coward, that's obvious from what Ellie and Peter have said about you, so it must be something else."

But the caring comments were lost, drowned out by that one reference. "And what have Ellie and Peter been saying about me? And when did you speak to them?"

"Tut, tut," Keith said, "you haven't even read me my rights yet."

"Suppose I did come on a bit strong there, didn't I?

It's just..." How could he explain it without sounding weak-kneed and looking as if he had a yellow streak a mile wide?

"It's just," Keith said, being quite casual, making an effort to make all this a bit easier for Wield, "that this is probably the first time you've ever been open about...well, about having a boyfriend, and you're not comfortable having them talk about it."

"Not comfortable? Scared fucking witless!" Christ, he thought, this honesty business could get out of hand. "Mebbe that's a bit strong an' all, but thinking about my friends talking about me behind my back..."

"And I suppose none of the straight people you know ever mention where there going of a Friday night, or mention that they're going out with someone that they all know?"

Put like that, it did seem a bit off to feel betrayed, didn't it? "I hadn't thought about it like that." He thought about it like that now, and when he smiled, Keith wasn't the only one who noticed the change in the craggy features. "It's actually nice, that, isn't it? In fact, that's grand!"

"See? Coming out doesn't mean having to pick up your bell at the door."

Wieldy pondered that for a minute. "Keith, what the hell do you mean?"

"A bell. As in lepers." He did a twisted impersonation of every sorry leper in every cheap television saga, half the restaurant turning to look at him. "Unclean, unclean."

"Actually," Wieldy confessed, greatly daring and leaning half-way towards Keith, "mebbe I should get one of them bells. My mind's not too clean, you know."

Keithsimply grinned at him and was tactful enough not to comment on what was, for Wieldy in a public place, boldness. "Going to prove that, are we?"

"Oh, aye, lad," Wieldy said to the man not so much younger than himself. "Oh, aye, I'll prove that tonight."

Dessert was ordered and consumed in something of a haze for Wield, all the sharp details blunted by the melting surety that he was going to have sex with Keith tonight. Have sex? he questioned himself. Or was it already sliding into something a hell of a lot more serious? He always had been one for leaping into commitments, loyal to a fault and faithful. Funny, wasn't it, how a disease had brought all those old-fashioned traits back into the height of fashion.

The bill was brought on a discreet silver saucer, tucked into a quiet leather folder. Automatically, Wield reached for it, and met Keith's fingers already there.

"Let me." Keith was obviously getting very good at

reading Wieldy's battered features. "Oh, go on, it's the first time you've been out like this, isn't it? So let me treat you, make it a real date."

"Doesn't sit well, letting someone else pay for me." Truculent, not about to yield at all.

"Then you can treat me next time we go out."

He was so busy floating on cloud nine over that, he didn't give a damn about so-called pride. This wasn't going to be a once-off, he thought, thrilled more than he ought to be, intoxicated less by wine than by the slow seeping in of hope. There was going to be a next time!

Unless he wasn't any good in bed, he thought with worry plummeting to the bottom of his stomach. What if Keith thought he was rotten in bed and didn't want to see him again? After all, what did Wield have to offer? Too many years with Maurice, where they'd done everything under the sun, but all that technique was based on what Maurice and he had liked together. Then there was Cliff, and he'd been more experienced than the French Foreign Legion, but all Wieldy had had to do to him was fuck him; Cliff had done all the rest of it.

And what if Cliff had been doing it only because Wieldy was putting him up and giving him the occasional tenner?

In the car now, driving, too skilled for any of his distraction or dismay to show in the way he handled the motor. But Keith was watching him, and Keith, it seemed, honestly did see beyond his surface ugliness.

"Nothing to be scared about, Mac," he whispered. "I've been tested, and I was negative, and I haven't done anything dodgy since then." A small, very sad laugh. "In fact, I've been so fucking monkish, I have to shave my palms these days!"

What had he been thinking about honesty earlier? They were on the steps now, front door locked behind them, and there was only half a flight between them and Keith's bedsit. "It's not that I'm worried about. I, em, well, I brought condoms with me for starters, and I thought we could, you know..."

"Leave off the fucking till later?"

There it was again, that blithe and exhilarating assumption that there would be a later, that there would be a next time. "Aye, that's about right, I think. Plenty of things we can do besides fucking," he said, thinking about all the times Maurice hadn't wanted him like that and it had been little more than a mutual wank. Especially towards the end of their relationship.

"Well, here it is, home sweet home. Until I can find something permanent," Keith was saying, chattering away as he put on lights and hurried over to the scullery alcove. "Coffee?" he called over his shoulder, ignoring that they'd had excellent French coffee in the restaurant. "As I was saying," he went on as Wieldy followed him through, "this is only a temporary set-up. I want to buy a place of my own, but I decided to try the area for a bit before I actually signed on the dotted line. I quite fancy a proper house, you know, with a garden and all that crap and—"

Wieldy came up behind Keith and slid his arms around him. "It's all right," he whispered softly, feeling absurdly happy that this mattered to Keith as much as it mattered to him. "No need to be so nervous. Anyroad, thought that was my line. It'll be fine, honest. I'm no virgin, and I've got a fair idea of how the plumbing and everything works. I'm not expecting Don Juan, Casanova and Errol Flynn all rolled into one neither!"

"I'm just..." Keith leaned back until his cheek was against Wieldy's and his back was pressed against Wieldy's chest. "I like you," he admitted, making Wield smile all the more. "You're a nice bloke, Mac, and you've a sexy body and you're funny when you get started. I don't want to fall down on your expectations, that's all."

"And as I've got more to go on than these bloody sex novels, you shan't. Do you really want another coffee?"

"Course not. Didn't want to jump you and put you off."

"Didn't want to hurry the poor novitiate, is that it?" But he was amused, touched by the way Keith had cared enough to even think about it. "Don't worry, you couldn't be too quick for me."

Afterwards, they lay together for a while, doing nothing more than exchange lazy caresses and sleepy kisses. Not thinking at first, content as never before in the warmth of this other man, Wieldy drifted on the sensations. Then thought intruded, and he looked at Keith. "I don't suppose you want me to go home, do you?" he asked, confident now after the way Keith had reacted to him.

"Just try it, and you'll have Peter Pascoe in here arresting me for kidnapping a police officer."

"Like that, is it?" Wieldy asked, voice as dreamy as his kisses.

"Could be. Would you mind?"

"Mind? Christ, I'll be joining you."

Long minutes, embraces fading into unabashed cuddling, Wieldy wrapped around Keith, slowly falling asleep. Then a chuckle, and Keith tickling him. "What?" Wieldy demanded, never too sunny when being tickled.

"D'you think we should have a race? See who's

going to fall in love first?"

A longer pause, then, incongruous in the gentleness of night. "What do you see in me? And why'd you come up to me in the pub in the first place?"

"Honestly?"

"I'd rather have the truth now than find it out later." When it would hurt more. When the pain just might be unbearable.

"Idon't really know. At the pub... Felt sorry for you, a bit. You looked so miserable, and then when I really looked at you, I noticed your eyes. Not often you see someone with eyes the same colour as Liz Taylor. And you had a nice body, and I liked the way you were dressed. And..." Keith shrugged, Wieldy's arms automatically tightening around him. "And I like a man who's all contained power, the way you are."

Fair enough, he could believe any of that. At least there hadn't been any praise for his pretty face, nor had Keith lied and said he wasn't that ugly. Because he was, and he knew it. But if Keith didn't mind, well then who was Wieldy to complain?

In that case nothing else needed to be said, and Wieldy allowed himself the luxury of sinking into sleep, entwined with a beautiful man it would be very easy to love.

Back aching, head pounding, stomach reminding him that not only was it six hours since last he'd eaten but that the last meal had consisted of a greasy pie and a pint of bitter, Sgt. Wield sat alone in his cubby-hole of an office, staring down at the report in front of him. It was his usual pellucid product, but that wouldn't cover the fact that even after a solid week on it, he had no idea on how to solve this case and that meant Fat Andy was going to have his balls for breakfast. He sighed, as he'd been doing a lot that afternoon, and reread the pages hoping that he'd find something that was a plus. But there was nothing. It would have taken a stroke of pure, blind luck to unravel this before the robbery had actually been committed, but Dalziel wouldn't see it that way. Christ, he'd be hauled in front of the fat bastard and his skin would be flayed from him by a sharp and wicked tongue. Miserable, that's what tomorrow was going to be, when Dalziel came back in and found out that Wieldy had got nowhere fast, and expensively at that. Wield winced at the total at the bottom of his expense chit, but stapled it to the report anyway. He was going to be hung; might as well get his money back anyway. He stretched then, trying to ease some of the ache from his spine, but the smallest thought of what tomorrow was bringing with it was

enough to make him stiff with tension.

The phone rang, and he seriously considered not answering it. The last thing he needed was Dalziel on the phone to him. But he was still on duty, technically speaking, even if he was useless.

"Hello?"

"Hello, love," a voice said, and Wieldy grinned happily.

"Hello yourself," he said to his lover of almost two months.

"Thought I'd give you a ring, because you've been saying work's bloody awful all this week. Any better today?"

"Worse," Wieldy said, although today was suddenly really very nice. It meant something, something quite wonderful, to have someone who cared enough to phone just to cheer him up a bit. "It's a lot better right at the moment, mind you."

"Should think it's perfect, considering I'm talking to you. But I have an ulterior motive for ringing you as well."

"Oh aye? What d'you have up your sleeve this time?" Time before last it had been back to the Gay Galloper, and drinks with his handsome friend for all the world—all the local gay world—to see. Last week it had been a single red rose delivered anonymously to him at the office. Embarrassing as hell, that, but worth it. Very much worth it.

"Ellie and I were talking about you and Peter, so we thought it'd be nice if we all had dinner over at their house tonight. Ellie's a brilliant cook, and you know little Rosie will be ecstatic to see her Uncu Mac. And Uncu Mac will be ecstatic to romp with little Rosie, won't he?"

He would, Peter and Ellie Pascoe's daughter the closest thing to his own child as he was likely to come. She couldn't manage 'Wieldy' and it had seemed so natural to have her call him Mac. "What time should I be there?" he said, already tucking the report into its folder.

"As soon as you can, according to Ellie. I think she wants you to mind Rosie while she does dinner."

"I'll be there in," a quick glance at his watch, "about half an hour."

"Right you are. It'll take me a bit longer, I've got papers to mark, but I'll be there soon. Em, Mac..."

Not often Keith was diffident about anything. "What?"

"Is Rosie really as god-awful as Ellie says she is?"

"Oh, you know how these mothers are," Wieldy said. And then, over Keith's sigh of relief. "So besotted

with their brats they think they're perfect."

He was laughing as he hung up the phone. Let Keith suffer a bit of trepidation before he met delightful little Rosie. Would serve him right for all the slagging he'd given Wield for being such a big softie for kids.

And it wasn't until he was sitting on the Pascoes' sofa in the Pascoes' living room, with Peter handing him a drink, a crabby Rosie perched precariously on his lap and Ellie shouting hello from the kitchen, that it dawned on Wieldy just what he'd let himself in for. He and Keith had been practically inseparable since they'd met, were even quite seriously considering buying a house together, but for all that, the only places they'd gone together had either been anonymous restaurants or cinemas, or the safety of an all-gay milieu like the Gay Galloper or the Jolly Roger. Now here he was, in the home of the people who had become his best friends, with his adopted niece on his lap, and his lover about to arrive. He knew what Keith would do the minute he walked in as well: come right over and kiss him hello the way he always did. But here, in front of people? In front of his Inspector, a man he worked with, day in, day out?

And if Keith didn't kiss him? How the hell would he feel then? Relieved, in a way, and terribly let-down as well.

Then there was always the question of how Peter and Ellie would react.

He was distracted at that moment by Rosie opening her mouth and screaming.

"Oh, Christ," Peter said, putting his drink down. "Don'tworry, it's nothing personal. It's the latest phase: she screams for a year or two before she'll give in and fall asleep. I thought we might have a night off with you here, but no such luck."

"Sorry. Listen," as Peter made to lever himself up off the sofa, "d'you want me to settle her for the night?"

An expression of profoundest gratitude settled over Peter's face. "Would you? Thanks, Mac, I really owe you one for this."

Half way up the stairs, Rosie still screeching at the top of her lungs, it registered what Peter had called him. Mac. So much, he thought happily, for keeping the two halves of my life separate!

Making faces and singing her silly songs, he soon had Rosie quiet and then it didn't take long before she was asleep. He lingered for a while, stroking her hair, gazing at the daughter he would never have. A family was something he would have liked, but there wasn't much chance of that. At least he had Rosie: all the

benefits, and none of the drawbacks. Eventually, he went back downstairs and found Ellie and Peter cuddled together on one over-large easy chair.

"Service above and beyond the call of duty!" Ellie declaimed when she saw him. "You are a treasure, Mac. She's been a little bitch all week—I should've known to ask you to pop in. D'you hear that, Peter?"

"I can't hear anything. Which is the whole point, isn't it?"

"Mmm. Peace and quiet. Offspring tucked safely in bed, dinner cooking happily in the oven, good wine and good company. Heaven."

Wieldy leaned back in the sofa, relaxing under their light banter. He loved coming to this house, hadn't realised how much he'd missed being here as often as he used to, before he met Keith. Would be wonderful if they could start coming over here together...

The door went, and Wieldy jumped.

"No, no, I'll get it," Ellie said, mistaking his reaction.
"It'll just be Keith."

Just Keith? No just about it. Keith was heaven on earth, walking perfection, and the love of Wieldy's life. And he was going to come through that door—voices coming closer but barely louder, kept quiet for Rosie asleep upstairs—and he was going to simply walk across the room and kiss Wieldy, right there with the Pascoes looking on. A public display of affection.

Wield wasn't quite sure how he felt about that. He knew one thing, though. It would destroy his friendship with the Pascoes if they objected to Keith doing that. This is it, he thought, tensing involuntarily, his heart pounding and his mouth dry. This is it. I'm going to be kissed in public by a man. My male lover is going to kiss me in front of my friends, and that's as good as a flaming

great neon sign announcing that we fuck each other.

Keith was gorgeous, as always, and Wieldy was peripherally aware of the bottle green sweater he'd bought for him. He'd watched Keith put that on this morning, pulling it on over his hairy chest, covering the nipples that Wieldy had sucked on when they'd made love early, before it was light.

"Hello, love," Keith said, and all of Wield's senses were on overdrive, so that he was aware of Peter and Ellie even as he gazed at his lover coming towards him. "You look like you've had a hell of a day."

Normal, so absolutely normal, precisely the sort of thing Ellie and Peter and a million other couples would say to each other in the evening. But this was he and Keith, and there were people watching, people seeing that he was in love, and loved.

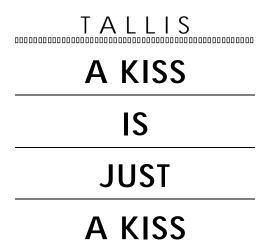
Then Keith kissed him, the briefest, chastest of pecks, lips dry and warm against his. But still, it was enough, and Wield realised how he felt now about public displays of affection: he liked them. A lot. Keith was moving away, going to sit discreetly in the other easy chair, and Wieldy grabbed him, tugging him to sit down on the sofa, so that they were still more discreet than Pete and Ellie, but close together nonetheless.

"Still protecting my sensitive sensibilities?" Wieldy asked him, taking hold of his hand.

Keith smiled at him, obviously as pleased as punch. "Doesn't much look as if I need to now, does it?"

"Not around here anyway," Ellie Pascoe said, snuggling in a bit closer to her husband so that he could kiss her neck. "We don't mind, and anyway, be a bit like the pot calling the kettle black, wouldn't it?"

"Heaven forfend," Keith said, taking a leaf out of Ellie's book and cosying in a bit closer to Wieldy.



The air was heavy and grey in the early dawn, that period of limbo between night and morning when there are no shadows, no colors, only shades of grey on grey. In the distance could be heard the rumblings of lorries and the rattle and squeak of a milk-float. The always present smell of diesel was dampened, held in check by the heavy cold of the early hour. The slick sidewalks held almost no human traffic this early, only the sounds of the monster city lumbering awake for yet another day of the abuse and indignities heaped upon it by these frail, fleeting humans.

Two men got out of the parked car, stretching and talking softly. The tall, dark-haired man yawned as he watched his smiling partner walk round the car towards him.

"C'mon," laughed Doyle, "no one'll see us. We've got near on half and hour before Murph and Anson relieve us. Plenty of time, laddie," he cackled maliciously, his breath sputtering white in the cold air.

Bodie cocked an eyebrow in contemplation, gave Doyle a quick appraisal, head to...head and, quite liking his partner's wicked little plan, shuffled him into the dim, narrow alley, past the dust bins and into the recess of a door. The brick entryway was damp and almost private, just public enough to add to the thrill of a quick one but not enough to really risk the consequences of being seen from the street by a passerby, or, god forbid, another CI5 agent.

Doyle lithely pressed Bodie against the wall and started to snake his hands up underneath Bodie's multitudinous layers of anorak, jersey and shirt as he nipped at an earlobe. Bodie let out a startled yelp. "Oi, mate! Your hands are bleedin' freezin'!"

"Just tryin' to warm 'em up so you don't go all limp on me at an inopportune moment," Doyle grinned.

"Oof, get on with it, then."

Doyle slid agile hands round and deftly unbuckled, unbuttoned and unzipped in one fluid movement. His warmed hand reached in to rub Bodie's quickly hardening cock, sending a jolt of intense desire through the other man's body. Feasting on the fire spreading rapidly through his veins, Bodie let out a sigh of soft pleasure as Doyle slipped the cock from the confines of clothing and massaged the hard, warm flesh.

"Hey, you just goin' to sit back and moan or are you goin' to do a bit of reciprocatin' 'ere, mate?" Doyle muttered with a grin between soft nips along Bodie's stubbled cheek and chin.

In response, Bodie ran his thumb from Doyle's belt buckle down along the zip and over the growing bulge in his trousers, exerting enough pressure to garner a satisfied "mmmph" from his partner. He undid the fastenings and with a swiftness that caught Doyle off guard, pulled trousers and pants down past Doyle's knees and lurched him around so that Doyle was pressed face against the damp, stone wall. Doyle gasped as the force of the cold hit his exposed extremities and his arms were twisted behind his back and held in the strong grip of Bodie's hand. His legs were

forced apart by a not too gentle knee between them. But then the heat of Bodie was plastered against him and a warm hand slipped round to encircle his fading erection with a promise of things to come.

"D'you want it hard, sunshine?" A rough whisperinto Doyle's ear. "A quick shag in the back alley before Cowley can catch us, eh?" Bodie slid his hand around Doyle's balls and gave them a sharp twist to illustrate. Doyle let out a gasp of mingled pain and pleasure.

Taking this as acceptance, Bodie rubbed the moist head of his cock up and down the crack of Doyle's bum, Doyle murmuring barely audible obscenities at the dual pleasure of fingers sliding along his cock and the cock sliding along his arse.

Holding his palm up to Doyle's face Bodie said, "Spit." Doyle hesitated, diverted by the sensations rippling through him, and Bodie roughly grabbed his jaw. "I said 'spit'," he hissed, and this time Doyle complied, saliva clinging to his beard stubble. Bodie rubbed the spittle onto the head of his cock and without more preamble, slowly skewered his seeping cock into Doyle, eliciting strangled moans, and began to rhythmically pump him, still holding his partner's arms behind his back. Doyle, face and shoulder pressed against the wall for balance, trembled with the incredible elation of relinquishing control to the man impaling him. The stone was cold, his balance precarious, and his arms ached, but with each powerful thrust of Bodie's cock pleasure speared through him. Bodie's free hand captured Doyle's cock, encasing it in a tunnel of sensation.

The mix of power and pleasure consumed Bodie, pounded through his veins as he rammed his body into the pliant Doyle. His thrusting became harder and more erratic as he edged towards climax. He pressed his face against Doyle's, breathing heavily, his searching mouth finding Doyle's neck and, grunting, he bit hard. The two partners came moments apart, their groans of pleasure drowned by a passing lorry.

For several quiet minutes they stood slumped together, recovering. No words, no movement, just silence and the slowing of hearts and lungs.

Leaning against the doorway, exposed parts tucked safely away, Doyle shivered, as much from the cold as from the aftermath of pleasure. Watching with satisfaction, Bodie smiled smugly at him.

"Bodie?" Ray rubbed absently at the soreness where Bodie had bitten him.

"Mmmm?" Bodie sighed.

"Why do we never kiss?" he asked, eyes staring intently at the averted profile of his partner.

"Bloody hell, Doyle," Bodie snapped, an edge of anger coloring his voice. "We've been through all this."

"Yeah. But why?" he persisted. "It's not like this is some anonymous fuck."

"Bugger all, Doyle." Bodie was getting infuriated. After all, this was sex, just good hard sex between a couple of mates. No need to bollocks it up with romance and flowers, all that crap that made women such a chore. "You want to make us out like a couple of fairies?"

"Dunno... Bodie, a kiss is just a kiss. Doesn't have to mean anything. Just would be nice...sometimes."

"Well if you want bloody kisses go find yerself a bleedin' bint."

All good humor dispelled, they returned to the carto wait impatiently for their replacement agents.

The day that had started with such a chill, turned warmer. Cowley sent them off to "follow and observe" some bugger who ultimately got himself killed when he had the misfortune to pull a gun on Bodie's partner.

And Doyle met Ann Holly.

They spent the better part of the day trying to track down Doyle's grass, Benny, to find out what was going on, what the conection was between the very dead Conroy and, well, anything. Grasping at straws, Bodie thought, but then again, the sod did run and pull a gun. Not the actions of the pure at heart.

"Hey! You never told me how you got on." Bodie remembered Doyle had gone back to visit the woman in the flats where Conroy had bought it.

"Eh?" Doyle wasn't with him, his mind back on the early events of the morning.

"With that bird. At the block of flats," Bodie clarified, always interested in what his partner got up to.

Coming back into focus Doyle stated, "Ahh. She's a toughie."

"Oh yeah?" He wanted details. Lascivious details. After all, share and share alike. "What do you

mean?"

"Mind of 'er own. Determined." This was not the usual type of woman he ran across and that difference held a certain appeal.

"Well it wasn't her mind you were interested in, mate." Bodie leered, hoping for some of the juicier bits.

"Just went back to see if she was all right, all right?"

Knowing his partner's methods all too well he replied, "Ohh yeahhh."

"Anyway, she doesn't like our sort," Doyle tried unsuccessfully to mentally dismiss her.

"Sounds interesting." Well, not really, he thought. She had seemed a bit stiff looking to him in the brief moments they'd shared after the shooting. But there must have been something in her to catch Ray's fleeting attention. "Bit of a challenge anyway." Just a passing fancy. He'd tire of her rapidly, Bodie was certain.

"Yeah," Suddenly, Doyle spotted a familiar red jacketed kid down the street; someone who might know where to find Benny. "Hey, pull over," he said to Bodie. Leaning out the car window he yelled "AY! TONY! I'm looking for Benny..."

They found Benny; buried under a pile of rubbish he was barely alive, beaten within an inch of his life. As they drove to hospital Doyle had that glazed-over look, a sure sign of impending depression. Oh, no, moaned Bodie inwardly. Another case of St. Doyle the Martyr.

An early dusk had settled in as sirens whined and doors slammed. Bodie sat huddled in the car waiting for Doyle to return from casualty with a report on Benny. Most of the residual heat had dissipated from the car's interior and to keep himself occupied during the interminable wait, Bodie mentally ticked off all the pleasant things awaiting them once they got home. A few fingers of scotch to relax them both, peel away some of the brooding tension that was starting to grow around Doyle like a cocoon, then a good, hot meal (he remembered Ray had frozen the leftover lasagna last weekend) and then, he grinned inwardly, eyes clsoing at the image, a nice, faceless fuck with a willing female. Shouldn't be hard to drum one up even this late in the day. Or, if Doyle was up for it, maybe a slow, leisurely, session on the divan sucking each other off by turns. Yeah, that would

be better, unless Ray was going into a funk. Was a little too early to tell yet, but the arrows were pointing that way.

Another siren wailed by him. Forlorn sound, that, he thought a little miserably as he realized that Ray was going to be trippin' the guilt fantastic over Benny and that he, Bodie, just wasn't up to dealing with Doyle in that kind of mood. Maybe then, a drink at the local and a few willing girls to take the edge off.

Out of the side mirror he glimpsed his partner approaching. Hunched and cold, a depressed looking Doyle got into the car.

"Comatose. Ten percent chance," he stated simply.
"Boy, they really hurt him didn't they?" Bodie mumbled, not at all surprised by anyone's ability to inflict such violence.

"But why? A warning would have been enough for Benny; he was scared of his own shadow. Why'd they have to go and beat him to pieces?"

Bodie looked at him,l gauging his mood, trying to calm him. "Hey, it's just a job."

"Yeah, what a job."

Making a quick reading of his partner's emotional state and his own willingness to deal with it, Bodie, piped, "Come on, you need a drink and some female company."

Exhaling noisily, his head tilted back against the car seat, Doyle replied wearily, "Nah, I just want to go home."

Okay, so maybe it was better this way if Doyle was going to be like this. Bodie really wasn't in the mood to be Doyle's punching bag or father confessor tonight. He started up the car without comment.

"Maybe she was right about us," Doyle mused.
"Eh?" Bodie looked at him quizzically, one brow quirked. But his only reply was a shake of a head. It was all too much to explain and Doyle looked far too tired, too mentally exhausted to cope. They drove in silence.

Standing in his silent flat, Doyle found he was not in the mood to sit alone after all. Pulling away in his own car, he headed toward the block of flats where Conroy had died. And where Ann Holly lived.

After an abrupt call from Cowley to escort him to hospital, Bodie paced near the car, hands stuffed into jacket pockets, waiting for his boss and word on Benny. An overcoated Cowley exited the doors and walked briskly toward his agent.

"Well, sir?" Bodie inquired. A grim look on his face, Cowley shook his head economically, words unnecessary.

Damn, thought Bodie. This would tear it with Doyle. "Well, I'm not goin' to be the one that tells him," he answered as they got into the car and pulled away into the wet night.

Weaving through traffic, Bodie kept his eyes on the road and off of Doyle. Was acting a bit erratic, his mate was. A bit over the top, threatening to push a kid like Tony over the balcony to get information the poor sod didn't even have. Just wasn't like Doyle to be that adamant without real provocation. Something must really be eating at him, more than just Benny.

Ignoring Tony cowering in the back seat, he asked,"What's got into you, Doyle?" sparing a quick glance at the man beside him. Traffic was heavy for this time of day. "Normally have to pull me off. Is it this bird or something?" He checked the side mirror as he passed a car. "It's not just Benny is it. She not coming across.?"

"Knock it off!" Doyle grumbled, his anger permeating the air like smoke, transparent but definitely there.

"Or maybe she is." Doyle would not look at him. "Next thing you know you'll be tellin' me you're goin' to marry her," he half-joked, trying to steer things back to calmer waters. But they were the wrong words, the wrong approach. Instantly he wished them unspoken.

"Yeah, well I might just do that."

No. He had to be kidding. Had to be. But something in Doyle's tone told him he meant it. Bodie's hands gripped the wheel, knuckles white, face staring straight ahead. He was afraid to look at Doyle, afraid to see the truth of the words if he looked at the face he knew so well. No, this wasn't supposed to happen. Ray was too complicated a man, too addicted to the rush of adrenalin and the heat of power to want to settle down with some little society woman. Bodie understood his needs and his actions, but someone else wouldn't. Someone like Ann couldn't.

Bodie eyed him cautiously as traffic slowed to a crawl. "Ray...?"

"Sod off, Bodie," Doyle snapped. "I told you, I don't want to discuss it." Silence curled up around them like a chill, making him hunch his shoulders to the cold.

Long minutes later, shaking off the self-imposed brume, Ray said quietly, "You don't understand. 'S getting to me. All of it. Benny's dyin' was just the capper. 'M tired of fighting, Bodie. I want to get out." Bodie shot him a glance, keeping his face carefully neutral while he clenched his fingers tighter still around the steering wheel. "Ann's been offered a position in New York. I was thinkin', maybe..."

What? New York? Was Doyle off his nut? He couldn't possibly, couldn't really be thinking... Bodie shuddered, a physical reaction to the suddensickness he felt. It was one thing to contemplate marriage, something else entirely to run halfway across the world. To run away from Bodie. He determined not to let it show. "You don't mean it, mate. You're in too far, too long. Wouldn't know what to do with yourself, you wouldn't." Or without me, he thought. "Once a copper, always a copper."

"Yeah. Maybe. I don't know." Ray looked tired and, mentally pulling away from Bodie, fell into another long, uncomfortable quiet.

Their relationship had always been filled with companionable silences and bickering interspersed with bursts of genuine anger and banked-down passion, the rhythms of their lives keeping in step. Though they never discussed it, both knew that was why they worked so well together, able to anticipate each other's thoughts, actions and leaps of faith in the field; able to provide for each other's needs off the field. They were infamous for their rapport, working together as one mind to pull the scattered pieces of a puzzle into a coherent whole. But what the rest of CI5, except perhaps Cowley, didn't know, would never know, was how that rapport, that deep-rooted understanding of each other, spilled over into the bedroom, or the kitchen, or any other suitable spot, and how that rhythm built and crescendoed and consumed them in its wake. Since Ann though, Bodie thought ruefully, they'd been just that half-beat out of sync.

Exhausted from long hours tramping round the peaceful suburbs, setting up surveillance and thenshowing the evidence of the Holly household's comings and goings to Cowley, Bodie entered his dark flat, the chill damp hitting him immediately. Banging the door shut, throwing his jacket at a chair, he wrenched the holster from his shoulders and stood, gripping the leather encased gun.

Rage consumed him. Everything inside of him screamed with pain of it. Rage at the potential loss of this man who dictated the emotional flow of his life. Rage at this need so suddenly and so disquietingly discovered. Ray was betraying him with that bitch Ann and he seemed powerless to change it. If it were just a fling he could have coped, he thought, slamming the holster onto the kitchen table and reaching for the kettle. He could have accepted Ray's desire to be with her, he told himself, filling the kettle automatically, water splashing his shaking hand. After all, despite their years working and sleeping together, they had always left it open-ended, each one heading for the birds when the need or desire was there. But after each one they returned to the other, to the closeness and compatibility and raw sexuality. It was unspoken but each knew the need for the other was uppermost and unquenchable. At least they had known up until now.

Flinging open the cupboard door and reaching for the instant coffee, he roughly unscrewed the lid and jammed a spoon into the jar.

Bodie wasn't certain but he thought Cowley seemed to know, seemed to accept this dark, *demi-monde* of his best team. He'd probably seen it many times before in the covert underworld of a life spent in intelligence. And after all, he'd paired them, nurtured them. He understood the lives they led, the closeness required in order to survive in a world of extremes of violence, of death always licking at their heels.

He poured the boiling water and began to stir, the action matching the pace of his thoughts. A terrible whirlpool of liquid spun violently, hot coffee dribbling down the side of the mug, pooling on the table.

And that comment the other day about the small print in their contracts, and about marriage, that it wasn't ever likely to affect Bodie, was that an oblique reference to Bodie's predilections for more than the occasional man? The Cow had files on everything about them; he might not know the details but the tendency towards brief liaisons with men was there. No, Bodie thought, absently tapping the spoon on the table top, if he thought it gave the partnership its special edge, then Cowley wouldn't care if they slept with each other.

But while Cowley might not be absolutely clear on their relationship, he was aware of the recent tension between them and the potential, very real, of losing Doyle and his best team. Cowley was nothing if not ruthless in his protection of CI5 and his agents. Once Bodie had determined that there was something not quite right in the Holly family tree, Cowley urged him to do what needed to be done to keep Doyle on the team. Team or no team, Bodie was determined to keep Doyle in his bed. By force or by force of will, it didn't matter. Bodie got what he wanted.

But getting what he wanted was a long and frustrating process and his patience was wearing thin. He had spent days trying to trace Holly and connect him with Bennie's death or Conroy. And ever since Doyle had hooked up with this Holly woman Bodie hadn't seen much of his partner. Even this evening, when, stopping by Doyle's flat in the hopes of a pint and a fuck, he had instead found him the busy little *hausfrau* preparing dinner for Ann, who, gasp, couldn't cook. Stupid cow, and with Doyle bleating after her like some lovesick ram on heat, the entire thing was disgusting. Couldn't his stupid git of a partner see what kind of fool he was acting?

Well, his plans for the evening had gone nowhere. Here he was turned out into the night. A dark glare in the direction of Doyle's window and he shoved his hands into his pockets, jacket fabric twisting and bunching at the action. He set off in the direction of his motor.

Serious. His bloody bugger of a partner was serious about the woman. Why the hell would Doyle be that way? He knew as well as Bodie did that the chances of an active CI5 agent sustaining along term relationship were practically nil. Rather like Russian roulette but with only one chamber empty, he thought savagely. You were doomed from the start.

Worse, he brooded, head down and booted toe viciously scuffing at a discarded bolt from a nearby renovation project, even if Ray were smitten with a bird, why should he, Bodie, be so be so upset? There was a pinging as the metal piece traversed a railing, clattering down steps to come to rest in front of the entrance to a basement flat. And he was upset. Upset with Doyle. Upset with himself. And upset with the notion that he should be having these feelings in the first place. Bloody hell!

He looked up to find himself at a pub—Doyle's local of all places. Well, he had wanted a drink and

a willing body, hadn't he? Might as well take advantage of the circumstances.

"Half, please," he greeted the publican, tossing coins on the counter and turning to survey the room's occupants. There were one or two likely prospects. But in the end he sat silently for hours in a corner spot, eschewing all offers of companionship, drinking steadily, if not heavily, until time was called. Doyle had a lot to answer for.

But answers were not forthcoming. A half empty bottle of whisky sat on the floor. An almost full glass of whisky was perched on Bodie's chest as he sprawled boneless on the divan, one arm flung over his eyes, keeping the dark at bay. He was miserable. Angry, lonely and miserable. Facing Doyle tonight at headquarters, even with Cowley there to take responsibility, had been worse than even his worst nightmares. The betrayal in Ray's voice... He took a slow swallow of whisky, feeling the burn.

Doyle's recriminations were stilringing through his head. "You..." he had spat at Bodie, "...checkin' up." Bodie's head had dropped into his hands, eyes staring unseeing at the pitted table top, now staring unseeing into the black night. "Did you bug my bedroom?" As if Bodie would want to listen to the sounds of Doyle making love to her: the sounds of flesh on flesh, of grunts and sighs and the cataclysmic crescendo of Doyle's orgasm filling his ears, burning into his soul, cutting out a piece of him. The anger and hurt in Doyle's eyes, in his voice, were nothing compared to the anger and hurt Bodie was feeling that moment. Nothing compared to the way his belly felt as if it had been slit down the middle with a knife. Couldn't Ray understand that he hadn't wanted to do this, that he'd had to do it, to save Ray? To save them both.

But now Doyle was on suspension and all because of that woman. Damn her! And damn Ray for putting him through this. He eased the glass carefully to his pursed lips, trying not to spill any of the liquid. A little trickle of scotch slipped out the corner of of his mouth, dribbled over his chin, down his neck, to soak into the cushion underneath. If he'd've just fucked her and left her then none of this would be happening. Ray wouldn't be thinking of leaving him, would still be on the streets with him, would still be in his bed.

Bodie couldn't imagine what it would be like without Doyle, had always assumed Ray'd be right there beside him: always. He needed him around to survive on the streets and off. It had come to that. Not just liking to have the man around, relying on his honed survival skills and supplying innumerable hours of companionship and great fucking; somewhere along the way it had come to be more.

As he sat in his morose haze, slowly turning the glass in his hand, he was overcome with the dawning, dreadful recognition of what they had really become to each other. What they had become... He was scared out of his wits, more terrified than he'd ever been facing an enemy, even certain death. But this was worse than death. This was living. When had this power over one man metamorphosed into this subtle subjugation of the other? When had the balance backflipped and left Bodie in the unenviable state of need that so engulfed him now?

"Jesus, Doyle," he whispered aloud, a hollow sound in the dark. "We've walked through hell together and come out smiling at the other end." There was no response, only the soft ticking of the clock in the kitchen. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?" he shouted.

Feeling annoyed at the intrusion that would have been so welcome just days before, Doyle pressed the buzzer to let Bodie into the flat. Bodie entered, his expression closed, eyes cold.

"Look, mate, I'm in a hurry. Goin' out, y'see," Doyle said walking briskly toward the bathroom, probably trying, Bodie assumed cynically, to hide his nagging feeling of guilt about his partner behind the trivialities of his ablutions.

"Ann," Bodie said flatly, following Ray down the hall.

"Yeah, Ann. 'S'matter? Thought you'd given her your Royal Seal of Patronage," Doyle grinned, referring to the uneasy dinner the three had shared.

"Yeah, well, it's different now," Bodie replied.

"Oh, yeah?" Doyle looked distracted as he combed his hair in front of the mirror.

"It's different now cause you're gettin' too involved," Bodie said leaning against the corridor wall, arms folded across his chest, heart thudding as he prepared for the conflagration he knew he was igniting.

He tried to look at Ray dispassionately but he couldn't. What had begun as a friendly having it away with a mate had unwittingly evolved into something more meaningful, something more intrinsic to his life. But he had to keep the upper hand, he reminded himself, keep in control. To show weakness was to lose an equal amount of control and he had to have that: control of his life, of his emotions, of his passions.

"Too involved? Look mate, it's none of your business how involved it gets," Doyle said from the doorway.

"But it ismy business, lover." Bodie said harshly as he grabbed Doyle's arm and started to propel him into the sitting room. "When you decide to dump me for some cold bitch, then it becomes my business." His business to keep Doyle from making the biggest mistake of his life. HIs business to keep Doyle.

"You bastard," Doyle growled and tried to pull away as Bodie manhandled him. "Where do you get off callin' 'er a bitch? And what the bloody 'ell do you think you're doin'? I told you I'm on my way out. Gerroff!"

Bodie released him, but he stayed his ground, unmoving, a mountain of strength Doyle would have to battle to get past. "I don't give a fuck what your plans are, you're going to listen to me *now*," Bodie said darkly. "She's a cold bitch and she's all wrong for you." And now, he thought, is our moment of truth, our reckoning. He knew then precisely where this conversation was leading, inexorably and inevitably: it was what they had become.

"Oh, and you're all perfect for me, eh?" Doyle sparked, looking at the smoldering fire behind Bodie's eyes and wondering what the hell was going on.

"Yeah, I am, sweetheart. I know you. I understand what motivates you, what gets you going. She doesn't."

"Oh, come off it, Bodie. It's different with Ann."
"Oh, I'm sure it is."

"Look, I've got to go," Doyle sighed. His voice had lost its belligerence, the tones sliding out smoothly, patiently, as if to calm an unreasoning child, a petulant Bodie. the musclesof his body, too, relaxed; he seemed about to step around Bodie.

"No!" Bodie thundered, moving towards him. Doyle looked startled, perhaps unbelieving, as Bodie pushed him onto the settee. He was even more startled when Bodie straddled him, hands on Doyle's shoulders, one knee on the settee, the

other between Doyle's legs, pressing firmly into his balls.

Not wanting a scene, not wanting to provoke Bodie further, he fought to remain calm, to not react to Bodie's aggression. He sat open-mouthed, awed by Bodie's anger and the sexual urgency suddenly rippling through him as the pressure on his genitals continued. But as hard as he tried, the instinct to resist, to fight back, swept through him and he attempted to throw Bodie off with a swift upsurge of strength. Bodie had him too well pinioned and the almost agonizing pressure of the knee in his balls stilled him momentarily.

"Come on, Ray, fight me," Bodie taunted, shifting to put more weight on his upstart captive. Doyle tensed, trying to break the firm hold on his shoulders. "That's it, sunshine," he rasped, heartbeat surging, "struggle." Bodie's cock began to fill with the urgent coursing of blood as Doyle angrily twisted under him. "Ohh yeahh, show me how big and tough you are." He smiled a thin, humorless smile.

Suddenly, Doyle slumped back into the cushions, all physicall resistance gone. "No, Bodie," he glared furiously. "Say what you fucking well have to say and then get the *fuck* out of here." He kept his voice dangerously even, deceptively calm.

Bodie eyed him for a moment. He realized angrily and grudgingly that having Doyle had become akin to breathing. Bodie needed him now to keep on living in the most fundamental way. And he was not going to let Ray go.

"You can't do this, Ray. You can't do this to us." Anguish and threat mixed in his tone.

Doyle narrowed his eyes. "It'll work out," he said purposefully misunderstanding. "When we get this thing with her father cleared up, I'll talk to the Cow about the suspension. We'll be back on the streets in no time, mate." And he shook his head, as if *that* would clear up their situation, as if that could negate his body's betrayal.

"Do you honestly think she's going to let you keep on at CI5?" Bodie asked acidly, running his thumb along Doyle's jawline.. "Come on, Ray, she hates what we do. You said yourself she doesn't like *our kind*." He glared at the man under him, daring him to contradict. "She thinks we run around all day shooting at villains," he continued, one hand absently stroking the curve of Doyle's neck. "And the hours. You think she's goin' to adjust to you always being on duty? To being on

an oppo for weeks? Come on," he said condescendingly. "She's goin' to have you sittin' behind a desk atrophyin' in no time. Think you can adjust to that, copper? Nah, you need to be out racing about, savin' the world."

"She's not like that, Bodie. She just needs time to adjust," Doyle said softly. "A little time." Bodie's hands were on him now, moving sinuously, playing lightly over the twist of muscle and flesh, weaving an erotic web of touch.

"She doesn't know what it's like." Bodie could feel the desire rise up inside him, feel himself harden. "The power," he whispered as he rubbed a strong thumb over Doyle's balls, "the control," his hand slipped up and with a slow, bruising pressure his thumb sank into the windpipe of Doyle's neck, cutting off his air for what felt like an eternity, "the taste of blood," his head dipped and he nipped the tender lower lip drawing a small bead of blood. Running histongue over the wound, he licked the blood away. "You'll be crying for it, Ray. And you'll be crying for me cause you need me, Ray. You need me like a junkie burns for a fix," Bodie breathed.

"Burn for me, Ray," he growled as he ran one strong, blunt finger down the line of Doyle's cheek to quivering jaw and slowly down over his throat and Adam's apple, feeling the involuntary swallow at the pressure of the finger. Bodie traced the finger along the edge of Doyle's shirt, his eyes never leaving Doyle's. He slid the fabric until his finger was perched on Doyle's nipple, slowly, agonizingly circling the aureola with the barest of touch. Bodie could feel the tension building up in Doyle, feel Doyle's cock getting harder, straining against his trousers, the pressure of it above Bodie's knee. He rotated his knee slightly and tightened his grip on Doyle's shoulder, a feral smile flitting across his features at Doyle's uneven breath as he strained for control, knowing he had no control. It was Bodie in command. Bodie unfolding the situation, exposing his passion, his cruelty, his desperation, fraction by fraction, piece by piece.

"I know you. Every bit of your soul and every bit of your body. I know what you want. I know what scares you in the dark and," he smiled wickedly, pinning Doyle with his gaze, "I know what turns you on in the dark. I can give it to you, Ray, I can give it to you up your arse or down your throat. I can make you beg." A small breath escaped Doyle's mouth as Bodie applied more pressure

with his knee. A spasm passed through Doyle's body.

"Please!" Doyle whispered.

"Like it rough, you do," Bodie smiled. "Rough and nasty. D'you think our Ann will understand? Can she give you what you need? Can she fuck you up the arse or suck you till you come screaming? Imagine a knee trembler in the alley with 'er? Couldn't be done, my son. She's passionless, Ray. But I'm not," he whispered as he leant his face down close to Doyle and gently shifted the knee pressed into his groin. Doyle almost whimpered as the pleasure seared through him.

Doyle was now on heat. He could feel Bodie's warm breath against his face, feel the weight and the strength and unleashed power of the man kneeling on him. He could smell the mixture of soap and arousal that was Bodie and the scent filled him, threatening to overwhelm him, to topple any self-will Doyle might have left. He was precipitously close to the edge from nothing more than a few touches and Bodie's overwhelming presence. Acutely aware of every movement of Bodie's, of every muscle that shifted, of every blink of his eyes or intake of breath, Doyle's face was flushed and covered in a fine sheen of sweat. He sat still under Bodie, completely under the indomitable man's control. Bodie's eyes had not left Doyle's and the blue seemed to penetrate him. They were aware of everything said and unsaid.

"Don't leave me," Bodie whispered with a fierce intensity, terrified by the fear of losing this man as he did the unthinkable, the one thing that would forever tie him to this need. He leant his face close to Doyle's and gently, reverently and with tremendous care, kissed him on the lips; not a wet lingering kiss, nor a chaste little peck, but a solid, passionate meeting of flesh. He laid himself bare.

With that confession racing through his veins, Doyle almost came. Only the sharp pain of the grinding knee stilled him. And in that moment, Bodie could have cut Doyle's heart out and Doyle would have bled for him gladly. In that moment, he knew what he held, or rather what held him, and that it was real and passionate and unconditional. It was a moment from which neither would be able to turn back.

The blunt finger flicked once at Doyle's nipple and just as suddenly as it had begun, it was over.

Bodie had made his point, had said too much, perhaps. It was time to escape before he exposed any more to this man. He slipped off of Doyle, headed for the door and stopped. Hoping to salvage something from the unprecedented show of emotion he had just given Ray, crying to himself to not give in, to not let Ray see the need that was burning at his inner core and cascading through his body, he slowly turned and calmly said, "A kiss is just a kiss, sunshine," and then he was gone. Doyle sat slumped on the divan, exhausted, confused, and still aroused. He looked like the aftermath of a storm: flushed, tousled, disarrayed, mind and body reeling. Bodie had looked as tidy as when he had walked in.

Bodie and Cowley stood in the small office discussing the possibilities of Holly's drug drop by air. They had spent considerable time tracing leads together; time Bodie seemed to have a lot of since Ray's involvement with Ann and his subsequent suspension.

Cowley was getting frustrated, knowing that finding this drug shipment was too close to the

proverbial needle in the haystack, and the air authorities were none too pleased, either, with the delays and long searches it was engendering. But this idea of Bodie's, two small planes flying in tandem, one dipping below radar and dropping $off the shipment, there \, might \, be \, something \, in \, this.$

"We'll stake it out. Move in a task force and get over there ourselves, eh." Cowley picked up the phone to start making arrangements.

Entering without knocking, a serious Ray Doyle broke in. "I'm coming with you." Bodie's eyes locked on him. "Holly knew Conroy. I've just seen a photograph of 'em. They were in the RAF together."

"RAF," Bodie's brows lifted as he watched Doyle. His Doyle. Back in the fold.

The next day, entering stealthily only to find her father being interrogated by CI5's best, Ann listened and her trust in Ray Doyle crumbled. Wailing like a banshee through the building, she stormed out of their lives, leaving Doyle to bitterly watch her drive away.

Bodie was there waiting.

RAPERE

(THE SEIZING)

For serious Avon/Blake fans, "Rapere" consists of three companion pieces each beginning with an identical premise and opening line: "We require," the Ultra said, "for our library purposes, the Human Bonding Ceremony." And with those words, Sebastian and M. Fae have cut straight to the heart of the themes they wish to develop: the relationship between Blake and Avon as viewed through sex. All three stories are psychosexual explorations in which the sex not only advances the plot, but is the plot. Rapere is Latin for seize or snatch. From it derive rapture (a synonym for ecstasy, Sebastian's original choice of title), raptus (a state of intense or overwhelming excitement; ecstasy), and raptor (one who seizes by force; robber). One final note for purists: the timeline of the original Blake's 7 series has been adjusted. For our purposes, the Liberator encountered the Ultras while Blake was still on board.

RAPERE I:

RAPTURE

"We require," the Ultra said, "for our library purposes, the Human Bonding Ceremony."

Blake looked blank. "What's that?"

He's going to pretend he doesn't know, Avon thought, and then a flash: he *doesn't* know...

There was Blake standing there, chin lifted; such a large man, purposeful and strong, he could engulf this pale slip of an alien in a vortex of vitality.

And yet it was the pale alien, currently, who held every whip and every card.

"The Human Bonding Ceremony," the alien said impatiently. "The Human Sexual Experience."

Avonstudied Blake briefly, then the wall. Blake was in charge here, or so he liked to think; let him act as if he were. Blake was frowning, restless. The alien delineated it again, with a cold patience which echoed many past encounters with beings of lesser intelligence. Blake interrupted the speech quite early on: "Yes, yes. I'm familiar with the process."

The way Blake said it, with a sort of tetchy sarcasm, amused Avon, though he saw that Blake hadn't intended to be funny. Blake was saying sharply, "I'm afraid you need to check your facts. There are two sexes of human: one of each is necessary."

"No," the alien said, with that utter impassivity which made Avon suspect some machine element in its makeup: "It is the Male Bonding Ceremony which we require. The reproduction ritual we already have in our library."

Blake stared. "The Male—?" He uttered a short

laugh, ran fingers through his hair. "I'm afraid there's no such thing."

"Youare in error," the alien said gravely. "Many are the references to it in your literature. Shakespeare. James Kirkup. Gor-don Merrick."

Blake, one pace in front of Avon, representing his own gang; he faced the alien in utter puzzlement. "Well, *I've* never heard of it." He swung around. "Avon?"

Avon regarded him with irritation, uncertain from Blake's cues whether this was the voice of bluff or naïvety.

"He means the practice of homosexuality, Blake."

Blake stared, then he clapped a hand to his head. "Of course." He even grinned. "Stupid of me. I thought he was on about some peculiar tribal ritual."

Well, if Blake could find something to laugh at, all well and good. *He* certainly could not. Butterflies stirred in Avon's well-schooled belly and a frisson of apprehension stung his skin like insects' wings as he looked at the alien standing there, so similar to a machine, so implacable in its dedication to its programme, so unmovable, unreachable.

Then Blake understood.

"You can't mean, you want me and Avon—" No-one answered.

Blake exploded into futile action. "It's absolutely out of the question," he snapped, and began to pace up and down, up and down. "You don't understand the implications. It's quite impossible."

"Then you will die," the alien said simply.

"I'd *rather* die—" Blake began hotly, and then he stopped, glancing at Avon, clearly wondering just how far Avon's instinct for survival would take him.

"Would you, Blake?" Avonsaid to him harshly; "Would you really?" and Blake was silent, shook his head, for once in his life utterly at a loss. It was a neat dilemma. Even if he felt strongly enough to expire rather than comply, should he force the consequences of that choice on Avon, who might not?

The alien switched on a viewscreen. "The woman too will die."

And of course, that decided Blake as he gazed up at the wall, at golden Jenna, all unaware. Standing staunchly in her cell, looking doggedly for an escape, not knowing that it was in their hands all along.

They were left alone in a different room, a purpose-built specimen cell by the look of it. It contained a medicine shelf, a sink, and a bed.

As the door shut behind them, Blake glanced at Avon and turned away, his voice low. "I'm sorry, Avon."

"Don't be," Avon snapped, unaccountably irritated by Blake's assumption of responsibility; he watched the broad shoulders hunch defensively. With the deliberate intent to shock he said: "Shall we get on with it?" And turning one palm to the ceiling he flicked open the fastener of his suit, began to strip.

Blake turned, and looked and leapt, to stop him. "Wait a minute. *Avon*."

"What's the point of putting it off?" Avon rasped, an unpleasant smile shaping: he shook Blake's hand off.

"A moment, Avon," Blake said, one degree more forceful; the voice of his leader. Avon sighed and desisted.

"Don't tell me: you wanted to wait till you were married?"

Sarcasm was his way of coping: Blake's was somewhat different. Brushing off Avon's hostility as he so often did, he sat down on the bed, elbows on his knees, and looked up. "I'm not sure I can do it at all." His tone was open, confiding, as if he spoke to a friend: someone he liked, someone he trusted. Avon knew it was an act; Blake neither liked nor trusted him, or if he did he was a fool.

"What's this?" he sneered. "A mountain you

are *not* prepared to scale? I'm sorry the view is not more to your taste." He stared at Blake with as much insolence as he could muster; he himself had strange, fleeting sexual whims and hatred would help him. Already, viewing Blake's panic, he felt a dizzying rush, adrenalin surging to his nerveends.

"I'm sorry, Avon," Blake said, calmly enough. He examined his palms, dried them on the soft cord of his trouser-legs. "I don't—" He veered off the subject abruptly. "What the hell do they want from us?"

Avonregarded him through hooded eyes. "You heard him. They've read the books." He smiled nastily. "Now they want to see the pictures."

Blake was still looking at him, hiding nothing, even, perhaps, Avon fancied, appealing to him to take the lead. "It's all very well letting you in for this—*myself* in for—" He stopped, then resumed—" without any real idea of whether we can—"

Avon did not help him out. Blake looked up at him again, his rugged Robin Hood face mild and curious. "How do you really feel about this, Avon?" was all he said, in the end.

Avon said, "What do you expect me to say, Blake, 'I've been waiting for the chance all along?" Making his point, his eyes flicked over Blake's dishevelled form with clear disinterest. "What I feel, precisely, is that this is something we have to do to get out of here alive. Nothing more, nothing less."

Blake was off in a world of his own. "I wouldn't do it—wouldn't make you do it—if it wasn't for Jenna."

"Oh really," Avon said tightly.

"She doesn't deserve—"

Bitter, Avon put himself nearer Blake and glared down. "Understand this, Blake. You're not making me do this. I'm not doing it for Jenna. I'm doing it for *me*. Because *I* want to get out of this place." Perversely, the dark eyes widened, a ripple of black humour softening the Stygian effect as an amusing thought occurred: "What a pity their file on human sexual reproduction is closed. Myself locked up in solitude. You and Jenna—forcing yourselves into a coupling distasteful to both of you—for *my* sake." His gaze, malicious, teased Blake: Avon had seen too many looks from one to the other, seen Blake too often visibly strain for the decision that it wouldn't work, that he and Jenna must deny themselves for the good of them all.

There was a little silence. Blake, his brow furrowed, looked down. "Or might that have been," Avon mused wickedly, "a rather less—painful—sacrifice?"

"Shut up, Avon," Blake said with the stirrings of violence. "I'd do the same for Cally. Or Vila. Any of you."

The argument might well have continued, Avon being entertained by such things, and Blake unable to resist a spirited defence, but at that moment an alien voice billowed into the room, making them both start: "Is continual discussion a necessary part of the ritual? Recording has begun some minutes ago."

Silence once more, and with it Blake's rising temper smoothed out. He looked again at Avon with something approaching concession. "Well? Are you ready?" he said with a glimmer of humour. "That's the time bell, I think."

Avon nodded briefly, began again to attend to the fastenings of his clothes. He did it neatly, automatically, actions he had performed a thousand times before in the privacy of his room: his eyes were distant and shuttered.

Blake simply watched him. Trying—looking at the slender musculature of his thighs, darkly downed; the extreme white curve of his buttocks, the dusky outline of genitals suspended slackly beneath. Blake looked away abruptly, sharply gripped by revulsion. "I can't—" he took a deep breath and said, quieter, "Avon, I'm sorry."

Avon whipped around to stare at him, eyes narrowed and tense. "Yes, you can," he hissed.

Blake took another deep breath, and another, forced himself to look again. Avon was facing him this time; Blake let his eyes travel over the line of his body, which was unexpectedly fine: Avon was slighter than himself, sleek as a cemetery mink, a darkwhorled triangle of hair at chest and groin. Nothing horrible, after all. Just a human being, whose skin would feel soft, whose lips would be warm.

Blake steeled himself, because this was something he had to do: that was the absolute truth of it and there was no escape. Avon seemed even more resigned than he, to the point where he was past the doubt and worries which troubled Blake: perhaps he could leave it all to Avon—

Not that that seemed entirely safe.

"What are we going to do?" he asked bluntly, meaning exactly that.

"Use your imagination, Blake," Avon snarled. But imagination seemed, on second thoughts, to be a force Blake had never exerted in this area. It seemed that Blake was a novice. A virgin, even. The thought of that was quite—something.

"Have you ever done this before?" Blake asked him calmly enough.

Avon smiled at him; a strange smile, almost sweet. "I don't think that's any of your business."

Blake eyed him: seemed about to say something, changed his mind. Avon moistened his lips delicately with his tongue; stared at Blake.

"Shall we get on with it?"

Blake started, then collected himself. "Yes... Yes, of course." He began to strip, almost absentmindedly.

"What exactly—"

"Yes?" Avon enquired sarcastically, hungry for the contrast of his own cool with Blake's floundering: such things fed so well the darkest, sweetest place inside himself. Blake shrugged off his white shirt, started on the fastenings of his trousers.

"—what, exactly, are we going to do?"

Avon sat on the bed, swung up his legs, and leaned back. "It depends, doesn't it, on what they're expecting."

"Well?" Blake said sharply, not missing the way Avon was playing with him now, the way he was enjoying the rare sense of control. "You seem so damn sure of yourself, Avon, you tell me."

"I'd say," Avon said precisely, "that what they are expecting— is an approximation of heterosexual intercourse." He grinned, ghostlike. "Wouldn't you?"

Blake's last garment fell to the floor; he strode to the bed and seized Avon by the upper arms. "Then you'd better get started—hadn't you?" Avon looked at him, eyes narrowed, assessing Blake's frame of mind. "I'm sorry," Blake added, curtly. "I couldn't." And he let go of Avon, lay down on the bed, face down in complete and utter rejection.

Avon stared at Blake, naked and substantial, at the swell of his buttocks: a reclining cherubim awaiting his piercing. Probably an inspiring sight, for those that way inclined. Am I that way inclined? Avon wondered, his own nature a mystery to him, and it said nothing to him now.

Moving with instinct he put out one hand to touch Blake—withdrew it as if his skin was hot; then settled it, tentatively, on the small of Blake's back.

"Not just like that, Blake..."

After a moment Blake turned his head, one large brown eye appearing through the frame of his arm. "You too?" There was a definite softening; as if to discover that Avon shared his doubts was in some way a help to him.

"Just give me—" Avon managed, and then—"time." With one hand on Blake's shoulder he nudged him, gently enough, to lie on his back. Blake rolled willingly enough and lay propped with one hand behind his head, watching Avon's face.

Conscious of time running out, all in a blur and a hurry Avon touched Blake; the satin softness of his skin, the ridged delicacy of bone beneath. His palm brushed over Blake's breast, rubbing nipples; stroked down to his stomach. His eyes drifted from there to Blake's cock lying there, as large as he might have imagined but drooping; his throat moved rapidly as he swallowed over sudden dryness.

"Avon," Blake said softly, "you don't have to—we'll think of something else."

"Like what," Avonsaid, suddenly vicious. "Like what, Blake? What else have you to offer them?"

"We'll wait. Stall for time. Maybe Vila—"

"—Vila won't be back for 72 hours at the earliest." Avon's most disagreeable smile put in a fleeting appearance. "That's a lot of foreplay, even for amateurs."

"What's the matter with you, Avon!" Blake said, angered as always by defeatism. "Anyone would think—" But he stopped himself.

Avon had caught it. "Well, they'd be wrong," he said, low and dark and quiet. "You can hardly believe this is something I would choose."

Oddly enough the statement calmed Blake; he nodded. "I think what we must do—is explain to them that it isn't going to work. That humans of a certain sexual orientation are necessary. That it can't be—"

"And what will the reward for that be, Blake?" Avon cut in, snapping. The answer to that was obvious. Blake said nothing. Avon continued, softly, with an odd little smile: "So if I were you, I think you should begin to consider—my finer points."

"It's not that I—"

Avon pushed Blake, with a trembling hand. "Lie down, Blake." And, helpless, Blake did what

Avon said, watching him through wide brown eyes, shutting them as Avon began to caress him, stroking his cheek, his chest, his thighs. *Maybe*, Blake thought, *maybe it will be all right...*

But the truth was, he had only ever felt a mild revulsion at the thought of another man's touch: he fought an inner battle to subdue it which he seemed to be winning. Until he felt the brush of Avon's mouth on his belly.

His mind flying, his eyes opened wide: he stilled the instinctive motion of his hand and brought it, instead, to rest, gently on the dark head hovering at his groin. "Avon—no."

He could barely meet Avon's eyes. "I couldn't bear it," he said simply. "I'm sorry."

Avon's eyes hardened and he lifted his head, sitting up, away from Blake. He looked—stiffened with dislike, with pride. Blake noticed the difficulty he was having to keep his breathing even, the stain of colour on his pale skin.

"This isn't going to work for me," he said, as gently as he could. "Nothing to do with you. I just can't. But if you can—" he hesitated— "you go ahead."

Such a delicate issue: but Avon merely stared at him, eyes filmed with thought.

Struggling in Avon's silence, "Do you think you can?" Blake asked, but Avon didn't reply. He got up, left the bed and went to the wall where he pressed a sensor to open the cupboard there. Looking into it he retrieved something and threw it towards the bed. Blake stared at it: it was a tube of some emollient cream. A cold sensation drenched the inner walls of his stomach, but he forced himself to be sensible. It really was the only way, and he should be grateful, relieved that Avon was taking things in hand: yet the flash of resentment took him by surprise, and took more quelling than it should.

Avon sorted quickly through the contents of the unit: medical supplies, obviously, for the use of the various specimens who had been coerced into performing for library purposes. Lubricants such as he had tossed to Blake, some drug-strips he guessed were contraceptive in purpose (one problem they wouldn't have), a few packages he didn't recognise; and one he thought he did. Because he was looking for it, or something like it.

He took it out and opened the little vial, sniffing it. He inserted a little finger and tentatively touched the point of his tongue to the white powder adhering to it. Then he simply held it in his hand for a moment, thinking.

Eventually he went over to the bed and sat down again, next to Blake. He looked into the other man's face, a strange, searching look which made Blake frown.

"What's that?" he asked Avon, nodding at the vial.

"I believe it's a derivative of one of the phyloxygen compounds, vaporous hydroxide most likely," Avon answered him, precise as ever, adding: "But you might know it under another name. Have you heard of Rapture, Blake?"

"No—yes," Blake said, recalling. A drug beloved of pleasure palaces, of (particularly) homosexual dives, which fact he knew only because habitual use had been the centre of a health scare some years ago.

"A useful prop," Avon said, smiling faintly, "for when desire—or necessity in this case—outstrips performance." And as he looked at Blake, an invitation, a suggestion, alight in his eyes.

Blake grabbed at the chance. "Yes, let's do it." And Avon nodded once, took the stuff over to the sink and found the other things he needed in the cupboard.

"How do we take it?" Blake asked, brisk and purposeful now there was something positive to do. "Swallow it?"

"Intravenously is the traditional method," Avon said with his back to Blake. "Phyloxygen compounds are partly destroyed by the action of digestive fluid."

"If you say so," Blake said. He did not ask Avon if he were sure that what he held was a harmless physical stimulant; an astonishing omission, Avon thought, since it might equally well be strychnine, almost identical in colour and texture. How Blake trusted him! It was almost amusing.

He mixed the substance with a little water and shook it vigorously to mix it. As he did so, it foamed and turned blue, thereby changing at a stroke the odds of it being a phyloxygen compound into a much greater likelihood that it was, instead, a simple sulphate of some metal salt, and thus of no use whatsoever for the purposes of sexual stimulation. No, it was most likely a simple hygiene preparation for scouring alien skins.

A setback, indeed. Avon stared at it in disgust. He opened his mouth to tell Blake, so content in the knowledge that a practical solution to their problem lay at hand—and then he shut his lips tight on it and said nothing. His back was to Blake. The mixture he poured down the sink, and rinsed away. He took out of the cupboard another, sterile vial, put into it a small amount of plain water. Then he took up a hypodermic syringe and went over to Blake.

"Give me your arm." Blake extended it without hesitation and watched curiously as Avonsearched with the pad of his thumb for the tender blue vein which lay in the crook of Blake's arm. "Ready?" he asked, holding the spot with one hand, rubbing and pressing the vein to encourage it. He made a quick, trial shot with the syringe. A fine spray of drops went flying into the air.

Blake looked down at Avon leaning over him, noting the dark shine of his hair, the long straight nose, fine eyes shadowed by lengthy lashes. He did not blink as the sharp, glinting needle approached but watched steadily. Avon found the blue bulge of the vein with the tip of his needle and quickly eased it in. He looked up into Blake's eyes as he pressed the tab on the syringe; the water flowed into Blake's bloodstream and Avon smiled a little. Blake did not, just watched him soberly, trustfully.

Exhaling sharply, Avon withdrew the needle quickly. A bright red bead of blood appeared on the spot at once; Avon snatched it off with a scrap of lint and folded Blake's arm back on itself. The fact that Blake would certainly be unaware of the erotic significance of all this rather amused Avon; it was not lost on himself.

He rinsed the needle and filed the vial again. A charade: and yet, the success of sexual function being largely lodged in the mind, he had the notion that placebo would serve very well.

And afterwards, what a very handy scapegoat to pin the essential guilt upon.

He handed the equipment to Blake, and was gratified to see a flicker of alarm inform Blake's eye. "I'm out of practice. Don't want to hurt you. Would you rather do it yourself?"

"No," Avon said, though he could perfectly well have done: he wanted Blake to do it. to force him to it, if necessary. But Blake took the syringe, handling it experimentally, getting the feel of it.

"Just make sure there's no air in it," Avon added, watching Blake through black, black eyes. "Unless, that is, you want to kill me." And he smiled, a perverse humour dancing through his

gaze and out again, leaving it cold.

He extended his arm, and after a moment's hesitation, scratching him, Blake's needle pierced his skin roughly. It slid in, probed his vein for a moment of exquisite pain; and then the fluid flowed. He didn't flinch, watched the last detail, just as Blake had. He could see the needle, darkening the vein from inside; and then it was pulled out, a disquieting sensation which caused him to shiver. He took a deep breath, watched his own blood flood to the site of invasion.

Blake had lain down on the bed, had his eyes closed, apparently meditating. As Avon tipped the equipment into the disposal chute, he wondered what the alien watchers would be making of this, the ingestion of pure water into their mutual veins, and he rehearsed the perfect answer—*There is often an element of ritual sadism in human male bonding*—but the question never came, so he supposed that they were free to get on with it, that there was no more reason to delay.

Blake was lying there, slow calm breaths lifting his broad chest, rocked now in the cradle of a fallacy; a sense that it was out of his hands now, that it would be all right. "I'm sorry, Avon," he said, warm and affectionate. "To put you through all this—"

Avon shook his head and sat down beside Blake on the bed, turning over Blake's hand to expose the tender crook of his arm; a little crust of blood topped the tiny pinprick hole. His own was slower to stop: trust Blake to have more robust defences

"How long does it take to work?" Blake was asking.

"A minute," Avon answered, touching his shoulder, and leaving his hand there. He smiled down at Blake: a disconcerting smile, the smile he must use, perhaps, to a woman in his bed. "But I think we should—get acquainted?"

"Definitely," Blake said as Avon touched him; he could feel the stuff beginning to work already, flowing fire through his veins like brandy. He sighed, and stretched under the gentle passes Avon's fingertips made on his naked skin: it was intensely relaxing. As Avon's delicate touch sent a thrill shivering across his ribs he closed his eyes, every nerve in his skin tingling sweetly, and it was easy, so very easy, with Rapture coursing through his blood to his heart, to accept the pleasure offered him from another man's hand...

Avon massaged Blake's thighs with the palms of his hands, watching with a detachment almost clinical the enlarging of Blake's cock, stirring now, rearing as it made a blind search for the pleasuregiver; Avon wrapped his hand around it and held it tightly, silken skin moving over an iron shaft, velvet head nudging on his thumb. He settled into a more comfortable position beside Blake on the bed, lying on his side, finding an instinctive rhythm to please Blake, making his cock weep slick shining drops onto his moving fingers. His emotions, fickle, flitted here and there: why was he doing this without resentment, without revulsion, for a man he did not like. And then the answer came. It was because his instincts told him that somewhere along the way there might be something in this for him, something he couldn't quite define, some edge it might give him over Blake perhaps...

His eyes, narrowed and pensive, travelled over Blake's face; a well-used face, carrying its baggage of stresslines, brown and springy curls ranged along the broad forehead, and a large and generous mouth. A curious face; the face of an honest man.

Avon's gaze darkened as he looked upon Blake, troubled.

Everyone had the odd prick of conscience at times, gazing at a beggar in the street, a child who dully starved while your belly groaned with food; Avon, who considered himself to be an honest man also, knew that to act upon such stirrings was the mark of an idealistic fool.

Ah, but. The fact that some men—that this man—did not take the easy path of self disturbed Avon; it made him want to crawl into Blake and search out the truth of the man, so that it would no longer haunt him: purge the faint longing from his soul.

Perhaps this was the way.

Lost in his thoughts, he hadn't noticed Blake's eyes come open and dwell upon his face. It made him start, to look down and see it. A smile creased little lines around Blake's eyes; and Blake's hand went down to cover Avon's on his shaft, urging a little more, a little harder. Then he reached out, wrapped a firm and capable hand around Avon's cock, and squeezed.

Such an invasion: Avon stiffened in shock, glaring into Blake's face. Then he shut his eyes slowly as Blake's strong fingers wormed a sweet and willing flash through his cock; and something

he had never imagined began to happen to him.

Blake leaned towards him, quite naturally, as if Blake was a different person from the man who argued with him coldly and contemptuously; and kissed him.

Blake's lips felt warmer than his own, and Blake's tongue was gentle, hesitant, on his. Avon dragged his mouth away, and away again as Blake followed him: "No," he said, violently and simply, and Blake watched him. A little sad, a little puzzled; Avon was a mystery to him.

Breathing rapidly, his mind a swirl of anger and longing, Avon looked down at himself, his cock an elegant dagger, rising high and searching. Then he looked up into Blake's face again, and what he saw there stilled the words on Blake's lips, even as Avon made the dreadful request: "Turn over."

And after a moment Blake did so, rolling away from him and onto his stomach, settling himself comfortably. He turned his face to one side just as he had before, pillowed it on his arm. "Be quick, Avon," the tense words floated back across to Avon.

Avon picked up the tube of gel and smiled sarcastically, grimly, to himself. *Be quick*. Fortunate Blake, to think it was going to be so simple. At this moment Avon would have given a great deal for a large shot of Rapture, or the like: he dreaded the humiliation of failure. He unscrewed the tube. The cream was scented: exotic stuff.

He looked at the cleft of Blake's buttocks, forced himself to keep looking as he parted the crack with his thumbs.

But it really was nothing so very much to dread, just a secret valley hidden deep, and a small duskpink pucker, impossibly small and tight.

He covered his fingers with cream, stroked it softly into the place, heard Blake's sigh of nerves. And as he pressed into the silky opening with a fingertip, a tremendous surge of feeling took him by surprise, seized his belly in a grip of anxious desire: failure might have been humiliating but this was almost a deeper shame, the boundless delight of his cock at the sight of Blake's hidden opening, the terrible need to put it there.

He smiled tightly, grimly, to himself. Well, at least it was going to be possible.

More cream spurted from the tube and he eased it inside with one finger, two, silken walls gripping him; Blake sighed and shifted.

"All right?" Avon murmured to him.

Blake's voice was gruff, reluctant, as if he didn't want to talk. "Yes, it's—go on."

Avon covered himself densely with scented cream, took a deep breath. Blake lay on his stomach, a little to one side. Avon used his hands to part Blake's buttocks again, and to position himself, the tip of his cock nudging the little wet ring of muscle, whipping up within him a strange and fierce delight: oh, there was no doubt now, he could do what Blake shied away from, his cock eager and almost desperate for what it sensed lay near.

For a moment a purely intellectual revulsion flickered through his mind again, but it could not take hold amid the stronger signs of joy pulsing upwards from his groin; and as he pressed his body against Blake's his cock found passage suddenly and the thing was done.

Shock opened his eyes to their fullest extent; that and the terrible strain of holding himself back, as he knew he must. But he managed to stop, stopped all movement, dipped his head for a moment so that his face brushed the roughness of Blake's hair. "All right?" he whispered again, hearing his own voice ragged and hoarse.

"Be—gentle, can you?" Blake said again, muffled; and this time it had a peculiar effect on Avon. In holding Blake thus, vulnerable and helpless, he felt a strange and hurtful tenderness for him. Like a mortal wound, it went very deep. And hit him very hard, the pleasure sweetened a thousandfold; Blake so very much in his hands and at his mercy.

"Oh—gently, Avon..."

It was hurting him: Avon could imagine it, his own feelings turned inside out, the knife in your guts. With that new and painful care for Blake Avon thrust in gentle rhythm and breathed in the savage glory of it: himself, screwing Blake. Their panting breaths, the slick sound of his skin rubbing on Blake's as he moved, the warmth of Blake's thighs around his own, the tight, tight honey creeping up his cock. After a little while Blake gasped, turning his head to one side—"Avon—" whether in pain or pleasure Avon couldn't tell: but it brought into his mind from somewhere the words—I want to hurt you—to hurt Blake—just to hear you screaming my name... Pity for Blake burst over him like a wave, a deep and savage pity which only sharpened his own exquisite joy: he wanted to make Blake sweat, to cause him untold hurt: and then to soothe him, make him feel the

terrible wonder of it all; images danced before his eyes and Blake's moans came to his ears like music...

With a stifled sound he reached around Blake's body, his hand ranging restlessly over Blake's nipples, his belly, then down to his poor sad cock, curled up afraid; thrusting into him from behind even as he worked on it swiftly, sweetly, handling Blake now with a rough, sure arrogance. And Blake responded to that, was beginning to thrust back against him in a rhythm all their own, the sweetest of harmonies, so that Avon felt himself fall into a black vortex at the very heart of Blake's body: touching now all the secret places of Blake he had yearned without knowing to touch.

Love and terror and delight overwhelmed him: he heard the song again in his head and the rhythm went on and on. He kissed the sweetness of Blake's skin and rode, exulting, on the wings of a terrible, terrifying desire: to hurt, to have, to own.

Inside his fingers Blake's cock stiffened, and kissed his palm with something warm and wet, two, three...little pulses, dying away. It was the ultimate thing... Moved beyond thought Avon clasped Blake to him hard and thrust once more, breaking through some depth undreamed of, pouring all of himself out and into Blake in a rush of the purest and sweetest ecstasy he had known.

He was awakened from deep sleep by Blake's voice—

"Excuse me."

Avon opened his eyes, half awake, and looked into Blake's face, very near to his own. "Sorry," Blake said, with crisp apology, "Had to movegetting cramp in my arm."

Instant remembrance now: he remembered that they were on a different planet, another world entirely, and he tracked Blake with his eyes before closing them.

The mortal wound he had suffered moved again inside him. He understood something now about himself.

About himself, and about Blake.

Blake was rolling away from him, beginning to sit up. "Blake," Avon said, and laid a hand on Blake's arm, traced the line of dark hair there. He wanted Blake to touch him as he had touched Blake, pay some service to this tremendous thing which had sprung into life: it would be difficult, of course, more difficult even than—Anna, but Blake

was worth it just as she had been. Blake was as brave as he, and as strong: somehow, they would manage...brought together across the universe by impossible odds. He opened his eyes, and the world was in them.

Needing to wash, but hesitating to be so discourteous, Blake looked down into Avon's eyes, and was dazzled by what he saw there, the deep dark softness of them. He smiled to himself; Avon's dose of the drug must have been larger than his own, cobwebs still lingering in his system, making his eyes shine that way, his mouth a tender curve. Blake himself felt alert and clear, his mind sharp and the grip of Rapture completely gone. His body felt a little sore, but that was all. Not marked for life in any way. Funny, that he had thought in the depths of it he might be.

He shook his head. That had really been quite something!

"Certainly did the trick, eh Avon?" He patted Avon on the shoulder and got up.

Behind him Avon said slowly, "What?"

"That Rapture stuff. Certainly sent me to the sky and back." He laughed, and shook his head. Water ran into the sink. Blake buried his face in his wet hands and rinsed the sweat and salt away, but he was not insensitive, was suddenly uneasily conscious of the stillness of the man who lay on the bed. And, Blake decided, looking back on the sensual depths they had sunk to, no wonder. Avon was a civilised man: naturally he would be embarrassed. Best go easy on him for the next few days, give him a chance to forget, make it clear that he, Blake, was never going to remind him of this, the worst of times.

He swung around from the sink and began to put on his clothes. Try as he might he could think of nothing to say. The silence began to feel strained. What comfort had he to offer? Avon must be going through hell.

"You couldn't help it, Avon. It was the drug...we both got carried away."

For a moment he thought that Avon would not reply. He busied himself with dressing and did not look Avon's way.

Then Avon said, "Of course." It was Avon's voice, and yet not Avon's voice: an odd note rang in it. Desperately anxious to reassure him, Blake added: "I swear to you, Avon, it won't make any difference. I do swear that."

"Naturally," Avonsaid. He was getting dressed, at highly efficient speed. Finished, neatly belted, he straightened himself up.

"Avon."

Blake stopped him, looked into his face, saw how it had changed. No trace now of the drugged dazed softness of his eyes: vanished like smoke in the wind, Blake doubted now that he had ever seen it. Instead, they were cold, and black as death; the eyes of a dæmon from Hell.

Shocked, frozen, for a moment Blake stood transfixed in the glare of the look those eyes flung at him; and then he shrugged it off, turned away, prepared to leave.

It was a look he was to see in Avon's eyes just one more time.

September 1991

RAPERE II:

RAPTUS

"We require," the Ultra said, "for our library purposes, the Human Bonding Ceremony."

With varying degrees of unease, all three men in the small grey cell stared at the communications screen in the corner.

"Then I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed," Avon said urbanely, draping himself casually across the plump divan.

"Specify," the Ultra said in the same monotone it used for everything from statements of fact to emergency warning announcements.

"The human bonding ceremony," Avon intoned, a lecturer in a hall of half-wits, "requires one female and one male. As you can see," his gesture encompassed himself and his two unmistakably male companions, "you have what could be called an embarrassment of riches." A small, very sophisticated smile, a deprecation of the two men with him. "If one were accustomed to abject poverty, that is."

"This is false," the Ultra replied without looking up from the console in front of it. "We require the Human Bonding Ceremony. You will now proceed."

"Don't be stupid! You heard him, he says you need a woman and a man and for once in his life, Avon's actually telling the truth!" Vila, from the corner where he was close-pressed to the wall, arms crossed protectively, right hand drifting down to cover his groin.

"This is false," repeated, without inflection, without any interest in the beings it was addressing. "A male and female are required only for the

Terran and/or Federation marriage ceremony and/or the reproduction of the species. We do not require this ceremony nor breeding at this time. We require only the Human Bonding Ceremony. You will now proceed."

Fleeting baring of teeth, and then Avon was back to his usual controlled self, an expression of patient charm covering the truth of his emotions. He speared Blake with a glance, then went back to rationalising with an alien that was as literal and implacable as a machine. "This...Human Bonding Ceremony you seem in such dire need of. What is it...exactly?"

The alien attended to a light flashing on its console before it answered the subjects in Holding Cell 392. "It is the mating of humans."

A half laugh, Avon not looking at either man in the room with him. "I rather thought you might say that. This mating you require—whom do you require to perform it?"

The question was unexpected; the alien withdrew, consulted, returned, all without the slightest flicker of expression.

Blake shuddered, felt the sweat prickle down his spine, memories crowding his mind. So much had been forgotten—why the hell couldn't he forget what they had done to him when they were making him forget all the goodness in his life? None of his happinesses survived, but he could remember being surrounded by machines, and bland faces, bland voices, people as uncaring as this Ultra as they drove him mad with pain. Technicians discussing the small details of their

lives as they tore his mind to shreds—

The Ultra interrupted his thoughts. "You are the leader of this group."

"See, Blake?" Avon, mocking him, but with a flicker in his eyes that Blake recognised as a snowflake of his own terror. "I told you they were intelligent."

"You are required to perform," the alien said, as if it had not even noticed the subject of its study had spoken, "with one other member of your group."

"So you wish *me*," Avon said carefully, with just an edge of complete disbelief, "to have sex with one of these two, and to do so while you not only watch me, but record all the details."

"That is correct." Another beep from the console, the alien giving that the bulk of its attention. "You are wasting time. Proceed."

Silken voice, but with the sharpness of violence threatening to rip through. "And if I refuse?"

The voice was just as disinterested as it had been from the very start, cool, unperturbed by what it was doing, the extreme blandness adding weight to the threat. "You will be absorbed and the other subjects will perform instead."

Don't panic, Blake repeated to himself, don't panic, don't panic, don't panic, don't let them see the fear...

"And if I do as you...request?"

"You and your companions will be returned to your ship when full data has been gathered."

A moment to stare at the image on the screen, and then Avon was on his feet, standing in the middle of the room, Vila and Blake watching him. His eyes held the beginning of wildness as he turned on Blake, words hissing from him. "You weren't exactly helpful, were you, Fearless Leader? Or do you lead only when you will be fêted and covered with glory?"

Blake swallowed hard, made his face hard, showed none of the distress boiling in him as the Ultra stared down on him the same way the puppeteers had, as they destroyed him and then left without rebuilding the rubble. "You've been trying to usurp me from the very start," he said, voice calmly hostile. "Now's your chance."

Avon stared at him, for once unable to think of so much as a single word for the occasion. Blake left him, a few measured steps taking him to the small ledge that stuck out from one wall.

Blake folded his arms and settled himself down

to outstare Avon. And all the while, his heart was pounding and his palms were sweating, and he was thinking about what had been done to him...

"Well now," Avon finally said, "depending on how you look at it, this is either a fate worse than death, or our ticket out of here." With debonair ease that did not—quite—mask his own unease, Avon began slipping the seals on his black leather suit, hanging the jacket on a hook, sitting on the edge of the divan to begin working his boots off. He glanced quickly, almost nervously, at Blake. "If you don't mind," he said, and there was the smallest tremor in his voice, a betrayal of commingled fear and unholy, unspoken, desire, "I'd rather get this over and done with."

Helpless, the panic clenched behind his teeth, Blake glowered at him. "No."

Avon startled as if stung by the whip of that single word. "No? What the hell do you mean, 'no'?"

"I think I made myself clear, Avon. No." And Blake was proud of himself, the way none of his fear bled from him, how he betrayed none of the panic rotting his belly. Avon was attractive, enough to cause the familiar lick of desire in his belly. Even the power-play between them brought heat to his balls, his cock responding to the situation. But he knew better: too many humiliations after his 'adjustment', too many times his body had teased and tricked him and then let him down. Not with Avon. Never with Avon, who would laugh at him, or worse, pity him. And then rip him to shreds on the flight deck, what little power Blake held destroyed by his impotence. He drew himself to his full height, looked down on Avon, and said it again, stark, bare, cruel, as if it were absurd that anyone would choose to have sex with a man like Avon. "No."

Eyes narrowed dangerously, Avon almost whispered: "A fate worse than death?" Not-quite laughter, a skeleton sound of unbirth. It was only then that Blake saw what had died between them: that forlorn trace of trust, a trust he had no idea Avon had ever harboured for him. He wanted to say something, but the moment was gone before he had time to do more than recognise what he had lost. Avon, quicksilver and darkness blended, had moved on, turning his back on Blake and any small goodness that might have been between them. "It seems," Avon was saying grandly, "that this is your opportunity to be a hero, Vila. Even

you can do what our great leader couldn't quite manage. It's your chance," and he looked, menacingly handsome, over his shoulder at a man he would never now choose to follow. "It's your chance, Vila," he said, but it was Blake he was talking to, Blake he was still looking at, "to prove that you have more..." and the vulgarism dripped from him like poison, burning Blake, "balls than he."

"But in public, Avon?" Vila, whining, never a wise thing to do around Kerr Avon, and most especially not when his eyes were glittering with a complexity of emotion that was razor sharp and could be turned inward or outward with equal lethality.

Perhaps it was that he had been looking at Blake: today, Avon turned none of his anger on himself, immolating his companions instead. He snapped around, pinning Vila with his stare. "Surely you're not going to pretend to be shy?" Now he was sneering, expression as nasty as his words, and the contained tempest of his emotions dominated the room. "I would have thought that you, Delta that you are, would be more than used to performing sex in public." He ignored Vila's flinch, stalked over to the divan, and began peeling off shirt and trousers, blackness folding away to unveil soft, white skin.

"Avon—" Blake's voice cracked across the room, a protest, a rejection, a plea.

"Don't say a word!" Avon whispered, his quietness more dangerous than any other man's shout. "You've made your..." a pause to display that he was sophisticated and confident enough that Blake's rejection was nothing more than mere gauche inadequacy, "shall we say, position clear. You got us into this fiasco in the first place, and as usual, I shall be the one to get us out of here in one piece." As coolly as if this were an everyday occurrence—and suddenly, absurdly, Blake found himself wondering if it were, if there were some secret between these two—Avon bent the full force of his leashed anger on Vila. "Haven't you managed to master undressing yourself, or should I ask the Ultras to come in and help you?"

"Don't remind me, Avon, I'd just started forgetting about them." But he was pulling his shoes off, then his socks. Unlike Avon, there was nothing graceful about this, simply Vilastanding, wobbling, in the middle of the room as he lifted first one foot and then the other. "Hate having to do this," he

was muttering to himself. "Not that it makes any difference round here, though, does it? Doesn't matter how I feel about this or what it does to me. Oh, no, got to take care of poor old Blake, with all his delicate Alpha sensibilities, haven't we? Never mind poor old Vila, well, not that I'm that old, any way." He stopped, having run out of both words and clothing. Naked, swallowing hard, he walked over to Avon, appallingly aware of how limp his sex was, and how small in the cool air, and how absurd and unattractive he must look to Avon. Ah, Avon, now there was a sight for sore eyes! At the edge of the divan, Vila dithered, not quite sure what he should be doing next, and not sure if Avon wasn't going to rip his head from his shoulders if Vila spent too much time staring at him.

"Well?" Avon said.

Not wanting to be accused of either staring or gazing raptly, Vila looked away from Avon, then wished he hadn't: he had enough to think about without worrying about that tangled expression on Blake's face. He shrugged, trying to be casual about all of this. "So how do you want me?" he asked.

"Precipitous and co-operative," Avonanswered drily. "Although you're hardly likely to be either if you stay there. Absence," he slanted a look at Blake, "may make the heart grow fonder, but it plays havoc with copulation."

"Oh, right," and Vila clambered onto the divan, cursing himself for his unusual clumsiness and all too frequent inanity. He should be saying witty, entertaining things, making this just another transaction. He'd had sex to keep him safe before, hadn't he? So what was he making all this fuss about this time? He knelt beside Avon, leant down to take Avon into his mouth, and hesitated, an inch away. This is bloody stupid, he told himself. It's not like it's something you've never done before, and it's not like it's someone you don't fancy—in fact, he'd had a thing about Avon from the second he laid eyes on him. So what was so different from any other time?

A shiver along his spine reminded him: there hadn't been another time like this one. Before, it had always been for pleasure or gain, pure and simple, with none of this laden atmosphere pressing down on him, with Blake looking as if someone had finally told him Santa Claus isn't real and Avon looking as if he'd bitten an apple and found half a worm. And this was the first time he

had felt like he was going to be fucked to rub salt in someone else's wounds. Which didn't make sense, he thought, not really. Wasn't as if Avon and Blake had had a thing going, was it? Or was it? Maybe they'd been building up to something, and maybe they just hadn't got round to realising that yet, and then here they were—

Avon's impatience interrupted his prevaricating thoughts.

"Either do it or don't, but don't just sit there gaping. I want to get this over and done with, so either fellate me or let me get myself ready, just make up your mind."

Vila lowered his head and opened his mouth, and filled himself with Avon. He sucked hard, feeling the immediate response, Avon growing quickly larger, his penis thickening against Vila's tongue. He thought, for a second, of the Ultra watching and recording and analysing, but pushed them from his mind: he had been handed Avon on a silver platter and he was going to make the most of it. He cradled Avon's balls, separating them with his thumb, fingers daring to caress the cleft of Avon's arse. And retribution did not fall from the sky. In fact, Avon was pulling him in closer, fingers tangling in his hair, pressing him down, then lifting him again until only the very tip of Avon's prick was in his mouth.

So that was something Avon liked, then, he thought hazily, flickering his tongue around the head, pressing his tongue-tip against the slit. Pressure on the back of his head, and he swallowed Avon inside, tongue rubbing the heavy vein that snaked along the underside. He could hear Avon, could hear the excitedness of his breathing, and the faint shush of skin moving on the divan coverlet.

"That's enough," Avon said, catching his breath, lifting Vila away from his cock. "It's eminently satisfying for me, but I think our hosts want a little bit more than that."

Vila grinned at him. "Yeh, but if we got it wrong, we could always do it again, couldn't we?"

"No, watching this once is once too many." Blake, hoarse, as if a noose were tightening around his neck, the unexpected harshness of his voice dousing the rosy glow of sex.

"What?" Avon, of course, sharp and brittle and altogether too amused to be believed. "So not only are you incapable of forcing yourself to actually save my life because it would mean the horror of actually touching me, but now you can't even bear to watch? Well then," and he was whispering, seductive, skin flushed with temper and rising arousal, his hands lingering caressingly on Vila, "why don't you turn your face to the wall for the dunce you undoubtedly are. Now, Vila," and the charm was on full force, the smile bent on Vila intended as a slap to Blake, "where were we?"

Not nice, Vila thought, not nice at all. But he didn't argue, didn't complain: he was getting what he wanted, albeit under unpleasant circumstances. That was all right: he'd had sex in worse places than this, and enjoyed many an encounter less. "I think you were about to get me on my knees so you can fuck me," he said clearly, catching sight of Blake out of the corner of his eye. He moved, so that he could no longer see Blake, and most importantly of all, could no longer see that haunted, tortured expression.

"Lubricant?" Avon asked.

"Yes, please," Vila answered, smiling, moving Avon so that Avon had his back to the screen and was sideways to Blake. Making it just him and Avon, making the best of this, whatever it took to see it through. "Got anything on you? Apart from the obvious," he tapped Avon's erection with his finger, "the *very* obvious."

Avon knelt over him, staring at him, for just a second, and then: "Why don't you make yourself useful, Blake, and find the lubricant like a good little boy."

"Enough! Damn you, Avon, stop pushing me." Chest heaving, cheeks a hectic red, angry and dangerous enough to give even Avon pause. "Just do what you have to do—"

"And leave you out of it?" He ran his thumb down Vila's spine, lower and lower until it disappeared into the shadow of Vila's rump. "But isn't that precisely what I'm doing?" For a long moment, Avon and Blake stared at each other, neither speaking, neither one backing down, and the tension grew, coiling between them, lethal promise overwhelming the fading spice of sex.

"Ehm, I'll just get the lube then, shall I?" Vila, absurdly polite, his nervousness deflating his erection, fear making him quick and deft, as if this silent challenge between the two Alphas were just another complicated lock he had to decipher before he could get to safety. "Here it is," he announced, scrabbling in a small chest lying beside the divan. "And a lot more besides! I don't think

we're the first they've required this mating ritual from, do you? No, of course you don't. I wonder how many races they've recorded? Oh, yes, scores of them, you're quite right." His bright babble dulled into silence, and still Avon and Blake were facing off, ridiculous as two tom cats, given the circumstances. "Soonest begun, soonest ended," Vila said hopefully, wishing that he could have got Avon alone, a long, long way from Blake. "Or is it soonest finished? Or is it soonest begun, soonest mended?"

Very deliberately, yielding nothing, Avon turned his attention from Blake and on to Vila. "Shut up, Vila, and hand me the lotion." A flicker of his eyes to gauge Blake's reaction: "I believe Blake needs to be shown how it's done."

"Oh, right. Ehm, how do you want me?"

A wicked smile, flaying Blake. "What is your preference? Ah, but I forgot, you're not interested in all this debauchery, are you, Sainted Leader? Or can you simply not remember what two people can do together for pleasure?"

"This is a side-show for aliens, don't try to dignify it." But familiar desire uncurled in Blake's belly, made his balls heavy. He wanted, shamefully, to stroke himself, to make himself hard, but he wouldn't give Avon the satisfaction of seeing his need or worse, of seeing what the 'adjustments' had done to him. More humiliating than even this, to have his erection falter and fail when any other man would be giving and receiving pleasure. Avon was looking at him with eyes that were too good at piercing façades, and Blake forced himself to lean, nonchalantly, against the wall. "It's animal rutting for the amusement of aliens, and if you think this is easier than talking your way out of here..."

Avon bared his teeth, not in a smile. "But I thought you said actions speak louder than words?"

Bitter barb, the final justification he had given after Gan had been killed on a mission Blake had once thought so necessary. On the flight deck, toe to toe with Avon, those brown eyes alight, Avon's breath rapid, his cheeks slightly flushed, and himself, deliberately towering over a man not much smaller than himself, speaking, being every inch the leader: but Avon, don't you realise that actions speak louder than words?

"Get on with it," he snarled, forgetting to pretend cool control. He turned away, face to the wall,

as if he were the dunce Avon had called him. Behind him, there was only silence, and then, crawling down his spine with sharp fingernails of temptation, Avon's voice: "Shall we?" and then slippery sounds, skin on skin, and breath sighing, and wet sucking noises and he remembered—had never been completely unaware of Avon's startling nakedness—that Avon's erection had faded during their argument, and how Vila had made him hard in the first place. Now he had details to colour the pictures in his mind: the rosiness of Avon's cock when Vila peeled the foreskin back, the black hair of his groin, the line of it pointing up to Avon's chest, and his pink nipples, and his white skin, and his beautiful mouth... His own breath was coming in gasps now, and his body was hard and hungry. He struggled, fought what he knew would be nothing but disaster, but then he heard Avon's voice murmur, too quiet for Blake to hear, and he thought, convulsively, of Avon manœuvering Vila, positioning him so that Avon could slide that perfect cock deep inside yielding flesh and—

Blake turned, helpless to resist the needs of his body and his mind. On the divan, Avon was canopied over Vila, Vila's legs bent upwards, over Avon's shoulders. And Avon, oh, Avonwas sliding his fingers inside Vila, and Vila's eyes were closed, his mouth open, his pleasure only too visible. With his free hand, Avon was taking Vila's cock and rubbing it, rolling it against the fine, fair hair that was so lush around his cock. Avon's hands, those exquisite, strong hands, had gathered Vila's balls now, pushing them up against the base of Vila's cock, caressing them, distracting Vila from the moment of penetration.

And as the first, wide inch of Avon's cock was consumed by Vila's arse, Blake fumbled with his trousers, his own fears of dysfunction swamped by the erotic vision in front of him. Fingers clumsy, he pushed his trousers open, his cock pulsing as soon as he touched it. The air was cool at first, but then his hand was moving on his own hard flesh, precisely matching Avon's hand on Vila. Long slow strokes, Avon's hand on Vila; long slow strokes, Avon's cock inside Vila. Blake moved, until he was barely a metre from the head of the divan, his back to the wall, his feet wide-spread, bracing him as he freed his balls, rolling and squeezing them as Avon did to Vila. Every movement Avon did to Vila, Blake did to himself, too lost to the moment to think clearly about what he was doing. It had been so long since his body had responded like this, usually failing before now, leaving him aching and lonely and emasculated. But here, now, watching Avon, watching Vila, the two bodies intertwined now, as Avon lifted Vila's rump higher, fucking Vila deeper, Blake was aware of nothing but the sex and the power and the pleasure.

And then Avon looked up. Eyes blind for a moment, and then he focussed, and saw. Blake, staring at him, with his cock in his fist and his face contorted with helpless lust and...something Avon did not care to acknowledge.

"Enjoying yourself?" he rasped out, shifting position, until his hands were either side of Vila's head, his arms stiff as he fucked Vila harder, his cock sliding out almost completely, only to plunge all the way in. Blake wasn't looking at his face, but at his body, where he was joined to Vila, at where his flesh was buried in another man. As if he were some sort of video to be used for Blake's solitary, untouched pleasure. Untouched? No, Avon decided, hot with the passion of fucking Vila and still burning from Blake's rejection. Physically untouched, perhaps, but not unaffected. Not if Avon could knock Blake from his ivory tower, and he knew precisely how to do it. He slowed his pace, very deliberately, Vila's arms and legs coming up to encircle him, and he shifted angle a fraction, giving Vila the sensation he wanted. But only part of him was focussed on Vila: he was watching Blake now, and every time his cock took control of Vila's body, he saw Blake's reaction to that as surely as if it were Blake himself Avon were fucking. "Decided you want it after all?" he said, smiling tautly as his words hit Blake. "Or is it just that this is a safe way for you to have me? What are you thinking, Blake?" he asked, burying himself inside Vila and circling his hips a little, Vila's moan of pleasure punctuation for the pleasure of impaling Blake with the power of his words. "Are you pretending that I'm Vila and you're fucking me?" Full withdrawal, Blake's eyes almost glazed as he stared at Avon's exposed flesh, an involuntary gasp revealing more than mere passion as Avon slowly sank back into Vila's arse. "Or is it exciting to pretend that you're me?"

Blake didn't answer with words, but his hands moved faster, almost blurring, and his cock was glistening from where pre-cum and spit made him slick and ripe for pleasuring. "Slow down," Avon whispered, his voice a seduction in and of itself. "Look at me."

Silence between them, but for the small, devastating sounds of flesh in flesh and hand on cock. Vila reached up, suckling on Avon's nipple, the sound preternaturally loud, until drowned by Vila's encouragements, dirty words thrust at Avon, hips canted and undulating, fucking himself on Avon's cock.

"Look at me," Avon said again.

Blake couldn't answer. He was looking at Avon, devouring him, but he didn't want to actually say so, no matter how blatant the action was. Words would somehow make it real, something that couldn't be politely ignored once they were back on the ship. And he couldn't, didn't dare, answer Avon's request by looking him in the eye, the way Avon wanted him to. No, didn't dare do that: too dangerous, far too high a risk of seeing something in Avon's eyes that he didn't want to know about. Hate. Contempt. Betrayal. Love aborted almost before conception.

Don't think about it! he shrieked at himself, desperately concentrating on the sensations in his cock and balls, coruscating from his nipples, battering his heart and making his lungs hollow. He was frantic, so close to orgasm, so close to the goal that had eluded him too many times and left him useless and unmanned. Too close, so don't think about what Avon's saying, just watch his body, look at the way he's fucking Vila, look at the way Vila's licking all over his chest and his neck—

"Look at me!" Almost a shout, and Avon went still, staring at Blake. Under him, his own cock hard and aching, Vila tipped his head back as far as he could, until he could see Blake. Unfair, that Blake didn't want Avon—was too scared to risk having Avon—and Avon wanted Blake so much. But Vila was a survivor: he knew how to get the best he could no matter the circumstances.

Still looking at Blake, his own throat exposed in ultimate vulnerability, Vilasaid, "Avon. Kiss me."

Avon looked at him. Really looked at him, Vila's lone comment giving Avon more insight than Blake would ever want him to have. Now, the involuntary movement of Avon's hips became deliberate again, faster and faster, until he was fucking Vila hard, and they were both on the spiralling race to orgasm. Avon speared Blake with a vicious, knowing stare, taking in Blake's shuttered expression and the way his hands were

so desperate on his reddened cock, squeezing and rubbing it, tugging at his balls to tighten the skin to add even more sensation.

And then Avon yielded to the pressure of Vila's arms hugging him in close, and subsided, until he was flat on top of Vila, Vila's arms and legs tight around him, Vila's cock caught tightly between their bellies, his own cock held even more tightly by Vila's arse. There was nothing for Blake to see now, only the movements of Avon's hips, the swell of his buttocks, the shadow that protected an arse Blake was never going to have. Avon looked up, and saw: Blake watching him, Blake caught painfully on the precipice of orgasm, so close that Avon would have long since come.

"Look at me," he said, and Blake did, his eyes dark with lust and pain and barely hidden fear. Then, carefully, Avon leaned down and kissed Vila, decisively shutting Blake out, telling Blake that he wasn't wanted, he wasn't needed: he didn't even exist.

But then Vila's tongue was in his mouth, and that cock was rubbing against him beautifully, and that arse was clutching him perfectly...

And Vila was ecstatic. He had Avon, in him and over him and all around him, and Avon was kissing him, not even looking at Blake any more, not even thinking about Blake, and this was the most exciting thing Vila had ever known. He was whimpering in his throat, and his heart was ready to burst. Then Avon was fucking him deep, straining to get in even deeper, his body shuddering and tensing, then abruptly, relaxing, collapsing, and Vila swore he could feel Avon's cum wet and hot inside him. He could hardly move, but he didn't need to, Avon's hand snaking between their bellies to grab his cock, doing wonderful things to it, and Avon was kissing him again, and it was enough.

A moment, and then Avon was moving again, the thrill of the chase leaving him nothing more than rather cold and very sticky. He didn't look at Vila, simply rolled offhim and began, immediately, to wipe himself off with one of the pre-moistened towels so thoughtfully provided. Like so much else, he thought bitterly, still not looking at Blake. In the end, he considered, he had lost far more than he had gained: after all, Blake had remained untouched at the end, out of reach, affected by nothing more than physical gratification. His conscience nagged at him, and he proffered Vila another cloth

to mop up the visible aftermaths, to erase those aspects that could be erased and not merely put behind locked doors to fester and peek out as barbed weapons on the flight deck.

Somewhere during the whole sordid display, his clothes had fallen from the end of the divan where he'd left them, and he gathered them, began dressing. And glanced, quietly, at Blake.

Blake stared and stared, unable to look away, almost weeping with frustration and fury and resentment that could too easily turn to hate. He stuffed himself back inside his trousers, trying to ignore the too familiar painful ache of his heart. He wanted, quite passionately, to kill Avon. He had been so close! Only seconds away, he knew that, was sure of it, so close to coming and only seconds away from being able to function like a man again! But Avon had ruined that. He had taken Blake's moment of triumph—a man again, for the first time since the Federation treatments—and ruined it, turning the triumph to ashes in his mouth. Avon had kissed Vila and it was in a misery of being excluded that Blake had come. To feel like a man again, and still be made to feel useless, unnecessary, unwanted. To see Avon kissing Vila with such intensity, such pleasure, such...

And that was something Blake didn't want to explore. He had no feelings for Avon, he reminded himself, watching the play of muscle as Avon stood to fasten his trousers. Nothing more complicated than fellow-feeling and that continuous hum of admiring irritation that Avon inspired wherever he went. Nothing more than that. There had been no jealousy in him when Avon had kissed Vila like that, and done it because Vila had asked him to. After all, it wasn't as if Blake particularly wanted that sort of attention from Avon, was it? Of course not. Nothing more than the warmth that one feels for a fellow colleague, someone with whom danger has been shared and enemies defeated. It was Avon who had obviously harboured secret emotions, secret possibilities, things that would have to be handled with delicacy and tact, a gentleness so as not to cause Avon any more pain, he told himself, pushing uncomfortable emotions back into nice tidy boxes where they could be made comfortable by completely ignoring them. Yes, he thought, concentrating on Avon and how this would affect the Cause, he would have to handle this very carefully indeed...

"This completes the Human Bonding Cer-

emony," Avon was saying very sarcastically.

Blake and Vila both started, all alertness to the discreet grey screen in the corner of the bland grey room long since subsumed in the heat of the moment.

"It's time for me to leave now."

"What about me?" Vila, of course. "I did my bit, didn't I? Don't I get to come with you?"

And Avon turned, very slowly, and looked at Vila, then, just as slowly, just as deliberately, looked at Blake. "Yes," he said, "you do 'get' to come with me."

Blake had the first stiletto touch of the implication: Avon had made that sound far more important than merely returning to the ship with him as at the end of any routine—or otherwise—planetfall. "And what the hell was that supposed to mean?" Blake asked, not being

gentle, not handling this situation very carefully indeed.

"Obviously," Avon said with such a spurious smile, "your brain is as useless as your body. It's quite simple, really. So simple, in fact, that even someone as severely impaired as you obviously are should be able to comprehend." The door hissed open, the Ultras apparently satisfied with their information gathering and ready to let the lab rats out of their maze. Avon stepped aside, pushing Vila through the door ahead of him. "Vila is coming with me. Back to the ship to which I have at least as much claim as you do. And," the civilised veneer was peeled back, revealing just how truly unwise it was to reject and humiliate Kerr Avon, "if you're a very, very, good boy, I shall even permit you to come with me also-oh Great and Fearless Leader."

RAPERE III:

RAPTOR

"We require," the Ultra said, "for our library purposes, the Human Bonding Ceremony."

Blake slowly lowered his hands and looked up, not at Avon. "Why?" he asked, completely levelly.

"To continue with our research into the Human Condition. You will begin the Ceremony now."

Blake smiled, an odd little smile, with more of pain in it than amusement. "That might prove difficult. You see," he spread his hands in the ageold lie of 'see? I do not intend to fight you', "there are no females of our species here."

"The presence of females is not required in this instance. We require an example of what your Histories name 'Male Bonding'.'

"Ah," said Avon, "that is something else entirely." An entirely sour look at Blake, and then he went on: "And you certainly have the wrong males if you want to see that."

Calmly, no anger showing, Blake stared at Avon for a moment, an imp of perversity dancing on his shoulder. "Really, Avon?" he asked, quite sharply, instantly seeing Avon's comment as challenge as well as insult. "Then the failure is entirely on your side, isn't it?"

"I would hardly call not bonding with you a failure, Blake. In fact," and he smiled his best sneer, "I'd call it sheer genius."

"Not surprising, for a man who spends his entire adult life wrecking a simple embezzlement and then looking for somewhere to run away to."

"It was an extremely complicated plan—"

"So you don't deny you are running away?" It wasn't often Blake managed to outmanœuver

him so thoroughly, and Avon's hands clenched in simple fury. "You were, as always, too hasty, jumping in—"

"Where angels fear to tread? I would have to, if I wanted to call you 'friend'." Blake turned back to the screen and shrugged. "As you can see, Avon can't participate in any sort of bonding ceremony, so I suggest you let us go back to our ship—"

"Then we shall eliminate this male and provide you with the other male from your pack."

The completely dispassionate voice was unnerving in its disinterest, chilling in its callousness.

"Eliminate? From this study or...something rather more radical?" Avon, sounding not at all scared, for all that Blake could see the unease in his eyes.

"A non-functional unit serves no purpose and will be eliminated."

"I rather thought that's what you had in mind," Avon said drily. "Well now, Blake, this puts a new complexion on the entire absurd situation, doesn't it?"

"Is there no other data we could provide for your records in return for our freedom?" Blake asked, ignoring Avon for the moment.

"We require the Human Bonding Ceremony in all possible variations."

"And if they get their hands on Vila, that could take them quite a while," Avon muttered.

"So we have no options?" Blake was standing now, in the middle of the room, arms akimbo, the wonderfully appropriate pirates' sleeves billowing in the faint zephyr from the air vents.

"You will provide the Human Bonding Ceremony, Subset: Males, Participants: two."

Blake looked at Avon then, shrugged, and began unbuttoning his shirt. "Well?" he demanded, when Avon stood staring at him. "You heard them. If we don't provide them with what they want, you'll be 'eliminated', as they put it."

The shirt was gone now, and Blake was sitting on the bed, taking off his shoes and socks.

"And what proof do we have that they won't eliminate both of us as soon as we have pandered to their perverse interests?" Avon said, cynicism not quite covering his unease.

"Surely you're not nervous, Avon?" Blake said with spurious concern. "It's only sex, so what does it matter? Oh, come on, man, don't just stand there looking foolish. Get your clothes off and let's get on with it."

Avon didn't move a muscle. "I refuse," he said, with great dignity, "to put on some sort of cheap sex show for blue aliens with sick tendencies!"

Blake smiled at him then, and it did nothing to put Avon at his ease. "So you are nervous! This is quite a turn up for the books, isn't it? The sophisticated Kerr Avon shy about some meaningless alien seeing his little bottom." His voice and his gaze hardened as he stood and snapped open his trousers. "It really doesn't make the blindest bit of difference to me, Avon, whether I do this with you or Vila or Gan. But according to our sick blue friends, it makes quite a difference to you, doesn't it?"

Reluctantly, Avon began to unseal his jacket. "Playing martyr for the Cause again?"

Blake's hands stopped for a moment, his underpants low enough that Avon could see a few stray strands of dark brown hair curling over the whiteness. "Martyr? You're a hard-hearted, sharptongued bastard, but no, fucking you isn't martyrdom." He paused for precisely the right degree of insult, to remind Avon who was the leader here. "Not quite."

Avon raised an eyebrow, elegantly, a picture of insouciance as he peeled his black surplice shirt off and left himself half-naked in front of Blake. "I shall take that as the compliment it was no doubt intended to be."

Blake pulled his underwear off and stood, casually, uncaringly, naked in front of Avon, his hands on his hips, his cock limp and uninterested. "You can take it any way you want to. Just get a

move on so we can get this over and done with."

"By all means." Deadpan, blank-faced, he turned his back and slowly shed the many layers of his clothes, and Blake would have found that blankness very revealing, had he bothered to look. But Blake was arranging the bunk, spreading the soft cover, opening drawers and finding lubricant, and more besides. "If you're this worked up about plain fucking," he said without turning to look at Avon, "then you should count yourself lucky they don't require the blasted bonding ceremony with the gadgets they've got in here."

The mention of esoteric gadgets bothered Avon not at all: it was the being naked in front of Blake, the having Blake so naked and blasé in front of him. Or at least that was a convenient enough excuse for a man who had been brought up in a crowd where personal privacy was an absolute premium. The excuse, however, didn't last anywhere near long enough, faltering the instant he unwillingly crossed the room and found himself too close to a very businesslike Blake.

"Doesn't this bother you at all?" he asked, postponing the moment.

Stark disbelief, and a frown greeted that. "Avon, I have been a ... guest of the Federation. I have been a plaything for puppeteers and guards alike. They raped my mind and stole everything I had from before, and all they left behind was a bovine mindwipe and under that, horrors I wouldn't wish even on you." He could feel the old anger burn in his gullet, wanted, abruptly, to rend and tear and destroy. But that was what the puppeteers wanted, that was what they had programmed him to do. Instead, he took a deep breath, and forced his vision outwards, away from his own woes to look, really look, at Avon. And was very taken aback by what he saw. Avon was obviously on edge, which was relatively natural, but there was a hint of fear concealed behind the habitual condescension. "I apologise," he said heavily, seating himself on the bed. "It's not your fault. It's just...when you've stood up in front of the Galaxy and renounced your beliefs and your friends and your family, it's a bit difficult to give a damn about performing sex for the amusement of aliens."

"For you, perhaps."

And from Avon, that was an admission indeed. "It'll be all right, Avon, I promise you. I'm not Don Juan, but that's hardly the issue here anyway. I knowwhat I'm doing, so I'll be careful and it won't

hurt—'

"And what," Avon hissed, "makes you think you will be the one doing the fucking? Or are you claiming *droit du seigneur*? Who's next in line for this remarkable honour? Oh, yes, you wouldn't mind if it were Vila or Gan. Are we to assume, then, that you don't care for ladies?"

Blake was placid, all the better to display his control. "Why are you making such a fuss about this? It's only sex, what does it matter?"

"Nothing," Avon said with a lupine grin. "Nothing at all." And then, unexpectedly, he was leaning in over Blake, hand reaching down to grab Blake's cock and balls and hold them, too tightly, too fiercely, his mouth coming down to feast bitingly on Blake's chest.

Blake had expected to feel some degree of desire, lust even, spurred by Avon's darkness and his beauty, but this flooding neediness caught him by surprise. "For fuck's sake," he gasped, grabbing Avon's head, pressing it lower, his wet nipples caressed by the suddenness of cold air after the heat of Avon's mouth. There was no resistance to the pressure of his hands, Avon's open mouth sliding farther and farther down, closer to Blake's goal. This was so much more than the sterile, utterly meaningless and mechanical recitation he had expected. This was...

Avon's mouth sucked him in, and he stopped thinking, letting himself feel and watch and enjoy, fingers combing through silky brown hair, hands sliding down to stroke the sensual lines of back muscle. "Oh, that's it, Avon, that's it. Put that mouth of yours to some use for once..."

And for that, he was abandoned, cock swaying in the constant airflow, so cold after such heat. "For once?" Avon's hand fluttered, too lightly, too briefly, on Blake's aching cock. "You think that this," a contemptuous sweep of his hand to encompass the room, the screen and Blake himself, "is the only use I have?"

Masterful, remembering that odd brightness in Avon's eyes every time Blake had laid down the law, Blake linked his hands behind Avon's head and pulled him inexorably forward. "Right now," he whispered, an inch from Avon's face, "this is the only use I'm interested in. Do it, Avon," and he could see the desire war with rebellion in Avon's dark eyes, "do it now." And he tugged again, bending Avon's will to his own, and Avon's body to his. Blessed heat engulfed him once again, and

he groaned in purest pleasure. It had been such a long time, too long a time, since last his body had known caresses the likes of these, Avon's tongue exquisite on him, as gifted with this as it was with words. "Harder," he muttered, holding Avon's head firmly, thrusting harshly into the soft depths behind the hard suction of Avon's lips. "Come on, come on, you can suck all of me, go on, swallow me whole..."

He was falling or flying, he neither knew nor cared which, for there was only the disorienting pleasure singing through his body. Until the sweet delight was shaken by the faintest discord, the slightest dismay poisoning his pleasure. No, he wasn't going to let memories of the past ruin this unprecedented moment with Avon. "Deeper," he said, grinding the coarse hair of his groin into Avon's face, his cock head touching flesh far inside Avon. "You can take more of me, Avon, eat me alive..."

Then he knew the discord for what it was: fear, the self-same fear that Avon had so tried to conceal. *Eat me alive*, he'd said. *Consume me*. The unspoken: make me part of you. No. He did not—could not possibly—mean that. He didn't even particularly like Avon, although he confessed to lust. But he could not want more than simple sexual gratification. He simply could not...

Vicious in his fear, he pulled Avon up, leaving his cock lonely, but promising it, promising himself, that it would have a tighter, hotter hole to fill in mere seconds. "On your knees," he growled, hands callous on Avon's pale skin, "get on your knees and let me fuck you."

And was stopped, Avon's knee hard up against him, threatening to unman him. "Give me," Avon rasped, breath heaving fast, his own cock as rigid with arousal as Blake's, "one good reason why I should."

Blake shifted, just enough to turn the threat into hard caress. "The Ultras will kill you if you don't."

"The Ultras will kill me if they don't get their damned mating ritual. But for all they know," and it was Avon's turn to shift, caress once more becoming threat, the power and the conflict blushing across the spacer's whiteness of Avon's skin, "we could already have done the ritual. Which means that I let you go, and you get your hands off me."

"They've seen others, Avon," he flexed, twisted Avon off balance, landing on top of the sprawled figure, his weight trapping Avon on the bed. "They'll know we're not finished. But I have a better reason than the Ultras."

"Well now, this is hardly the time to play coy with me, is it?" Avon's voice gave him away, a tremor there, a shiver to match the taut erection caught between his belly and Blake's. "Tell me, Blake. Now."

And Blake knew, with all the unsolved puzzle pieces clicking tidily into place, exactly what Avon wanted him to say. "We're doing it because we want to. Because *you* want to."

"Because you," Avon's arms and legs were suddenly around Blake, enveloping him in strength, Avon possessing him even in apparent surrender, "need to fuck me. You need me, Blake. You need me more than you need to breathe."

And Blake, helpless, laughed. "Need you? *Need* you?" He shoved his hips forward, cock scraping against Avon's, Avon's gasp of arousal music to Blake's ears. "I need you about as much as I need a knife in the back. And as this is you," he fumbled for and found the pristine tube, a clenching of his hand and the valve was open, the lotion spilling out over his fingers. He kept his fingers stiff, stabbing them into Avon's arse, all consideration for possible inexperience in this one thing completely subsumed by the rush to possess, to dominate—to make Avon submit to him and finally belong. "As it's you, I'm as likely to get a knife between my ribs as I am to get my prick up your arse, right, Kerr?"

"Shut up!" A controlled shout, huge violence poured out into a smallness of sound, and Avon was spitting himself upon Blake's fingers, twisting his hips this way and that, fucking himself on Blake's hand. He was a maelstrom of conflicting emotions and desires, and he hated himself for yielding to Blake as much as he...hated...Blake for doing this to him. But then he closed his eyes, shutting Blake out, so that all Blake was to him, once more, were hard fingers to be used, a hard cock to be consumed for Avon's own pleasure. "If you think I'm going to stab you in the back, then perhaps you should have me up against the wall. Then," and he lost his breath for a moment as Blake's fingers found and seared his prostate, "our little aliens could add," teeth gritted against the insidious pleasure, words forced out to make Blake distant from him, a dildo that required no batteries, only battery, "rape to their list of studies."

"Rape, Avon?" Blake asked, dangerously softly, his fingers pulled viciously from Avon's body, the liquid sound too loud for the room. "How can it be rape when this is what you've been after from the very beginning. Flirting with me," he snarled, wrapping both hands round Avon's cock, squeezing him so hard the flesh purpled and viscid pearls dropleted from the slit. "Flashing your eyes and your arse at me." He released the abused flesh, Avon's continued erection inflaming him even more—how dare Avon not be deflated by Blake's anger, by Blake's strength?—and now his hands went to Avon's nipples, pulling hard enough that the paps distended and Avon's back arched in an agony of ecstasy. "And so wild, my Avon, I can see it in your eyes when I put you in your place, when I shout 'enough!' and force you to obey me. That's what you like, isn't it?"

Blake released Avon then, knelt back away from him, left Avon bitterly separate in his own skin. Blake waited, stroking his own erection, the burning arousal alive on every nerve, and himself, exhilarated beyond anything he remembered. Avon, he admitted, was not the only one who fed on their battles, and this, the most private of all, was exciting to the point of self-destruction. His own eyes more than a little wild, Blake stared as Avon lay spread wide on the bed, chest heaving, Blake's fingerprints red round his nipples. Suddenly, achingly, Blake wanted to mark that body, to make it belong to him, to force the allegiance Avon so stubbornly refused him. He raised his hand, and struck, the slap drowned out by Avon's gasp and groan of pleasure, Avon's beautiful face bearing now the sign of Blake's dominion over him. "Is this what you've been trying to get me to do all this time? Is this," sharp bite to Avon's left nipple, beadlet of blood lingering behind, "what all those petty arguments have been about?" Hand now on Avon's balls, spreading them until the skin was shiny and taut, until Blake's hand was flat against the underlying hardness of body. "You should have said, Avon, because the Federation trained me well."

Avon was whimpering now, pain become the most exquisite of pleasures, and Blake knew how fulfilling the fantasy of castration could be to a man so self-repressed as Avon. But that wasn't enough for Blake. He wanted Avon to be truly afraid, so terrified that he would break under Blake as Blake had been broken. Kneeling between

Avon's open legs, he brought his other hand up and gathered Avon's cock and balls between the palms of his hands. Awash in pleasure, locking Blake out, Avon writhed in pleasure, and then Blake twisted, corkscrewing Avon's genitals until the balls were pressing into the softness of his belly and his cock was trapped between his legs, Blake's big hands forcing it there. Now Avon's breath was hissing from him, teeth clenched, sweat erupting on his forehead, across his cheek, drops of light to highlight the marks Blake had left on him.

"Like this?" Blake demanded, twisting a little more until Avon actually cried out, the sound a fanfare of victory to Blake. "I could rip them off you, right now, and with no effort at all," Blake whispered, leaning down low so that his breath was a caress on Avon's skin, so soft a contrast to the vice clamping Avon's cock and balls. "I could," Blake tasted Avon's throat, bit it hard, as if he could consume Avon's lifeblood and make Avon his liegeman, "make you a pathetic eunuch, give you an excuse for following me like a lost sheep. Shall I do that, Avon? Give you an excuse?" He was half an inch from Avon's mouth, and Avon convulsed away from him, a strangled scream coming from him as the movement made Blake's grip on him a real Inquisition and not the sweetness of sexual torture. "Oh? Don't want me to kiss you? Fucking's all right, but not kissing?" He licked the corner of Avon's mouth, was rewarded by another convulsion of escape, which made Blake smile: he knew now how to break Avon. First the abuse that Avon craved, and then the tenderness to chain him to Blake. Just as...Blake didn't know the man's name from the Treatment Centre, knew only that He had come in the dark and the night, clad in black, invisible until Blake knew he was going insane and cried and wept and wanted to die...

He shook the memory off, focussing everything on Avon, his own lifeline, of a very twisted sort. He would use softness now, reward after punishment, perfect for an old hand at all this, as Avon obviously was. Blake released Avon's cock and balls, and watched as that relief etched agony on Avon's face. He waited then, until Avon was free of the pain of release, and then, with extreme tenderness and a vicious smile, he cradled Avon's face between his hands, thumbs rubbing so gently across the arching cheekbones. "Look at me," he murmured, the merest breath of sound, the very quietness

making it compulsive.

Avon's eyes opened, and Avon wanted nothing more than to be able to run away and hide, find a bolthole, even if it were a grave. He made his eyes blank, hiding his secrets inside, where he and Blake would never be able to find them. "Are you going to fuck me or not?" he asked laconically, pretending that his nipples weren't hard peaks and that his cock wasn't pulsing desperately against the pressing softness of Blake's belly.

"All in good time, Kerr," and now the smile was tender as it ought to be, but Blake's eyes were as unyielding as Avon's, filled with banked resentment. "But first," he nudged Avon's legs a little higher, and Avon lifted them, wrapping them around Blake's waist so that Blake's cock was slick against his arse. "Oh, no, boyo," Blake laughed, shifting Avon to his pleasure so that Avon's rump was on his lap, and Blake was once more in complete control of the situation, "not before I decide to. But before we were so rudely interrupted," breathless, voice catching on the excitement constricting his throat, "I was about to do something that I don't think you're going to like at all, Avon." He reached out, arching over Avon's prone body, once more cradling Avon's face in his hands. "I'm going to kiss you," he whispered.

"Try it, and I'll bite your tongue out." Snarled, an animal at bay, and fear writhed in Avon's eyes.

"Oh, I doubt that, Avon. You see, if you were stupid enough to do that, then I would be vengeful enough to rip your balls off and feed them to you."

Avon managed a laugh, undermined by the fine tremble in his hands. "Quite a threat."

"I'd have thought it was quite a promise. For you." He saw the fight in Avon's eyes before Avon could move, and simply moved so that he was lying completely ontop of Avon, his weight holding the other man down. "But I thought you liked it kinky?" Which was why, amongst other reasons, Blake had the perverse desire to give Avon no more of that, simply because the games of power and pain were what Avon desired. "But this is about what I want, what I need. You, my dear Avon, don't enter into it at all."

He pressed downwards then, his nipples brushing the taut peaks on Avon's chest, and gently, oh, so cruelly gently, pressed his mouth to Avon's and traced, lightly, his tongue around the bow of Avon's lips, Avon opening to him, absorbing his tongue inside, and the kiss was deeper

than it ought. Blake heard a groan, as if something inside were breaking, and saw the nightmare in Avon's eyes, saw the misery there. And knew. Completely, whole, entirely. He *knew*. Avon loved him. That was why Avon stayed, that was why Avon followed, that was why Avon provoked him so.

Avon loved him.

It frightened him almost as much as it did Avon.

"Oh, Avon," he said before he could stop himself, and saw when the love was shuttered away by coiled fury and the beginnings of hatred as Avon heard the unwitting pity in Blake's voice.

"Oh, Blake," Avon mocked cuttingly, thrusting his hips up sharply, demandingly. "I thought you were keen to fuck me into submission. What's the matter? Afraid you won't be able to meet my standards?" Another jolt of his hips, hard cock grinding against Blake's erection. "Too afraid that it's not merely on the flight deck that I find you woefully inadequate?"

And Blake was in him before he had time to think, before he had time to savour the possessing of Avon, before he had time to wrest control from this loving harpy under him. For all that Avon's taunts had spurred him into haste, nothing was going to make him hurry through this. Avon's vicious words, his callous rejection of even the possibility that loving Blake might not be the depths of degradation, all combined to drive the last remnant of pity from Blake. If Avon didn't want his sympathy, then Blake would offer him no quarter either. He withdrew from Avon's body, and then slowly, slowly, he pushed in again, the muscle dilating before him, opening Avon up to him. He thrust in, inch by inch, making sure that Avon could not deny that Blake was on top, that Blake was impaling him.

Silent, Blake fucked Avon slowly, refusing to surrender to his own body's scream for satisfaction. No, he could hold off, he could wait. He was going to make Avon come first, he was going to make Avon scream with ecstasy, and then Blake fully intended to fuck the cold-blooded bastard's heart out. Avon's eyes were closed, and Blake didn't want that: he knew how Avon hid from him, and he wanted Avon completely exposed for what he was. He pulled out until only the very tip of his cock was stretching Avon. "Look at me," he hissed.

Avon kept his eyes closed, safe in the bolthole

of his own body.

Blake withdrew all the way, his cock barely touching Avon's hungry arse. "Look at me!" he shouted.

Avon turned his face away.

"Look. At. Me." Each word measured, a full breath between, and every word was accompanied by the sweet tease of Blake's cock sinking an inch into Avon's arse, and each breath brought the aching hollowness of abandonment. "If you don't look at me," said coldly, "I shan't fuck you."

Still turned away, still with his eyes closed, Avon gave his answer to the inanimate wall. "If you don't fuck me, then I'll simply use one of the toys in that drawer."

"And what will you tell the Ultras?"

Avon had actually forgotten all about them, and their damned research. "I shall tell them that this is how we do it, where I come from. And you can tell them anything you damned well please. After all, *you* will be the one failing to...perform."

Blake fucked him for that, deep and hard, driving the breath from both of them. Ramming into Avon, uncaring of tender flesh, half hoping that tender membrane would tear just enough to make Avon bleed and remember Blake for days, Blake whispered softly, "If you don't look at me, I shall kiss you again."

Avon opened his eyes, and turned, and looked. And Blake wished he hadn't. No love there now, only hatred and fury and bitter, bitter pain. He almost said it again, Avon's name laced with pity, and more, but held the words inside, where they could calm the ravening beast of Blake's own darker side. Where the pity could remind him why Avon did as he did and said as he said. Where it could remind him that he knew a terrible secret, the darkest secret Avon owned. Love. He slowed his strokes, changed the angle, so that it was perfect pleasure for Avon, and then he let himself go, let orgasm build deep in his balls, fucking Avon all the while with all the compassion and sympathy in him.

Under him, staring up into those eyes filled withwhat to Avonwas cruelty and what to another would be sympathy, Avon let Blake fuck him, let Blake possess his body, let Blake bend him to his will by making Avon look at his tormentor-lover. Mouth pulled tight, teeth bared, Avon pushed up, fucking Blake harder, consuming the other man, making him work for their pleasure and Avon's

emotional pain. So much for protecting himself from Blake, and so much for his pathetic delusions of insularity. Avon had lost everything, bar bleak survival and the fragments of his pride. Blake, so full inside him, would think that Avon had lost everything. So. If he had, in appearance anyway, already lost everything, then he was going to take all he could get, wring every last ounce of guilty pleasure from this once-only and oddly solitary encounter. He closed his arms around Blake's shoulders, bringing Blake down to where Avon could reach him, his mouth fastening on Blake's, devouring Blake as Avon had been devoured by his own emotions. "Fuck me," he said, his words filling Blake's mouth. "Fuck me," he said again, and didn't care if Blake knew he meant 'love me'. He pressed downwards as Blake thrust into him, cock stretching him, Blake's smoothly sweaty chest rubbing his nipples, Blake's hands holding him with delicious strength, Blake fighting to kiss him back, to invade Avon's mouth as he had conquered Avon's arse. For once in his life, Avon surrendered. He let Blake kiss him, luxuriated in the strength of the other man, wallowed in the freedom to simply feel. He would suffer the price later, but for now, he had Blake all around him, in him, filling all the empty, lonely spaces. All he could see was Blake's face, too close to focus on the details. Then Blake broke the kiss, was moving him, bending Avon's legs up against his chest, his feet over Blake's shoulders, Blake all the more deeply inside him. It was purest heaven. He could feel the kiss of Blake's balls against his arse every time Blake filled him, could feel the tremor in Blake's arms where they were braced either side of Avon, and if he looked down, he could see Blake being consumed by his body, his own cock weeping against his belly, pulsing every time Blake disappeared into him, as if his cock were Blake's, piercing him so deeply they were all the one body.

There were things he wanted to say, things that terrified him, words of love and need and forever. Perhaps, he thought, mind hazy now with encroaching orgasm, body supreme with pleasure, I could say it to Blake...

Then Blake thrust into him once more, and he was dissolving, dissolving, rushing away on ecstasy, body tensed then boneless, aware of nothing but his own orgasm. Mere instants, and the pleasure faded enough for him to float in the amatory haze of Blake so frantic still, inside him,

fucking him desperately, Blake strung taut with the tension of not coming. Avon could smile now, stroking his hands across Blake's chest, feeling the pounding of his heart and the constriction of his nipples. He didn't mind, generous in the afterglow, content to let Blake find release in him. He gazed upwards at Blake. And remembered. Blake pitied him. Blake didn't love him, and pitied him, doubtlessly because Blake couldn't conceive of ever loving him.

"Aren't you finished yet?" he snapped, pushing Blake off, heaving him over. "I thought it was only your mind that was retarded." He loomed over Blake, curving his body so that Blake couldn't see him. So that Blake couldn't see the self-contempt and despair in his eyes.

"Avon!" Blake shouted, so frustrated he could kill or maim. All he could reach was Avon's back, and his hands, fingers like claws, dug into the clenched muscles. He felt a hand cup his balls, rolling them, another hand pumping his cock, fast, as fast and hard as he needed it. He had been only seconds away when Avon had rejected him, and now this uncaring blur of sensation on his cock was enough, sending him over the edge in orgasm, all his tension erupting from him in white streamers to land, glistening, on Avon's chest. Who turned fully then, letting Blake see him, and picked Blake's hand up and used it, disdainfully, to wipe Blake's seed from him.

"Now that that's finally over," Avon was saying, looking somewhere to the left of Blake's face, "do you think you could be quicker about dressing yourself? I would like to get out of here before the next millennium."

Avon stood then, his back to Blake, eyes therefore hidden, once more, therefore, a mystery. Half-dazed, rocked by Avon's emotions and the beast in himself that he had so delusionally thought well-chained, Blake lay where he was, the small pillow pressed over his face.

"It won't work." Avon. Cold, chill, amusement burning Blake like vitriol.

"What won't?" Blake asked, expecting a nasty comment about his performance, his cock, his life.

"Suffocating yourself."

"Is that what you think I'm trying to do?"

"It's what I wish you would try."

Blake sat up then, stared broodingly at Avon's back whilst Avon methodically redressed, item by item, layers of protection gradually hiding the

flawless skin and the planes and sinews of his body. He felt so terribly guilty for what Avon must be going through, for the suffering Avon must be enduring. It couldn't be easy to love and be unloved, but it would be harder still for Avon to know himself pitied. "I don't believe you mean that," he said, quite conversationally, but noticing that Avon he sitated, a snap fastened wrongly and redone, clumsily.

"You believe a lot of stupid things. Exhibit A, your pathetic faith in your stagnant revolution."

"Which is, of course, supposed to divert me from talking about us into arguing with you about my Cause."

"You have already displayed more than enough stupidity for one afternoon," Avon replied. "There is no 'us'."

"Isn't there?" Pushing, trying to make Avon bring it out into the open, telling himself that it was his guilty conscience driving him to prevent Avon from brooding on this until it became a cancer that ate them both alive. "Even after this afternoon?"

"Especially after this afternoon. Anyway, this has changed absolutely nothing."

"Oh, but I think it has," Blake said, remembering love in Avon's eyes, and fear, and his own chaotic reactions. Pushing that unpleasant self-knowledge aside, to be dealt with later, much later, when it wouldn't terrify him so... "Knowledge always brings change."

Avon whirled round then, fully dressed, his gaze contemptuous as it took in Blake's damp and rumpled nakedness. "Knowledge? Of what? Of something in me of which I am ashamed? But I already knew about that, so there can be no impetus for change. And as for knowledge of you! You give away nothing, and you *give* nothing. You simply take and use, whatever suits your Cause best."

"Another deflecting tactic?" he asked, mildly.

"If you choose. And here's another." Avon crossed the room, and now he was back fully in control of himself, his expression shuttered, his smile a grim line of anger. "Let the subject drop, or I shall kill you where you sit."

"You have no weapons," standing, refusing to be intimidated, proving to Avon that he was still leader here, still the Alpha Prime.

Avon, however, simply stepped even closer, crowding Blake, and grinning at him like a skull. Then, unyielding, he brought his hands up, displaying them, turning them this way and that,

until Blake couldn't tear his gaze away. "No weapons, Blake?" Avon asked, his voice a parody of seduction. "Then what do you call these?"

A blur of movement, Avon moving away from him, staccato, sharp, quick. "Ultra!" he called, facing the display screen. An impassive face appeared. "The ritual is complete," Avon announced. "We have given you what you required. I want to go back to my ship—now."

"This is not possible."

"What do you mean?"

Near panic in that voice, Blake noted as he threw his clothes on, readying himself for fight or flight. Near panic, and he did not for one second believe that it was fear of captivity. It was, he was certain, fear of being confined with Blake.

"The others have not yet completed their rituals. When all rituals are complete and stored, you will be returned to your ship."

"And how long is that going to take?"

"This question cannot be answered."

Then the face was gone, the screen blank, and they were alone with each other. Avon went round Blake, sprawled uncharacteristically on the bed, making a display of how little recent events meant to him. After all, how could any of it be important if Avon could take his ease here and wait so casually?

Because, Blake thought, if he didn't, then Avon would have nothing left: no pride, no self-respect, no secrets. And no man could live without those. He offered an olive branch to brush away the too-close memory of pity. "D'you think the alien can be trusted?"

Avon glowered at him. "I don't think *anyone* can be trusted. Present company included."

"So you don't trust yourself?"

"I said that I don't trust the company I'm keeping." Nasty, said viciously enough to draw blood.

Stung, Blake snapped back: "Then why don't you give yourself a change of scenery? Give us all a pleasant surprise."

Avon leaned back even more comfortably, smiling. "Perhaps I shall. But I think it is *you* who needs to leave. And not," he added, "for a brief change of scenery."

It was the old argument, honed sharp by the knowledge of love and pity morassing between them. "The ship is mine."

Avon arched an eyebrow at him. "Yet more

droit du seigneur?"

"No. Legitimate claim. Look, we've been over and over this—"

"Only because *you* refuse to see sense. Or perhaps I should say, only because you are incapable of seeing sense. We three of us have claim on that ship, and you may be able to fuck Jenna into relinquishing her share to you, but it would take better than *you* to do that to *me*."

"Would it?" Blake leaned over him, echoing his position when he'd been so deeply inside Avon, and Avon had been so naked in his love. "You're a very poor liar, Avon."

"My only poverty is a direct result from your absurd altruism and self-sacrifice—which always seems to involve the rest of us giving up rather more than you."

This wasn't getting them anywhere, and Avon could talk them in circles for hours. Annoyed, Blake demanded: "Are you going to listen to me?"

Avon glanced over at the locked door. "Do I have any choice?"

"If that's how you're going to be, then there's no point in me talking to you, is there?"

Avon grinned. "Oh, what a lovely thought. You should have it more often."

And silence fell, as the *double entendre* registered. They stared at each other for a long moment, and then Avon looked away, and Blake's shame was renewed.

"Avon, I'm—"

"Don't you dare apologise to me!" Fierce now, blazing, coiled on the bed, serpent poised to strike. "I neither need nor want your pity. Now, if you want to be in one piece to get back to *your* precious ship, I suggest you shut your mouth and keep it that way. Do you understand me?"

Better than you think, Blake wanted to say. Better than I want to...

But he said nothing, walking away, going over to lean on the opposite wall, as far away as he could get in the smallness of the cell. Not another word was spoken, as they neither one of them looked at the other, or conceded that there was another human being in this cell. But Avon was thinking, mind racing, going over plans that had fallen fallow. Now—now, he needed to find somewhere to run to, a place where Blake would never find him, where there would be no reminders of this humiliation. He wanted to shout the roof down—that Blake should find out his feelings, that Blake should dare pity him... It was too much, simply too much. He would not put up with pity. He would go, and go soon, the loss of the *Liberator* a small price to pay for being free of Blake, for having all this over, and finished, and not one more second of Blake's pity to endure. Oh, yes, he would be gone, the instant he found himself a safe sett where he could run to ground and lick his wounds in peace and privacy and away from the emasculating pity in Blake's eyes.

And Blake? Blake was appalled, wondering what he had done, what sort of Pandora's Box he had opened today. Not only had he dared pity Avon, but he had let Avon see it, and let Avon know that his secret was safe no more. Dangerous, that, and foolish. He would have to be on his guard now, and there would be more fights than ever before, and more arguments, disputes over policy disguising the bitter battle underneath. It was, he decided, going to be a nightmare. But like Pandora, he saw a hope: destroy Star One and get it over and done with, then he and Avon could go their separate ways. Let Avon have his damned *Liberator* if it really meant that much to him. With Star One gone and the Federation defeated, Blake would be needed on Earth, and the Liberator wasn't going to be much use there. Yes, that was what he would do. Make an end to all this, so that he and Avon could end up on separate edges of the Galaxy, for otherwise... Otherwise, to silence forever the poisoned secrets they held between them, Avon would surely kill him.

TAKING

THE RISK

(OF TRUE LOVE

OR ILLUSION)

The two tales in this section, both from the Glaswegian, are linked by the risks the major characters take for love. The second piece gives us Bodie (and eventually Doyle) by the seaside during the grey, melancholy days of autumn yielding to winter. In contrast, the first story transports us to the theatre and other lesser known delights of Sherlock Holmes' London. The story begins immediately following "The Hound of the Baskervilles": "And now, my dear Watson, we may turn our thoughts into more pleasant channels. I have a box for 'Les Huguenots.' Have you heard the De Reszkes? Might I trouble you then to be ready in half an hour, and we can stop at Marcini's for a little dinner on the way?"

GAEL X. ILE

AFTER

MARCINI'S

FROM THE PRIVATE JOURNALS OF

JOHN H. WATSON, M.D.

We had, indeed, stopped at Marcini's for a little dinner on our way to the theatre that night. If the truth is to be told, and I have sworn by all I hold dear to record nothing but the absolute truth upon these pages, Holmes and I lingered so long over dinner that my friend offered the driver of our hansom half a guinea if he were to gain the theatre before the curtain was raised. It was certainly a night to remember, for my companion is not a man given to displaying passions, but on that remarkable night, he was overflowing with emotion, a display the likes of which I had not seen from him since the very earliest days of our acquaintanceship and long before Holmes and I had truly become friends.

Sherlock Holmes can be a man of the utmost charm when he chooses to exert himself in such a frivolous direction, although he would insist, were he to read this dangerous account, that I impart that he was never frivolous in his charm, rather employing charm in those circumstances in which it would be of the greatest good. He was, however, utterly charming to me that evening, beginning with the game soup and abating not one jot until we had finished the tiny cups of richly aromatic coffee for which Marcini's is justifiably renowned amongst those residents of our great capital who value epicurean delights. All the while we were eating, and most particularly in the intervals between courses, when our plates had been cleared away and the waiter had not yet returned with the next laden platters of delicious food, Holmes regaled me with entertaining tales of past exploits.

On occasion, he would decipher every secret of our fellow diners, in such a manner that I was near reduced to tears more than once by his rather unkind but exceedingly amusing detections. His grey eyes danced with humour and fondness, his pallid cheeks were yet bronzed by his exposure to wind and elements upon the moor during the dreadful events surrounding Sir Henry Baskerville, an account of which I have already put forth for the public to enjoy. It is a great pleasure to me to write my accounts of Holmes' exploits for general publication but this, my battered old journal with its ink jots and coffee stains, is a great solace to me. Here is one place wherein I can safely unburden my soul and speak of those things best left unspoken in the society of our day.

To return to that night in the latter half of October, Holmes was more vibrant than I could recall seeing him before, so much so that, I confess with a guilty heart, I suspected him of having fouled his system with another dose of seven per cent solution. I need not have feared such a thing, for I had scarcely had time to conceive such a disloyal thought before Holmes had leaned over the table with scant regard for good manners and said to me, his voice very low and pitched so that none but myself could hear: "Unless you have renounced all your loyalties and are no longer a subject of Her Majesty and no longer count yourself an Englishman, then it is nothing foreign to me that has brought about this..." He hesitated then, seemingly at a loss for words, which could mean nothing but that the subject concerned not the dry

facts of science, but rather, one of those matters in which Mr. Sherlock Holmes is so woefully ill-prepared to communicate.

Knowing him as I had come to over the years of our association, I believed myself to understand the meaning he was attempting to convey as I gazed at him more than a trifle bemused by such an extravagant display of amity. "I believe the word you are seeking is 'giddy'," I said, fully as quietly as he had spoken.

"Is that the word, my dear Watson?" He was smiling at me and his eyes were still as bright as they had been since first he had suggested this evening on the Town. "Am I so similar then to a young débutante at her first ball?"

Icould not help but laugh at such a preposterous image. Firstly, it was absurd to imagine Sherlock Holmes as a giggling young girl barely stepped across the threshold into womanhood, and secondly, it was utterly impossible to contemplate Holmes as young at all. Consumed though I had been by curiosity about my friend's past history, I had more than half-convinced myself that he had sprung, fully formed, from the forehead of an esoteric professor of philosophy among the dreaming spires.

"It is not nearly often enough that I hear you laugh," Holmes said to me and I swear his eyes softened the way a man's customarily do when he faces someone in whom he had more than a passing interest. It occurred to me, at that moment, that if I were a girl and Holmes himself, then my Mama would be whispering to my Papa, who would then be asking Holmes precisely what his intentions were. Quickly, I shook this foolish and libellous thought from my mind, bitterly ashamed that I could suspect such a thing of my only true friend. Would that I could have apologised to him, but an apology would require me to admit the sin for which I owed such reparations. Better, then, to stifle such thoughts at birth, and to then concentrate on the wholly innocent overtures of friendship Holmes was making towards me. I should not have been surprised at the tone of his speech towards me, nor by the extra-ordinary intimacy of his gaze upon me. My dear friend had had no friends in all his lonely life, and were it not for me, he would still be friendless. I resolved to curb my worldliness and to remember always that Holmes had little skill in the realm of friendship and would be prone to gaffes and gaucheries when he mismeasured the degree of affection required to show a friend that he is valued. I reminded myself, quite sternly, that this was the pureness of gratitude for my aid and assistance in the matter of the Baskerville Curse that had brought this frothy mood upon my friend. I cast all unworthy thoughts from my mind, and thought instead, of him comparing himself to a giggling, foolish girl.

Still laughing a little over the mental portraits I had painted of Holmes as a blushing débutante, I was very proud of my legerdemain in putting the great Sherlock Holmes off the scent once more. I was secure and certain in the knowledge that if he had not yet discovered my secret, then I would assuredly have the ability to hide it from him forever.

Even here, in my most private journal, I hesitate to record and give name to my secret. A cold fear breaks out all over my body and a faintness creeps upon me as I contemplate what would befall myself and by extension, Holmes, were these pages to fall into the hands of one of the legions of blackmailers and extortionists who inhabit the streets of London like rats. Yet I must give my shame its name, for if I fail to do so, then I shall be lying, by omission undoubtedly, but a truth untold can be a worse sin than a deliberate lie. I love Sherlock Holmes. I love him as one would a cherished brother or a dear friend, but I also harbour a love for him that is cut of the same cloth as the love a man feels for his wife. There, I have said it, and how strange the words appear upon the white page! It is daunting and frightening to think of how much damage these few black scribbles on the pages of my journal could do to both myself and the man I love, were any of this to fall into the hands of one of the evil band.

I wander far from the execution of my tale, but there are none to castigate me in this, for this is but my journal. I'm afraid I am all of a muddle, my head spinning and my heart racing as if I were in the grip of some tropical fever. Perhaps it is a fever that has taken me over, a fever of the heart and soul and mind. I would do anything for Holmes, and this is a fact which he never fails to utilise to the fullest degree. It is also, as I so recently realised, a fact which Holmes has fully understood since before I knew that I would find myself in such a state.

The fog that had so irritated all of London for the past several days, had finally lifted. We were,

by now, replete after an excellent dinner and fine wine, in our hansom on the way to the theatre. The city was bedecked in her finery and fulfilled her reputation as the greatest jewel of the Empire. The lamps were lit, and their bright glow cast colour and shadows upon passers-by and cabs alike. Beside me, so closely that the night chill was kept off as much by his warmth as by the heavy rug across our knees, Holmes was silent now, merely pointing at this or that to draw my attention. In my public recordings of his deeds, I have given naught but the scantiest descriptions of him and in such a way that one could be forgiven if one were to think him less than truly handsome. He was, however, a singularly attractive man, whether pale and melancholy in one of his morose moods or as he was tonight, dark from the weather and vibrant. It took all my strength to refrain from gazing at him to the exclusion of the world around me and it was with the greatest relief that we attained the theatre. For, although it embarrasses me still to think of it, the close press of his person was wringing unwelcome responses from my own more intimate parts.

The theatre stairs were throughd with people, ladies in their gowns and plumes, the gentlemen sober in their dark clothes and top hats. I felt a thrill of pride as we alighted from our hansom, for not only was my companion recognised by several people, but he was indubitably the most handsome man there. He is so much taller than most, and thus carries his clothes well. It is one of his few vanities, that his suits are always of the finest cloth and the most superb cut. Beside him, I felt very much the dowdy city starling in the shadow of a falcon. I would not dwell on such an ignoble thought, and hastened instead to engage my companion in conversation, to entertain him as he had me, and thereby return the great compliment of good companionship. It was a sweet reward indeed, when one of my little jokes brought a smile to his lips and he tucked his arm in mine and led me into the theatre.

The theatre is the world of make-believe, of pretence and artifice, and I indulged myself as we walked up the wide sweep of staircase and entered the perfumed warmth of the building itself. I pretended that Holmes was more than my friend, that he was my escort, my brother-in-arms, in the tradition of civilisations which our society so reveres, save the never-discussed detail of man-to-

man friendships and affections that were indistinguishable from marriage.

The play was stimulating and illuminating. The costumes were stunning and the acting subtle and convincing. I could see Holmes only by the the light reflected from the stage, for he had taken a private box and our lamps were not lit.

As the curtain rose, Holmes moved his chair nearer to mine, until we were once more as close as we had been in the hansom and my heart was once more pounding as if I had run miles.

"As you can see, my dear fellow," he said to me, "the stage is so much more effective if one is distracted neither by the rustlings and fidgetings of fellow play-goers nor by the glow from lamps that have merely been trimmed."

"Yes, yes," I said, although perhaps I should admit that I was stammering, for it was most distracting to have Holmes leaning in so close to me. His mouth was at my ear as he whispered, his breath caressing my skin and making me shiver with reactions best left unmentioned. Still, for all that this attention had knocked me for six, I almost reached out to stay him when he at last moved back to sit upright in his own chair. I stifled my emotions and did everything I could to regain mastery of my own body, a task made all the more difficult by Holmes' restlessness. This fidgeting, for which he was wont to castigate everyone else in the theatre, resulted in frequent small touches of his leg against mine. This, in its turn, caused physiological responses in me that I despaired of either controlling or disguising.

I was in a horrible dilemma. If I were to excuse myselfand thence make my way to the gentlemen's facilities, Holmes would surely analyse such an action, for I had no cause to return to such a place, having used the situation in Marcini's not a threequarter hour before. However, if I were to remain seated beside him, with nothing to protect me from his comprehension than the distraction of the play, then I would surely betray myself to him. My choice, then, was all too obvious. No matter which course I chose, he would certainly deduce the nature of my problem. If I kept my seat, then my breathing and my trembling would confess my dreadful secret to him. Yet were I to stand and leave, the most unobservant of creatures could not help but remark on the condition of my anatomy. Holmes, as the entire world must know by this time, is an extra-ordinarily observant man, able to

piece together a man's entire history by nothing more personal than examining the man's walking stick. What, then, would be revealed to him if he were to see the effects his presence was having upon me?

Holmes knows I am not a passionate man, needful of the satiation of the flesh simply for the sake of carnal gratification. I am a man of honour and moderation, and have always prided myself somewhat on my ability to control those base needs to which all men are prone. I was proudest of my dealings with other men of my own sort. It was only upon the rarest of occasions that I availed myself of the companionship and release afforded one such as I by another of the third sex. Sitting beside Holmes, in the dark, the brilliant play unfolding in front of me, I was nearly overcome by a wave of misery. Surely, I thought, I have not much longer before he notices my condition. Another thought brought even more melancholy with it. I wondered if Holmes had, in his usual sharp-eyed fashion, seen my problem and was now trying to find a way of separating himself from me.

His attention was fully engaged by the movements upon the stage, and his restlessness had settled down to a steady pressure of his body against mine. Innocent in this as in so many other things (I know not of a single occasion upon which Holmes has had carnal knowledge of a woman, although I am aware of several invitations from women both high- and low-born), he was supremely unaware of my fouling his friendly gesture into something of which he would be bitterly ashamed.

"Look, Watson," he whispered to me again, and I was hard pressed not to gather him close to my chest and hold him. It was only the contemplation of his response that saved us both from my sinful desire. "If you watch carefully here," he was yet speaking, oblivious to the turmoil in my body and mind, "then you will see the moment when smoke is puffed onto the stage by one of the hands and the trapdoor is released. Do you see the way the boards do not quite match, there, in the centre?"

"Yes," I responded, as much as I was capable of at that moment. He had twisted almost full around in his chair and his right hand had come to rest upon my right knee, whilst his left arm was draped affectionately around my shoulders. I wanted, with a fever of passion, to kiss him, but I controlled

myself fiercely and he returned to his normal pose, unaware of how dreadfully close he had come to being molested. Tears thickened my throat, and this, in a man who could not remember crying in his lifetime. Not even when I was sent off to school at the age of seven did I shed a tear, nor when I was four and I wrenched my ankle falling down stairs. Now, a grown man who had seen war and death, and had shot his revolver in anger, a man who had leaned on no-one since leaving the nursery, I was on the verge of weeping. My shame, then, was to know no bounds. Desiring Holmes, polluting the naïve beauty of his friendship and now, weeping like a woman. I could not move, dared not draw attention to myself and truthfully, I feared that my legs would not hold me if I were to stand.

"Ah-ha!" Holmes exclaimed. "There, in the wings, you can..."

His words trailed off and I wished only that I could die. I was undone, for he had turned and seen my shame, for I am sure that little light though there was in our box, there was sufficient to mark the passage of my tears.

"My dearest fellow," Holmes said, and I was ashamed that I had harboured such thoughts and feelings about a man whose only concern was that I was pained. "Oh, my dearest chap, whatever is the matter?"

The very gentleness of his tone made my misery all the worse. To have a taste of the tenderness and then only to lose it when he uncovered the cause of my unhappiness—oh, life is a bitter chore at times. I struggled with my weakness and controlled myself. A handkerchief with initials not my own was thrust into my hand, and I did what was necessary to regain my composure. His fingertips then came and wiped from my lashes a few traces of moisture I had missed. I noticed that his hands were only slightly steadier than mine and I wondered at the cause, until my shame spoke and asked me what else could I expect from a man like Holmes when his companion wept like a woman and responded to him as Ganymede to Zeus.

"There is no need for this," he said to me, and my cheeks flamed when I discerned pity in his voice. "No need at all and I am entirely to blame." He gave one his bursts of laughter then, and took my hand in his, where the lip of the box would hide us from those few people who could see in at all. "I thought I was being...well," he shrugged,

and stroked his thumb along my palm. My heart was pounding again and I was absolutely confounded by his behaviour. It was so unexpected, so unlike the Holmes I had thought to know. Greatly daring and in dire need of something that would assist me in understanding what was occurring between us, I looked up at Holmes. His expression was an odd mixture of diffidence, apology and tenderness. It was, in fact, an expression I had seen not a week since, when I had emerged from the hiding-place on the moor and discovered Holmes. Although I could scarce believe my eyes and ears, he was, indeed, still my friend, and I gazed at him as he continued speaking. "I was trying to be romantic, to wine and dine you. Then an excellent play, and perhaps, if neither of us was too exhausted, then I was going to take you on to a rather unusual club of which I am a member."

Abruptly, his movements as quick and spare as was his habit, he abandoned me, but for mere moments only. He had loosened one of the box curtains, as if to shield us from a draught.

"There," Holmes said, "that is a distinct improvement. Now, our box is visible only to the stage and to our sister box directly opposite. As that box is empty and the actors somewhat preoccupied, I think I can safely say that we are in private here." He was beside me again, and took my hand in his.

"I don't know what to say," I told him, rather less than steadily, although at least my unmanly fit of weeping had not thickened my voice.

Holmes smiled at me in a singularly sweet manner. It seemed to me that I had perhaps had more smiles from him this evening than in all the months of our friendship. "You could, perhaps, say that you forgive me?"

"But why ever should I forgive you? You have done nothing! I am the one with the stain against my name, not you."

He canted his head as he looked at me. "Ah, but my dear Watson, your actions were innocent and restrained by your honour and basic decency. I, on the other hand..."

"What could you possibly have done to compare to my behaviours? Would you force me to admit to you, actually to state to you here and now, the terrible things I have thought and imagined? Would you have me confess my feelings, emotions that no gentleman should ever

have for another gentleman?"

He was smiling at me again, but there was less sweetness there and more than a hint of spice. "I would be very much interested in hearing such a confession from you, my dearest friend. You see, I do believe that your confession of such matters would prove a perfect match for mine."

This was more than I could comprehend in an instant. Words failed me, and I'm afraid I gaped like a stranded fish after Holmes' pronouncement. "You?"

"Yes," he answered softly, "me."

"You," I began, only to falter. How could I possibly put such a thing into words? I could not be sure that I was not being led astray by the wine I had consumed with dinner, nor could I be certain that I was not deluding myself with something I so fervently wished to be true. "Are you saying..." It was hopeless. Nothing in my life had prepared me for such a moment, and I was floundering.

Then, as he had done as many times for me as I had for him, Holmes came to my rescue. On this occasion, he saved me with words. "Yes, John, I do. I find myself caring about you far more than is either sensible or practical. I had intended to do nothing about it at all, simply ignore it until it went away. But I'm afraid you are too strong an influence upon me for that fate to befall us.'

I understood his speech precisely, but I wanted to hear more. I needed time to come to terms with this singular change in my fortunes, and I also craved the reassurance Holmes' words were to me. There was a happiness beginning in me, and a hope for something I had long since given up as lost. "So you are saying that you feel for me as I do for you? Is this—" I broke off, not quite satisfied over which word to choose.

Holmes appeared to have no such doubts. "I desire you," he said.

Flustered, I hushed him and looked all around us for fear that someone had heard him. This was a foolishness on my part, for Holmes had chosen our box well. We were quite safe, fully as safe as in our own rooms, where Mrs. Hudson was never more than a few rooms distant.

"It's perfectly all right," Holmes soothed me. "I have taken every precaution, for I had intended to make love to you in this box as I had in the restaurant earlier this evening. I had planned this, dear chap, that I might whisper to you, touch you thus," he placed, once more, his hand upon my knee and his arms around my shoulders, "and perhaps, if you were bold enough and willing, I thought I might even dare a kiss."

So saying, he closed the last small distance between us, and for the first time outside of my fevered dreams, I felt Holmes kiss me. His lips were soft, supple and yielding, and I could not have enough of him. I opened my mouth to his, welcoming his presence within me and then coming to know his mouth. My hands firm upon his nape, I held him to me and kissed him with all the desperation born of the lonely nights I had endured in my single bed with only a door or two between us as he slept or worked. Innumerable heartbeats later, we parted, both of us breathing heavily. My collar was too tight around my neck, and my member was engorged with my passion, so full and hard that my underdrawers were strained by its pressure. I was so overflowing with emotion, I could hardly think. There was one thing I had to say, however foolish considering the magnitude of the events transpiring between us, and it burst from me. "You called me John." In all our time together, he had never done such a thing before and it betokened so clearly the changes I hoped were to come.

"Would you prefer I did not employ your Christian name?" Holmes asked me and I swear his eyes were twinkling. "You would rather, perhaps, that I refer to you always as Doctor Watson? Or perhaps John H. Watson M.D. suits your fancy better?"

"John is quite perfect, thank you." I wanted to ask the same of him, that I might use his Christian name, but I was yet diffident with him. I do not believe that I had fully assimilated the implications of our situation. It was all too much, and all too quick. I had entered this theatre convinced that Holmes was trying on the unfamiliar mantle of affectionate friendship, and not an hour later, I was confronted with the notion that Holmes was far from innocent, and knew precisely the Wildean depths that yawed open before us.

"Have you nothing else to say?" he whispered to me and I found the touch of his breath upon my skin to be most distracting, so much so that I must admit that cogency was not fully in my grasp.

"What would you have me say?"

"I would have you return me the intimacy of using my forename. I would have you," and he paused wickedly, the inference Biblical and thrilling to the depths of my soul, "permit me the intimacy of your person, with nothing forbidden me."

I am quite sure that I must have taken on the appearance of a rabbit with a stoat, my eyes wide and staring, my breath gasping and my heart hammering in my throat.

"Forbid me nothing, my dearest John," Holmes said to me, "as I forbid you nothing and give you dominion over me."

It was more than I had ever dared to dream. Men of my nature did not have happiness handed to them in this manner. We did not find love, not unless that love and happiness were hard-chased by misery and misfortune. Naught but ill ever came of such liaisons, all society knew this. And yet, and yet, this was the great Sherlock Holmes daring to speak of love. This was the most brilliant mind in London speaking words which implied even men of such perverse and unnatural desires as I had the right to declare love and devotion.

I did not know what to think. I wanted Holmes, yearned for him as I had ached for nothing and noone in my lifetime, but yet, what he was proposing was the most unnatural of vices, one that could have us both in Reading gaol and hounded from the doors of decent society. Overwhelming even that was the dizzying knowledge that it was Holmes saying all this to me. Holmes, whom I had more than half-convinced myself knew nothing of love and was, indeed, as incapable of love as he had always claimed.

"All you need do," Holmes said to me whilst the actress upon the stage wept and wailed, "is ask me. Whatever is disturbing and confounding you so, ask me, and I shall make it clear to you." He smiled at me then, a singular smile I remembered from late nights in our rooms in Baker Street when I would wake from an exhausted doze only to find Holmes staring at me. He would bless me with that same smile, and it never failed to cause a stirring and a confusion in me. With so much new data placed before me, comprehension was slowly forming. "Treat it as one of my cases, if that will render the mystery easier for you."

"But I thought you did not love?"

"Always so willing to believe me. It is one of your many charms. As for love..." He sat back a little, leaving me cold and lonely for all that he was so nearby. "I believed in love, I simply saw neither the use nor the desirability for it. But then you

intruded yourself upon my life..."

I spluttered then, too outraged to remind him of who had requested me to accompany whom on so many occasions. I subsided when he smiled at me once again and took my hand in his.

"I did not think to arm myself against you, and by the time I saw the danger you posed me, it was far too late to save myself. All that remained was to attempt to minimise the damage. Then, as time passed, and I observed how you comported yourself—for I had perceived your emotional attachment to me, I believe long before you yourself had recognised your affliction."

"Now, really, Holmes," I began, outraged.

It was not often that Holmes displayed such rank surprise, but I saw that I had shocked him. "You would deny having such feelings for me?" he asked me.

"No," I blustered. "I deny anyone but myself the right to call my feelings for you 'an affliction."

"Ah," he answered, smiling gently at me, and his hand upon mine was of an equal gentleness. "I should know better than to usurp a doctor's right of diagnosing."

Iwas no longer listening to what he was saying, my mind having finally caught up with what he had said before. "You are telling me," I asked, and my voice was as tremulous as a girl's, "that you know of my affections for you and also of my...carnal interest in you."

He answered me in the tone usually reserved for those occasions upon which it was necessary for him to elucidate a point that was, to him, all too patently clear. "Yes, that is precisely what I am telling you."

"And you are also informing me," I took a deep breath in the forlorn hope that it would steady my nerves somewhat, "that you share these carnal interests of mine?"

His eyes darkened, as men's do in the heat of passion. It was an unexpected sight, upon his face, looking at me, and a sight I had never taunted myself with hopes of. "Do not, I pray you, forget the companion of our carnal interests, that other aspect which you and I both share in what I hope will be equal measure."

This was surely too much. I stared at him, aghast. "You have affections for me?"

He threw his head back and gave a shout of laughter, and at a most inappropriate moment of the play. There were a few hissed calls for quiet, but it was most reassuring to note that none of the audience had but the vaguest idea from whence that shout of laughter had come. "Affections?" Holmes was saying, completely undisturbed by any consideration of what the masses, no matter their class or breeding, would think of him. "Affections? Oh, my dear fellow, surely affections is too banal a word. Affections are what one harbours for a pet or a house or even a favoured strumpet. Between you and me, surely, surely, there are better words?"

There was one word far better than affection, yet I was not certain he would willingly entertain its speaking. I was only too aware of the term appropriate to describe my emotions for my truest friend, but this was hardly a word Holmes had ever welcomed in the past.

"Have I swayed you so, that you will not even speak the word?" He was whispering once more, leaning in very closely towards me, his hands both strong and tender upon me. "Have I so convinced you that the emotion is valueless that you will not confess to it?" He kissed me then, a butterfly-wing against the corner of my mouth. The caress was utterly chaste in execution, but libidinous in effect. I trembled, and I believe he misunderstood the reasons for that physical response. "No, you would confess it, but never to me. You fear me too much. My damnable temper and my callous inconsideration. None of that will change, my dearest chap, but I promise you that you will no longer bear the brunt of my self-loathing for having failed to keep you at a suitable distance." He repeated the kiss, and as he did so, his hand slipped under my jacket and began unbuttoning my waistcoat. "Instead, I promise that you will know that my tempers are purely the result of some case, or of boredom. You will know," he had finished now with the buttons of my best white waistcoat and had started to undo the waistband of my trousers, "that my affections for you are of the deepest measure."

I gasped, not only from the impact of his words, but also because he was now spreading my flies open and his hand was searching out the opening to my drawers. His long fingers found the gap, and I felt, for the first time, his hand upon my private parts. I am afraid I made a sound then, but could spare only the smallest amount of concern over public reaction. I knew this to be insanity, but not even the prospect of the prisoner's dock, the

thunderous face of the magistrate and the stench of gaol could halt the lust rising hotly through my body.

Holmes unbuttoned my drawers and laid them open also, until my groin was exposed to the theatre air, and the dim light displayed my wantonness to his eyes. "Will that make it bearable?" he asked, and neither one of us noticed the *double entendre* in that until our reminiscing conversations several days later. "Will you be satisfied with that?"

I was too distracted by the touch of his fingers upon my member to answer him. He mistook my distraction for incomprehension.

"I am asking you if you will suffer me as I am, unchanged and unaltered for I cannot pretend to be what I am not. I will not become sweet and malleable, nor even placid and contented. But I will be honest with you, and tell you that I love you and take great joy in showing that love for you."

"Then for Heaven's sake, man," I groaned, "prove your word!"

Had I been in full command of my senses, then I would surely have made an elegant and adoring speech accepting him and this new level of our friendship. I would have spoken of Greek and Spartan ideals, of David and Jonathan swearing a covenant with each other before God and I would have told him, eloquently and poetically, with quotes from Lord Byron and Shelley, of the love I felt for him. As I was not in command of anything at that moment, it was well that Holmes took my frantic desire as proof of all those things I said to him over the next several days.

"I shall more than prove my word to you," he said. My legs were atremble and my heart was thundering in my chest. I could barely contain myself, and wanted terribly to reach out and have him do certain things to me. However, these were not things one asks a gentleman to do, and Holmes was most assuredly not a Guardsman out to make a few extra sixpences whilst on leave. Holmes was my friend and colleague, and holder of my heart. I could ask him for nothing. I stared at him mutely and wished that he would touch me again. I wanted him to do much, but I would settle for his hand upon me. To show this, I tried to reach the buttons on his trousers, but he dusted my hands away.

"No, no, no, John, that is not what this is to be. This is for your needs and for me to give penance for all the time you have spent yearning for me and I, wrapped in my own doubts and fears, left you to burn with unspent passions. This, my love, is for your pleasure alone."

He did then that which I most desired but which I most feared asking him to do. He lowered his head, and as he did so, I swear my heart tried to leap from my chest, so great was my anticipation and excitement. In the few instants his movement took, my phallus reached its fullest erection, for I was so stimulated by the vision of Sherlock Holmes willingly lowering himself to take me in his mouth.

I have always been intensely fond of fellatio, both as a performer and one performed upon. The possibility had never entered my mind that Holmes might be of the same inclination. My head was spinning from a combination of shock, confusion, disbelief and outright lust. How could it not? Here was the man I loved beyond Queen and country, a man I truly believed did not share my fleshly desires nor my mortal affections, and he was taking my member into his mouth with such tenderness, I could have wept.

His tongue laved me, there, where his fingers had teased the prepuce fully back. Then his mouth was haven around me, until he swallowed me deeper, and I knew the smooth heat of his throat, and the feel of his lips tight around the base of my phallus and the press of his face against my groin. I can not say whether it was superior talent or simply the depths of my feelings for him, but this was the headiest experience of my life. Heaven could hold no greater joy than this. I caressed his head, slipping my hands down to the sensitive skin behind his ears. My touch left a faint sheen on his skin from his pomade, and this caught the light, illuminating the hollow and fill of his cheeks as he suckled my flesh. I could not resist, and brought my hand between us, that I could feel my own hard phallus be absorbed by the softness of his lips. It was an exquisite sensation, and one that pushed me closer to the dissolution of climax. I could feel the glorious sensation gather deep inside me. My testes tightened, and I felt them move upwards to cling hotly to the base of my phallus. I was almost ready, and although I knew that, I did not inform Holmes, for I was afraid that if I were to tell him, then he would withdraw from me and use only his hands to bring me to a finish. It was, and I did not know why until my mind was

functioning once more, of the most vital importance to me that he should perform this act for me and that he should take my seed inside of himself. Of course, this was purely my need for him to prove his word to me, to give me evidence that my eyes and ears had not deceived me and that Holmes did indeed return my affections full fold.

He was stroking my testes, and I could feel them jump with his every caress. He knew, then, that I was close to *le petit mort*, but he did not hesitate. His mouth closed more firmly around me, his tongue pressed more firmly against me, and he made a sound in his throat, the vibration delightful against my glans. In that moment, I spent myself, and he swallowed me, taking everything I had to offer and not ceasing his ministrations until I was both drained dry and flaccid in his mouth. Then, and only then, when my pleasure was utterly complete, did he relinquish his physical hold on me, his emotional hold all the more firmly enshrined. I was sprawled inelegantly upon my chair, incapable of either movement or speech. He raised himself with a final, and very moving, kiss to my spent manhood. Then my clothing was rearranged, every button buttoned and every fold smoothed out.

"There," he said, "nothing at all to betray us." The he looked at my face, and my expression must have said more than any mere words ever could. "Well, nothing, if you keep your hat low and your face averted. No-one could look upon that countenance and not see you for a man in love."

I found my voice, and my boldness. "And a man who has recently been well loved. I wish to thank you..."

"For beginning reparation on a terrible debt? I think not."

"I wish to thank you in kind," I replied. Infected with his daring and made brave by the heedlessness of the rest of the audience, I reached for his trousers. Once again, he brushed my hands aside, but not before I had ascertained that he was in a state of some arousal.

"Allow me to do penance in my own way," he said, retreating back to his seat. "I feel myself to be dishonoured for having treated you so shabbily, and these few hours are all I can bear to redress the balance."

I heard my own words once again, as I had stood upon the moor and met him. 'Then you use me, and yet you do not trust me!' I had cried with

some bitterness. 'I think that I have deserved better at your hands'. Holmes, it would seem, was in agreement with me. "It does not matter," I replied tenderly, my hand seeking his in the darkness. I found it, and clasped him tightly. He returned the gesture, and also smiled, a little shyly, a little ashamedly. "Yes, I confess that I have felt myself treated harshly in your hands, but what you have just done—" I lost the words, for the softness in his grey eyes brought a lump to my throat and I must needs swallow before I could hope to speak another word. "What you have confessed to me—"

His eyes were twinkling now, and upon his lips hovered that small, quirked smile of which I have always been so enamoured. "In fact, you did not know that I had it in me."

"There is more that you shall have in you shortly," I replied in haste, and then my cheeks flamed with heat as I realised the dreadful crudeness of my speech. Holmes, however, did not seem to find such roughness offensive. Rather, he took my hand that was yet clasped in his and pressed our entwined fingers against the burgeoning strength of his groin.

"I could not agree with you more," he said, and I was astonished to note that his voice was all aquiver. "However, as I have said, I must repay you for the dismay and anguish I have caused, to prove that I am sincere."

I began to protest, unwilling to either wait to know his body or to make him suffer one whit of what I had endured in my lonely achings for him.

"No, no," he said, "this is something I must do. There are no marriage certificates for our sort, nor is there a clergyman in the land who would bless our union. We must make our own bonds, John, and we must make our own covenants. This," and again he pressed our joined hands to the heated hardness of his manhood, "is my proof to you that I am sincere in my vows and honest in my devotion to you."

I did not know what to say to such a blatant display of love from a man I had once believed had no human weaknesses at all. "This is not necessary," I told him. "And worse, it leaves me in a deuced awkward position." He was withdrawing from me, untangling our hands and his eyes were shuttered and opaque. That hurt me more than I believed possible. "Don't," I murmured, "please, I beg you, do not shut me out. I love you, as you

love me, and if we neither of us are yet at ease with this knowledge, then we must each give the other time and make allowances for blunders and gaffes. Forgive me, I did not mean that you making a vow to me was unwelcome. I was simply attempting to say that you had a means of proving your intentions, whilst I had none."

"Nonsense, John!" he cried, once more reclaiming my hand and honouring me with the sweetest of kisses against my lips. "You have proved yourself over and over to me. And as he spoke, his voice took on the tone of a confession, for he was baring a stark truth to me. "It was your devotion and steadfastness in the face of my most appalling nature that made it possible for me to finally unburden myself to you and tell you the truth of my affections for you."

"So you require nothing farther from me?"

"I require a great deal from you." There was a thunder of applause at that moment, disturbing me. Unremarked by myself or my companion, the play had reached its conclusion and the players were taking their bows. The curtains closed and the audience began to filter from the theatre, chattering as loudly as the gaudy birds they resembled in their fine evening clothes.

At my side, Holmes had gained his feet, and was tophatted and elegant as ever. Not a single detail about him disclosed what he had done nor what he had said. There was nothing at all to indicate that I had not fallen asleep and dreamed the entire, wondrous business. He chose that moment to smile and offer me his arm, leading me from the theatre, whilst I floated on a cloud of happiness. That smile had told me that it had not been a dream, merely dreamlike it in its perfection. Holmes had said and done everything my heart had desired from him, save for allowing me to reciprocate his ministrations. There would be time for that soon enough, I thought, I confess somewhat hazily as I was more than a little dazed by all that had transpired. It would be less than an hour before we were back in our rooms, and then I would demand that he act upon our covenant, and permit me the liberty of his body.

It was not to be so. Holmes hailed a hansom, and we were soon on our way, our driver jostling his way through the theatre crowds thronging the street. I was stung and angered by the address Holmes had given. I knew not where this house stood, but I did know that it was not the familiar

confines of Baker Street. I did not wish further entertainment, for I wanted nothing more than to return to our home and learn that everything Holmes had said was true and that he was no longer afraid to make such a display.

"There is no need for such anger," Holmes said before I could speak. I did not ask him how he knew I was angry, for it took no great powers of observation to discern such a palpable truth.

"Is there not? You toy with me in the theatre, you deny me the right to share with you and now you are taking me off to goodness knows where when we could be returning to our own rooms and our own beds!"

"You are so much bolder than I had hoped. It sits well on you, John. Pray, do continue."

There was little I could say in the face of such indulgence. I felt very much a wench with her beau, when nothing she says is taken seriously and everything is in the hands of the man. It was neither a comfortable nor a welcome feeling, and I was weighing up the consequences of demanding we return to Baker Street against the need to show Holmes the understanding I had so foolishly proposed in the theatre. I did not, at that moment, feel at all well-disposed to tolerating this blunder he was making in our fledgling affaire.

"We are almost there," Holmes said, tapping the roof with his stick. "And in the interests of discretion, we will alight here and walk the last distance." We strolled arm in arm along the pavement, and I found it impossible to retain my anger. It was too fine a pleasure to be with him in such a manner. To any outsider, we would appear as nothing but two friends walking together innocently, perhaps to work off a too-rich dinner, or even one brandy too generous. However, I knew how unlike those other friends we were. Holmes was pressing my arm tightly against his body, so that I must, perforce, walk so closely at his side that his leg continually brushed against mine. He was also speaking all the while, making up, or so he said, for all the times when he had kept his peace and held his own counsel. Now, he told me all the things he had never dared before and all those vulnerable truths which he had so feared to disclose.

There was a house on the corner, almost white in the moonlight, with a tall wall that prohibited any view from the street. Even the traditional gate had been replaced by a door far more suitable to a country residence than a home in Town, but that was the only odd thing about the place. Holmes raised his stick and pounded in what was obviously a code. After a few moments, a small cache port opened and a shadowed face growled— "Yes? What d'you want and who are yous?"

"We wish admittance and we are friends of Sir David and his cousin, Sir Jonathan."

The door immediately opened to us, and we entered. The shadowy face belonged to a handsome, rough sort of man, of perhaps thirty summers. "Thought it were you, guv'nor," he said, "but I 'ave ter be sure. Yer've picked a good night to come."

"I'm delighted to hear that. For future reference, Jimmy, this is my very special friend, Dr. Watson, and you may admit him without fear."

"Right yer are," Jimmy replied, taking a good look at my face. I knew this man would recognise me again, even were I not to return for ten years.

"This way, John," Holmes said, pointing along a white path that was bordered by weeping willows and a brooklet on one side and large rhododendron bushes on the other. I thought I could hear sounds coming from behind the vegetation, and my suspicion must have been obvious. "This is an extraordinarily special house," Holmes whispered. "One can do anything one chooses here. Complete freedom, John, without having to once look over one's shoulder. We are safe, within these walls, where none but our own kind ever enter."

"I would still rather be home in Baker Street," I replied somewhat churlishly. Ihad heard of houses of this sort, and I had no desire to share Holmes with any debauchery, nor did I wish to indulge in anything of that nature with anyone but the man at my side. I was in love, and newly told that my love was returned, and had no wish to dally in pleasures of the flesh that might be welcome once the first blush of love has worn into the comfort and ease of long-term companionship. I wanted Holmes, and I wanted him all to myself.

"Come, come," he whispered to me, almost pushing me, reluctant, up the sweeping stairs to the front door. "Trust me in this, as you have trusted me so well in all other things."

Had it not been for his open affection for me and how important it was to him that I trust him still, I should have left that house without setting foot over its threshold. Instead, still dizzy from what Holmes had said and done to me this night, I followed him. A manservant took our coats and hats with a discreet murmur of welcome. Holmes asked him something, low-voiced, and I heard the servant reply, "In the main ballroom as always, sir."

Someone else who knew Holmes well. I began to feel a fool for having thought him innocent and unaware of the demands of the male body. It would appear that Holmes had far more experience to call upon than my few paltry engagements with members of my own sex. Doubt began to settle upon me, as I contemplated how often Holmes must have frequented this house and how many men he must have known in a purely Biblical sense. Darkness weighed upon me, and I wondered if all his protestations were nothing more than a means to an end. Perhaps he was merely curious, or seeking the convenience of a partner he already shared rooms with. I did not truly believe any of that, but I was not certain that all my doubts were born of insecurity. I truly feared that he was doing this out of pity for me. My own words, my own voice came back to me as I had spoken to him on the moor. I had sounded pathetic to my own ears, ill-done by and melancholy. I knew that Holmes had intended to cheer me by dinner and an evening at the theatre, and despite his apparent sincerity, I could not relinquish the insidious fear that all this was done out of his sense of guilt at having used me so poorly.

A liveried servant opened another door to us and we stepped into a magnificent ballroom. The first impression one had was of immense size, and a huge crowd, and then one saw that it was an illusion created by mirrored walls and large chandeliers. There were sofas and chairs encircling the room, and a table laden with a cold supper. It took but a moment for the most uncommon aspect of the room to become clear. There was not a woman present. All the revellers were men, dressed primarily in black, as was proper, but some were dressed in gaudy clothes of a most improper sort. One man, I noted with some astonishment, was bedecked in a formally cut suit of the most livid green satin. Another was in peacock blue, yet another in brightest red. For the most part, the rest were dressed in the usual somber colour of Englishman at play. There were couples—two men, together!—dancing closely, and elsewhere men were discoursing with men. There was nothing untoward taking place anywhere, certainly nothing that one would not see at any ball in London, save for the fact that the discreet flirtations and the exquisite dancings were enacted entirely by the male of the species. Arousal rumbled through me, heavy, rich, unnerving, my heart beating faster at the sight of such an unending display of masculinity.

"Observe," Holmes said, rightfully amused, "not a woman in sight, nor a policeman, nor anyone else who might either disapprove or put us at risk. There are other rooms in this house for baser entertainments, but this is where I wished to take you this evening."

We were descending the stairs to the ballroom proper, and I was astonished, despite the ambiance of our surroundings, when Holmes took me in his arms and led me onto the dance floor. There was a moment or two of adjustment as I learned how to place my arms so that whilst I was not leading, I was also not taking the rôle of the lady. He was, to my considerable surprise, an excellent dancer and we were gliding perfectly across the floor. Of course, it may also have been simply that my happiness had returned and I was once more floating on a cloud of happiness.

"Why did you so wish to bring me here?" I asked. Although I was almost sure of the reasons, I also needed to hear him say these things for himself.

"Because, my dearest John, I wanted to celebrate this evening with you. I wanted to make it so memorable that you would not require an entry in your journal to remember, a year from now, what we did this night."

I almost stumbled in my shock. Enough that Holmes had confessed love, but now he was admitting something amazingly close to romanticism. I wondered what other delightful secrets I would uncover in this beloved friend now that we had no need to hide from each other that which a cruel society labels 'unnatural'.

"That was the last answer you expected, was it not?"

He was smug and I could not find the hardness of heart to deflate his high opinion of himself. "Yes, indeed," I replied, smiling at him, allowing myself to relax into the sweet pleasure of dancing with him in a room surrounded by other people so alike to us yet endlessly different. We all of us had one thing we shared, and that was our desire for our own sex, but every face was different, every voice, every person. Holmes and I were not, I was quite certain, the only lovers in this room, but I was equally positive that we were the newest and with the most to anticipate in the future. I was willing, with the music soaring and ourselves dancing in perfect harmony, to abandon myself to my dreamings of our rosy future, but there was one thing I had to ask Holmes.

"In the theatre, you said that there was a great deal you still required of me. What, I wonder, could it be?" I asked of him, pressing forward a trifle closer until my groin was touching his and I could feel his quiescent manliness begin to rise once more.

"I shall certainly require that," he replied, his expression making it clear that if this were any other room of this house, then he would surely kiss me. "That is of the moment, however. What I require from you," he continued, bringing us almost to a halt and becoming very serious, "is the rest of your life."

I was truly astounded. "And if I do not choose to give you the rest of my life?"

"Then I shall yet give you mine and try to persuade you to my point of view."

And none knew better than I how terribly persuasive Mister Sherlock Holmes can be. "Home," I said, taking him by the hand and leading him through the thronging men. "I have more than enough memories stored up from this evening to ensure that I will never forget a single moment. But there is still more I would have to remember, and I am most anxious to begin memorising."

He did not argue with me, and indeed, it was he who was in the greatest haste to return to Baker Street, with our cosy rooms where the fire was lit and an unneeded cold supper was left covered upon the table. Most welcome of all, we returned to the rooms where our beds were, clean and fresh and welcoming, and there we consummated the great happiness which had, indeed, begun after Marcini's.

WISH I WASN'T HERE

Silent and grey, water and sky surrounded him. Even the pier was grey in this light, the cloudy skies leaching the colour from painted wood, the shuttered cafés and amusement arcades staring blindly out at the deserted seashore, summer's colourful profusion of sun-burned holiday-makers nowhere to be seen. Bodie stuck his hands more deeply in his pockets and wandered a little farther out, to where a grizzled old man was sitting, solitary, fishing. They exchanged the brief nod that passed for greeting, then Bodie was walking on, looking for something to do, or see, or best of all, someone to talk to.

Christ, but he missed Doyle. The tea shop, used year round by locals, was still open, so he went in there, but only old Mrs. Henderson was there, dozing behind the till. Familiar now, Bodie helped himself to tar-like tea from the urn, and a cake from the old-fashioned cake stand that Teresa simply couldn't persuade her gran to get rid of. Quiet enough to not wake Mrs. Henderson up, he slipped a pound note under the tip saucer; he'd get his change later, if Mrs. H. woke up before he left, or tomorrow when he came in as usual.

Depressing thought, that. Sunk into a routine that would bore an octogenarian, and it was still a bit much for him sometimes. Not surprising, really. The injury was well healed now, but he was still a bit weak from the infection. Mind you, he was willing to admit, if he were alone with no-one within five miles of him and had a written guarantee that Cowley would never hear of it, that the tiredness was caused more by depression than

any lingering after-effects of the stabbing.

Christ, but he missed Doyle! And how many times had he thought that today? Steadfastly, he refused to think about Doyle any more. Well, he wouldn't think about Doyle for an hour. Wouldn't think about the job, or his mates, or going out to a decent pub, or a film that was less than three years old, or a good Indian restaurant or any of the other million things he missed. Such as Doyle. But he wasn't supposed to be thinking about Doyle, was he? Not for another fifty nine minutes anyroad. He picked up the paper, supped his tea, took a bite of his cake, engrossed himself in the fervid discussion on whether the Council should erect a new wind shelter on the Promenade, or use the money for extra bins round the shopping precinct. By the second paragraph, he had reneged on his promise to himself and was missing Doyle all the more. If Ray were here, he'd be able to toss sarky comments across the table, and have Doyle answer him right back. But all he had was the grey sky, the grey sea, and Mrs. H. snoring at the till.

Small wonder he was depressed.

Go to the seaside, Cowley had said, recover your strength, get your edge back. He closed his eyes for a minute, indulging himself in one of the few amusements available him. Reliving the past. Correction: reliving the bits of his past that were about Ray but safe, oh, yes, only think safe thoughts about Ray...

The sun had been streaming in Cowley's window when the old man had ushered them both in, Doyle looking at Bodie, Bodie looking at Doyle,

both of them on tenterhooks. Not many people got invited to Cowley's flat, and those that did were usually of considerably higher standing than two CI5 agents.

"Sit yoursel's down," Cowley was saying, limping slightly as he crossed to the old-fashioned sideboard and got the whisky out. Another glance between the other two men: not only the Laphroaig, which was unusual enough, but the crystal glasses as well. "Here," Cowley was handing them both a glass, and suddenly the rich, peaty smell of the whisky was drowning out the smell of the sea and the tea-shop, and Bodie really was back there that sunny afternoon, in the final days of an unforecast Indian summer that had lasted a few precious days before autumn had closed the skies and started killing the trees. He could feel it again, the ache in his back, in the side of his neck, in his arm where the worst of the bruising had been, and hovering over it all, the odd lightheadedness that came from fever and too much weight lost too quickly. He should still, according to the doctors, have been in the hospital, but he'd signed himself out, and gone gratefully home to Doyle, Ray taking care of him, lazing around together in those few days of sunshine—until the phone call. And then there they had been, in Cowley's living room, his boss slightly rumpled in brown trousers and tan cardigan, shirt open at the neck, old brown leather slippers on his feet and his faded ginger hair dishevelled as if Cowley, of all people, had been worrying enough to run his hands through it.

"No doubt you'll be wondering what's behind all this."

Not a question, and only Cowley had any answers anyway.

Their boss was staring down into his glass, swirling the whisky, watching the way the light glinted in there. Silently, Bodie and Doyle waited. Then, abruptly: "You were very attentive of Bodie here when he was in hospital, weren't you, Doyle?"

Now how the hell was he supposed to answer that? Doyle shrugged, taking a casual sip of his drink, nothing showing how fast his heart was pounding, nor the fear that was racing through his veins. "Same's any mate would do."

Cowley, sharp-eyed, nailing him. "McCabe wouldn't do it for Lucas."

Quicksand, treacherous underfoot, ready to devour him. Another shrug. "Then maybe Lucas and McCabe need to be re-partnered, if they're

that callous about each other."

Nice one, Doyle! Bodie thought. That should put the old sod off the trail. Don't let anyone else see how close we're growing, don't let anyone spoil it for us...

"Oh aye? And what about after you were shot, Doyle, when Bodie went to stay with you, took care of your shopping and cleaning and heaven knows what else?"

Neither one of them gave into the temptation to look at each other, not the slightest flicker of reaction giving them away, the united front presented as always, as if their world weren't being torn apart, all the ragged, unspoken secrets held up for public comment. "Told you, we're good mates, and we take proper care of each other."

"And is it?" Unblinking, no mistaking the implication in his words.

"Is it what?" Doyle, an edge of hostility now, tension showing round his mouth and in the way he uncrossed his legs, sitting up very straight, that very formality a silent banner of defiance.

"Proper."

"Couldn't be improper, could it?" Doyle demanded, willing his partner to keep quiet, to let him deal with this, let him bear the brunt.

"Couldn't it? Tell me, Doyle, what's the difference between proper and improper?"

Doyle smiled, not sweetly. "Oh, well, I wouldn't know, would I?" He dug out an old quote, a snide insult delivered by the former Minister. "Illiterate, ill-favoured gutter brat like me, what would I know? I'll just leave the moral judgements to you, I think.'

"Oh, you think, there's no doubting that," Cowley said with something akin to approval. Then it was Bodie's turn to face the Inquisition. "And you, Bodie, will you leave the moral judgements to me as well?"

"Depends, sir."

"Oh, it depends, does it? And what is it it depends on?"

Bodie swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing, gambling more than he had any right to do, not without discussing it with Ray first. "Depends on whether you're going to use the rules of peace or the rules of war.'

And felt Doyle's momentary puzzlement, saw Cowley's instant comprehension. Cowley's voice was very soft, his accent very strong, as if thirty years abroad had been wiped out and he were the man he'd been before he'd moved down South. "An' would it make that much of a difference?"

Bodie, almost in a whisper, sensing Doyle's comprehension and stunned disbelief. Oh, god, he thought, even if we get away with this, there'll be hell to pay when he gets me outside. "Yes, sir, it would make that much difference."

Cowley pressed his lips tightly closed and got to his feet, going over to that same sideboard, and the silver framed photos on it. Parents, obviously, in the poker stiff poses of days gone past. Immediately behind that: standing with an old woman who was obviously his grandmother, there was Cowley himself, all shining face and ruthlessly combed hair, in his brand new school uniform. Then Cowley again, this time with another boy, not a penny to choose between them, in their Boys' Brigade uniforms, honour badges bright as their sashes. Next, four young people, the two boys become men, laughing, flushed faces, standing there in their kilts and lace-up dancing shoes, the two girls in white dresses and tartan sashes, smiling brightly at the camera, more life than one photograph could hold. So many other pictures: a stern regiment standing stiffly at attention, soldiers caught exhausted in their bivouac, faces begrimed and muddy, the sort of photo that had signatures and dates on the back, too many of them belonging to dead men; a sepia-tinged old man, hair and collar of a fashion long since discarded, but with Cowley's sharp eyes and that same proud expression, and those same laugh-lines round so similar a mouth.

Cowley stood there for some time, face revealing nothing, remembering what Doyle and Bodie could never know, what Doyle and Bodie could never be told. The man's loneliness was palpable, and Bodie was guiltily glad of it, for it could weigh the scales in their direction. If Cowley could see his way to understanding that they were stumbling along, taking their first steps on a path that would free themselves from the loneliness that was the everyday curse of this line of work, then perhaps he would let them be. Perhaps, for it was obvious Cowley thought they had travelled that road many a time and were all too familiar with it.

With his back to Bodie and Doyle, paying more attention to the photographs of his own past than to them, or so it seemed to his agents, Cowley said: "For all we're fighting a war to keep the scum off the streets, we are, technically at least, at peace."

Cowley turned to look at Bodie, an expression—something, almost recognised—fleeting across his eyes before Bodie could decipher it. "You're asking too much of me, laddie," Cowley said, and there was sadness there, and regret, and things hinted at that their boss would never speak of. "You're asking me to mind things best forgotten, and to break rules that shouldn't be broken." A slight shake of his head, and then he was looking at those photographs of his memories again, speaking scarcely above a whisper. "The one rule I'm feart of breaking."

And Bodie was left to wonder what had been left unsaid: 'especially for me', or 'especially for you'?

But then Cowley was looking them again, brisk and dour as always, but this time, not even Bodie could imagine a smile on this face, nor that this man could have possibly hinted at forbidden feelings. "No, it's the rules of peace we'll go by. I trust you both know what that means?"

Doyle's silent shock echoed through the room, smacking Bodie, making him curl up inside with guilt. He glanced at his partner, saw the expression on his face, and Bodie felt the blunt wedge of that shame edging them apart. Christ, he shrieked, but silently, all the sound bottled up inside behind a militarily impassive face, why couldn't this have waited until we'd talked about this? Until after Ray at least knew where we were heading. Or what I wanted with him...

"Would you care to spell that out, sir," Doyle was asking carefully, very, very politely, an absolutely stunned expression lurking just behind his eyes. "So that we all know we're all talking about the same thing here."

"I thought I'd trained you better than that, Doyle," Cowleysaid, busying himself with pouring more malt, topping up three glasses far more than mere hospitality, even of the Scottish sort, demanded. "Think, man! If I were to spell it out, then that would mean I knew all about you and..." a pause, a mouthful of whisky swallowed, then Cowley continued, "your partner there. And if I know about it..."

"You would have to ask us to resign."

"Aye, Bodie, I'd be leaning on the pair of you to resign, to get out before the scandal broke and damaged my department."

"And if you don't know?" Doyle, asking, Bodie looking at him with shock, and perhaps, a touch of

hope.

"If I don't know?" A longish pause, more than a mouthful of good Laphroaig disappearing. "If I have cause to suspect—cause that can be put down in black and white and used against me, ye understand—" a sharp glower at them both, a warning and an anger, "then I'd have no choice but to order a full security check run on the pair of you."

And that slight emphasis on 'full' was the most chilling threat Bodie for one had ever had levelled at him.

"So basically what you're saying is that if we'd done anything—and we haven't, so you're in the clear—" Bodie said, unable to look away from Ray, watching the disillusion grow, "but if we had, then we'd be out, and if we hadn't—which we haven't—" and he wondered why Doyle was looking at him like that, as if he were some sort of slimy creature crawled out from under a rock—"but then decided that we were going to—which we're not, wouldn't ever even consider such a thing," and now he wasn't looking at Doyle, didn't dare face his partner, "but if we did, then you'd run a check and we'd be asked to resign?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, have you turned into a parrot as well as a fucking eunuch?"

"If I was a eunuch, I wouldn't do much—"

"That's quite enough of that language, you two."

"Yes, sir." Bodie, looking downwards, closing in on himself.

"Oh, that's great, that's really great! I've got you threatening us with the chop and I've got him dancing like a puppet on a fucking string!"

"What d'you expect, Ray?" Shouting, jumping to his feet, not even noticing the way Cowley was watching him. "Me down on one knee with the diamond ring in its little box?" Subsiding then, folding in on himself, unnaturally small in his chair, all the power and bravado gone out of him. "We could never have anything like that. Why d'you think we've been going round and round in circles the way we have? If anything was going to happen..."

"That's enough," Cowley again, but not his usual bark. This was very gentle, and the bite it carried was all the more painful for it. "You two know better than to have this conversation in front of me."

Two voices, in tattered unison. "Yes, sir."

"Just see you remember to watch your language in front of me—and everyone else on the squad."

"Is that it?" Doyle asked, but looking at Bodie, asking a question that Bodie didn't know how to answer.

"Aye, laddie, it is." Cowley, saying it for them both. "If you either one of you intend to stay in security—and you've both got fine careers ahead of you, so don't go doing anything any stupider than you already have."

"So that's it then. Over and done with." Still looking at Bodie, but not asking any more, not really.

Bodie didn't quite shrug, a gesture Doyle had always found attractive. "Suppose so."

Doyle looked away, out the window, watching the light glint off a window opposite. "Best be off then, I suppose." Something too close to a sigh for comfort, then a watery smile, one that had no heart to it. "Need a lift, mate?"

As Doyle had driven them both here, and as Bodie was in no fit state to drive, the comment was nothing more than a signal that everything was back to being just friends, all other possibilities dead and decomposing before their eyes.

"Before you leave, Doyle, take this with you."

"What is it?" As cool as if this were a routine day, he picked the typed page up from Cowley's desk.

"A special course in weaponry at Sandhurst. I've made arrangements for you to spend this weekend and the next fortnight there."

Doyle just looked at him. "Is that a hint or an order? Sir?"

"The latter, if you're too stupid to take the former."

"It's all right, I've got the message. No need to send me off to the boondocks."

Cowley ignored him, turning his attention now to Bodie. "And you're looking too peaky for anyone's good. A wee sojourn at the seaside should see you straight."

And no-one was going to actually comment on that, although Doyle opened his mouth, only to close it again when he looked at Bodie's unrevealing face.

"The seaside at this time of year? Guaranteed pneumonia—"

"Not at this time of year, Bodie, not if you wrap up well." Implacable, making his point, giving them both the opportunity that they were still to be trusted, that there was no need for that threatened full security check.

"I'll take my woolly undies then, shall I?" Vicious smile, so much anger suppressed behind it. "That should give the local ladies a thrill."

"Aye, it should," more heavy-handed than usual, labouring a point that had already been made, but harping on at it, as if he couldn't quite let it go. "So should you, Doyle."

"Pimping, sir?" Doyle asked sweetly, already half-way out the door. "Or am *I* supposed to pay *them*?"

And then he was gone, and Bodie with him, so that only Cowley was left behind in the untouched tidiness of his bachelor flat.

Unspeaking, Bodie and Doyle got into the car together, neither one of them willing to wonder aloud how long it would be before they could afford this luxury again. Several minutes, no words spoken and precious little of London travelled, cars congesting the roads like flu, crowds overflowing the pavements, tempers made short by the heat. Longer, and more distance travelled, far enough to take them beyond the press of humanity into almost deserted streets, old age pensioners moving with the slow care of the easily broken, and children hurling themselves around with the abandon of immortality.

In the car, it was Doyle who finally spoke. "So are you going down the coast or what?" Or what: follow the rules, or give it all up and stay together, do something about this intimacy that had been growing so unavoidably between them.

"Might go down to a place I know near Plymouth," Bodie said, being carefully casual, not wanting to push Doyle into what neither one of them had been ready for this morning, so the mere mentioning of it by Cowley shouldn't have changed that. "You?"

"You're the one he's sent off to get a suntan, not me."

"That's not what I meant and you know it. You going to Sandhurst then?"

Doyle was looking across at him, at the way the sun had made Bodie's normally pale skin slightly pink, at the single drop of sweat that was rolling down Bodie's temple. Doyle, from the expression on his face, wanted, deeply, to lick that droplet up, to taste Bodie, to know the man. But they hadn't brought this out in the open until Cowley had trawled it up in his prim little parlour, so Doyle

didn't reach across, didn't press his lips to Bodie's warm skin. And Bodie knew why. After all, he had said he was going to the coast, doing the sensible thing, getting away from him—running away from temptation. Bodie knew he had made the right choice, no two ways about it. Still, to give up all the promise, all the possibilities between them without ever having given it a chance...

"Don't suppose I've got much choice, have I?" Doyle said heavily. "Anyway, not much point in staying behind if you've gone off to play in the sand, is there?"

Tension prickling his skin, Bodie hastened a glance at his partner, then looked away, preferring the banality of lace-curtained windows to the almost hopeful expression on Doyle's face. There had been an offer in that last comment: if Bodie stayed, then so would Doyle, and damn the consequences. But to give up everything he'd worked for, everything he'd done to redeem himself in his own eyes, for what? For a handful of promises that hadn't even been made yet? For a love that hadn't been mentioned apart from the most elliptical of Cowley's comments? For lust? Too much to lose, and perhaps all he would gain is a relationship that wouldn't work, a hope that would pan out into nothing more than a curiosity that faded when satisfied, the unnatural outcome of a tooclose partnership brought to premature fruition.

Half a street away from Bodie's flat, Doyle tried again. "Since we're getting hung anyway, I just wish it was for a sheep instead of a lamb."

That cut Bodie to the quick. He knew what Doyle was talking about, had been thinking of a similar metaphor himself. But from his point of view, it seemed that they'd been let off lightly with a warning to protect them from their own indiscretions. And perhaps, if they'd never even got to the point of discussing these feelings, protection from throwing their careers away on something as solid and dependable as air.

"Fair enough," Doyle said, when he pulled up outside Bodie's flat. "Silence speaks louder than words, eh? Anyway," and his sunglasses were left in place as he said goodbye, "you've got a key to my place, you can pick the rest of your stuff up tomorrow."

"You going to be there?"

"Nah." Off-hand, as if it didn't really matter anyway: they were only workmates, after all, weren't they? "Think I'll go hit the road tonight,

drive around a bit, have a bit of a break before I have to face the chinless wonders at Sandhurst. So." An oddity: an awkward pause between them. A casual goodbye seemed too little, a handshake too formal, and a hug—too much by far. "Well. See you back at work once you've got yourself back in

"Right." He stared at Doyle, wishing there were something he could say, or better yet, something that he had said, before Cowley had dragged it out like so much dirty laundry. Again that fraction of a shrug, and he was turning away, going up to his own flat, leaving Doyle sitting in the car on the street in the sun, watching him. He could feel Doyle's eyes on him every step he took up the half flight to the main door, knew he was being watched as he dug out his keys, turned them in the lock, and pushed open the door. He didn't want to go through that door: didn't want to finish this before it had even started. Started to turn, to say something, but the car was screeching away, only the stench of its exhaust lingering in the summer air.

Back in the here and now, he could smell the seaweed and the sand, the clinging underscent of too many holiday makers packed too hotly into the tea room. He even fancied he could smell the Daddies sweat and the Mummies' stale, cheap perfume, and the grime of their sand-crusted kiddies. There had probably been a squabbling tribe of overtired tourists sitting at this table when he'd been in Cowley's parlour listening to the old man dispose of his life for him. And for Doyle as well. Christ, poor Ray. He'd been so taken aback when it dawned on him what he, Bodie, and Cowley were talking about that afternoon. Poor bastard, to have Cowley, of all people, bring it all out in the open like that, when all Doyle and he had done so far was let the camping go a bit too far, copping more of a feel than was strictly typical, being a bit too fond of slinging their arms round one another, a bit too free in their discussions of sexual dalliances... Of being a bit too conscientious in giving aid and succour to their companion-atarms. He could still remember, that first night Doyle was out of hospital, lying in Doyle's big bed, his partner still and silent and awake beside him. How long had they lain like that? Felt like forever at the time. And then Doyle had grunted with pain, and misery, and reached out until they were lying side by side, their hands and arms touching,

their legs so close he could feel Doyle's heat. They might have done it that night, if Doyle hadn't been so exhausted by the shooting.

Typical, Bodie thought to himself, abandoning the dregs of his tea and the crumbs of his cake, every single time either one of them had been vulnerable and miserable enough to let it happen, there had been an injury in the way, new stitches, fragile joints sprained into agony, bones broken and grating with pain. So they would touch each other, and perhaps think about saying something, but the moment would always somehow pass with neither one of them having the balls to speak. Then it was back to business as usual, all banter and bitching. But the touching would be easier next time, and a little bit more than before, and the friendship between them would be that bit more comfortable, that fraction more intimate.

Walking along the Promenade, most of the tourist traps boarded up already, shutters going up the day after the last Bank Holiday, he could have been in some science fiction film: after the nuclear rain. All the people departed, only the haunting music in the background. He looked around, trying to work out where the sound was coming from, finally spotted an open window, where bright flowers were drooping. Perfect, really, for the way he was feeling.

One shop was still open, the newsagents the locals used year round. The plastic mesh bags of spades and pails were gone now, the stacks of rock bought and consumed by sticky-faced children, barely enough choc-ices and ice-lollies left to cover the bottom of the big freezer, and the gaudy souvenirs stuck to the back of shelves to gather dust until the next invasion of the tourist hordes.

"Oh, hello, didn't expect to see you in here again today."

Bodiesmiled at her, glad of the chance to actually talk to someone, and Mrs. Humphries was nice enough, if a bit boring and inclined to be oblivious to his many charms and overly fond of chatting about her children. "Yeh, well, not a lot else to do round here, is there?"

"No, there's not, unless you're willing to drive to one of the towns. Of course, you should see this place in summer, when the amusements are set up and the theatre's open. We have some really good

"In the summer," Bodie dutifully supplied. "Only problem is, summer's been and gone and I'm still here."

Jessie Humphries busied herself tidying the plethora of newspapers and magazines that were piled atop the counter. "If you don't mind me asking...

It was nice to have someone actually be interested enough to ask, and listen, even if it were only to pass on a new tidbit to the local gossips. "No deep, dark secret," he lied, smiling friendlily. "I've been ill and my boss sent me down here to rest till I'm back up to par."

"Have an active job then, do you?" The newspapers were actually dusted, and the magazines smoothed. "Something exciting?"

"Active, yeh, suppose so. Exciting, nah," he shrugged, eyes twinkling. Here was a game Doyle would enjoy, their old play of pretending to be something they were wildly unsuited for, and doing it all with such outrageous innocence that people actually believed them. "Not unless you get excited being a private nurse for an old—and very rich—invalid.'

"You! Never! Oh, come on, you're pulling my leg."

"No, straight up! I landed myself this cushy number looking after an old man, and when I got sick, his son sent me down here until I was well enough to go back to work."

All pretence of being politely interested was gone, replaced by voracious, bare-faced nosiness. Mrs. Humphries was leaning one elbow on the counter, chin propped on her hand as she stared at Bodie. "No," she finally pronounced after serious examination. "I can't believe you're a nurse. You look," she said with more perception than Bodie cared for and with an accuracy that actually stung him, "more as if your job would be to hurt people than to help them."

"That's only 'cause I'm such a fine figure of a man," he joked, the smile gone tight on his face. He'd hurt Doyle, he was sure of that now, but he would only have done more harm if they'd gone on with the relationship. Nothing was worth buggering the rest of their lives up, was it? Nothing, especially since it was probably only curiosity and the ties that saving someone's life bound round them.

"You're certainly a good looking young man," Mrs. Humphries was laughing, "but you're no nurse."

"Yes. I am!"

"Prove it!"

"Oh," he said, eyebrows waggling suggestively, telling himself he had to get on with his life and stop this pathetic moping, "you want to play doctors and nurses, do you?'

She had both arms folded across the counter now, and was watching him with bright-eyed interest, this unusual man who had half the town atwitter with speculation. "I've a daughter who's a nurse," she said, "and I did a bit of training myself, before I met my husband and was expecting. Where did you do your training then?"

Oh, Christ, he thought, trust me. Doyle would be laughing like a drain by now... "You've got me there," he said with his most utterly charming smile.

"That's what I thought! Go on, dearie, tell me what you really do."

For a minute, he actually considered telling her the truth, but then the story would be over the town as quickly as the phone could spread it, and hot on its heels would come the uneasiness or the requests for help. "Just been demobbed," he said, stretching the truth by a few years.

"You weren't injured, were you? Is that why you're down here?"

He hadn't been expecting such genuine concern and absurdly, foolishly, he felt tears of self-pity prick his eyes.

"Oh, you poor lamb!"

God, it had been years since he'd been called that, absolutely years, and it took him back to his Gram, who always had a sweetie and a cuddle for him. "No, no, I'm fine, honest. Just, you know, got sick..."

"Was it really bad?" she was asking him, and if she didn't stop being so fucking nice to him, he was going to bawl like a baby and embarrass himself to death. "I can tell just by looking at you, you saw active service, didn't you?"

"Yes," he answered, meaning CI5, meaning the Paras and the SAS and Africa, all the hurt and anger and denial a lump in his throat.

"Oh, I am sorry," she was saying, and now she looked all misty-eyed, and Bodie knew he had to get out of there, soon, now, should never have come in.

"Here," he said, grabbing the first postcard he saw, setting the revolving rack squealing and groaning in a slow circle, "I'll take this, need to get it off to a mate of mine..."

"Still in the Service, is he?" she was asking him kindly.

"Yeh, yeh he is. And I'll take a packet of Revels and a Crunchie as well." Anything, just get her doing that and stop talking to him with all that sympathy before he ended up telling her about Ray and Cowley and what they'd given up without so much as a murmur.

She took the money he was all but throwing at her, glanced at the postcard. And raised her eyebrows and tightened her lips in a moue of pity. "Like that then, is it?" she asked, even more kindly. "Was he injured the same time you were?"

"No, he wasn't hurt, not this time round..." For God's sake, hurry up, I need to get out of here, away from you... He snatched the postcard from her, and the chocolate, trying desperately to maintain his composure, to not make him any more a topic of gossip than he already was.

Her hand wrapped round his wrist, and he was looking at eyes that reminded him too much of Cowley. "Your friend," she was saying, with that terribly telling emphasis that made 'friend' so much more, "is he why you were kicked out?"

"I don't think I care for your implications," he said with icy dignity, proud of himself for not betraying his panic. "Now, if you don't mind?" He eased himself politely free, and turned on his heel, walking out of her shop, trying not to let her see his fear.

Back on the promenade, fighting down the urge to run and run and keep on running, he walked smartly along, cramming chocolate into his mouth, stuffing himself the way he always did when he was this stressed, this tense. This scared.

The postcard was burning a hole in his pocket, and he went into an empty shelter, turning his back to the road so that no-one could see him. He almost laughed when he finally noticed what he'd bought: a stretch of pebbled sand and an empty deck chair sitting all by itself and under it, as if handwritten, the familiar legend 'Wish you were here.' But it was true. He'd give his right arm to have Doyle here right now, making him laugh, or giving him a good argument, or having a fight with him. Even, he admitted, just to be able to see Doyle, make sure that he was all right, make sure that he was eating—stupid idiot thought he could live on yoghurt and nuts and vitamins if you didn't watch him—make sure that he hadn't been hurt on the job, because he'd be back from

Sandhurst by now. Not that they'd so much as phoned each other, mind. Didn't dare. Didn't want anyone to know what they'd only just been getting to grips with themselves.

He turned the postcard over and over in his hands, and then sat for a very long time, staring out at the endless, restless surge of the sea, the water always teasing the shore, running up it a little, then racing away, only to come back, and run away again... There were people walking along the beach, in lightweight kagoules and thin trousers, the sea breeze rustling past them. Bodie moved, until they couldn't see him, in case they decided to be friendly and chat to him. He didn't want to talk to them or anyone else. Didn't want to put up with mindless small-talk and endless platitudes about the weather and what a lovely summer they'd had and how mild it was for this time of the year...

He had the postcard addressed and a crumpled stamp dug from the depths of his wallet stuck on before he had even stopped to think. Looking out at the rocky outcrops dotting the seashore and the unending sea, he wrote, pen pressed so hard it cut into the card: Wish I wasn't here.

The so-nice family was coming his way after all, and so he was on his feet again, walking away before they could get to him, stopping only to drop the postcard into the pillar box on the corner. Then he was moving again, along the intersecting streets, farther and farther from the shore, in and out of streets, past houses he knew were filled with people who weren't like him, people who were happy and had families and other people they were allowed to love if they wanted to.

It wasn't until he got back to his shorefront B&B that it really hit him what he'd done. Wish I was not here. He sat down, heavily, on the bed, leaning his face into his hands, as it washed over him. He'd done something he should never have done, something he wouldn't have done if he weren't so miserable away from Doyle: he'd written and just about begged Doyle to come here, and that meant trying to be what Cowley had said they were. Lovers. Committed to each other. Willing to lose their jobs for each other. And god help them, what the hell would Ray's family do? They'd all had a fit because his sister wanted to marry a Catholic; what the fuck would they do when they found out their pride and joy was queer?

And what would he do if Ray didn't come? If

Ray didn't forgive him for walking out in the first place? If Ray, with some space between them, had discovered that all those sweet, unspoken feelings were nothing more than infatuation? On Doyle's side, at any rate, Bodie added unhappily, unlike him, who was finally ready to admit to love. Even if he'd left it too late.... He couldn't stay indoors, in this stale room with its anonymous furniture and empty bed. He went out, wishing he could leave his thoughts behind. Wishing he could run away from this fearful hope that was hammering in his chest that Ray might come to him, that it could actually happen between them at last...

The days were milder than he had any cause to expect them to be, the air positively balmy when he was out of the wind, but not so much that he could lie here on the rocky beach in anything other than normal everyday clothes. Especially not since the only time he had tried going in for a dip, some bastard had stolen his clothes from the bench. Still, that was over a fortnight ago, the weekend he'd sent his postcard. That was a thought he shied away from, forcing himself to keep it in perspective, to not let himself slide down into misery over it

Physically, he was recovering, his body wellmended, and the misery was now simply something he lived with, something he accepted the way he accepted that he'd heard nothing from Ray. As Doyle had said, silence spoke louder than words, and if that was the way it was going to be, then fine, he could cope with that. Monday would see him back on the job, and he would go in to see Cowley, very blasé, very mature, and ask to go solo. Failing that, a new partner. And failing that... Well, there were always options for a man with his talents and experience. But one thing he was not going to do was hang around gazing at Doyle, pining away from unrequited love, wanting to die of unhappiness every time his partner had a new girlfriend. No, he'd walk before he let himself sink so low.

But then a voice would whisper: easy to say now, when you can't even see him...

He used the meditation techniques he had learned to finally master his temper, and cleared his mind of debilitating thoughts, until he was drifting, slipping into the sleep he never seemed to grasp in his bed at night, lying there alone... The sun was still quite warm, and bright in an almost cloud-free sky. Coloured dots danced on his inner

eyelids, and he lay and watched them for a while, preferring not to think, because when he thought, then all the colours faded and he was back to staring at grey sky over grey sea from his harbour of grey rocks.

It didn't feel like sand at first, more a strange dust, so light, feathery, drifting down like snow on his hands and on his face. Raising his hands to shield his eyes from the glare of the sky, he opened his eyes. And saw a grim faced, hard eyed Raymond Doyle staring down at him.

"H'lo, Ray," he said, inanely, because he wanted to leap up and babble and hold Doyle tightly and kiss him for a month.

"Bodie." Very formal, very distant, and then the sun-glasses were lowered again.

"How'd you find me?"

A shrug. "Postmark."

Of course, he never had told Ray where he was going, had he? And how must that have looked? "No, I meant, here, on the sand. Can't see me from the Promenade because of the rocks..."

"Asked."

Christ, he didn't know what to say to this uncommunicative Doyle. "Oh. Well, it's nice to see you..." And strong hands were grabbing him by the wrist and hauling him to his feet, so quickly he couldn't catch his balance, and he rested, for the barest second, against Ray Doyle's body. Not long, but long enough to feel the tension, and the arousal stringing him taut as a bow.

"Back to your room. Now, Bodie!"

"What's wrong with here?" he asked, trying to pull Doyle down below the level of the screening rocks and onto the blanket he had brought. "It's not all rock round here, nice bit of sand, feel that? Then we wouldn't have to go anywhere—"

"Apart from the local cop shop if someone decides to walk his dog along the beach!" This, hissed, as Doyle recoiled away, beginning to walk as quickly as soft sand would allow. A few steps away he stopped, wind blowing his hair straight back off his forehead, jacket gusting open to reveal the cling of his shirt and the fullness of his crotch. "Move!"

Bodie was gathering up his belongings, scrambling to catch up, blanket trailing along behind. Side by side with Doyle now, heart racing with both unrepentant happiness and burgeoning arousal, he steered his partner towards the house he was staying in. He wanted to ask, to talk about

this before they got in any deeper, but this stern Doyle was not a man to be questioned. Bodie had seen Ray like this before, or almost like this before, and he wasn't going to risk triggering anything but the most carnal of explosions. So, not speaking, as all this had begun in the first place, Bodie led the way up to his room, dumping his stuff on the plump chair, shivering with anticipation when he heard Doyle lock the door behind them. He made out the sound of jacket buttons clicking against wood, realised Doyle had hung his jacket on the door handle. Then the unmistakable sound of boots being pulled off, and then Bodie was hauling his own clothes off, discarding them where they fell. He pulled the covers back, jammed the pillows into a pile at the head of the bed, and climbed in, rolling over and sprawling on his back, expecting Ray to be right behind him.

But Doyle was standing in the middle of the room, fully clothed, only his feet revealed.

And then something dawned on Bodie. Jacket removed, hung on the door knob—but no holster. Either left behind because he was on leave—and leave was unlikely, with the Squad understrength with himself offsick and McCabe still in hospital—and if he weren't on leave... Had he? Resigned? Gone tearing off to see Cowley, going off half-cocked, throwing his warrant card and gun at the old man?

For him?

Ray's face was giving nothing away, only the tension of banked desire. The shirt was undone, one button at a time, Doyle's stare never wavering, then the shirt was shrugged off, dropped carelessly to the floor. With a snick, the waistband was opened, and Bodie held his breath so he could hear the rasp of the zip being undone, heavy fabric parting, and now he'd be able to see, to know Ray. But Doyle was wearing underwear, his cock still hidden from view, only his beautiful legs coming into sight, the muscles firm and well defined, inviting Bodie to trace their shape with his tongue.

Bodie was stroking himself, cock already hard. The jeans were kicked off, and Ray was standing there, hands on hips, only a scrap of cloth covering him. The sworls of hair on his chest narrowed into his groin, down to where the elastic was being stretched away from Doyle's belly, his erection pushing outwards, and Bodie licked his lips as he strained to see what was hidden in that shadow, what was under those curls coming into view.

"Let me see you," he begged, needing Ray.

Doyle came over, knelt astride Bodie's chest. "You want to see me? Then go ahead," he whispered, arching his groin forward, leaning back with one hand to take hold of Bodie's cock, eyes slitting half shut at the first sweet touch of Bodie's flesh on his.

Bodie reached up, propping himself up on pillows, his mouth open and wet on Doyle's underwear. He could feel the shape of the hard cock, learned it as if he were blind, taking in the contours and the smell and the taste. Then, and only then, did he allow himself the luxury of easing Ray's underwear down and down, the heavy cock springing free, so hard, already moist, the foreskin pushed half back already. Bodie had intended to take his time about this, be sophisticated and clever and imaginative, the best lover Ray had ever had—but he moaned helplessly and sucked the hard flesh into his mouth, the tight fabric pushing Ray's balls up against his chin, Ray's arse full and ripe in his clutching hands.

Doyle curled over him, pulling Bodie's head in tight against himself, his arms wrapped around Bodie's head, cradling him closely as exquisite pleasure enraptured them. It had been so long since Doyle'd had a man, and so much longer that he'd wanted Bodie, that now Doyle was on the verge of coming, his hips juddering into Bodie's mouth, hisballs ready to explode. But Bodie pushed Ray away, dragging them apart, turning them over until Bodie was on top of him, Doyle's arms gripped by Bodie's strong hands and held over his head, Bodie using his weight to pin Doyle in place.

"I want to fuck you," Bodie said, breath coming ingusts, his mouth circled by wetness from sucking Doyle's cock. His mouth drew Ray's left nipple inside, the tongue flickering him with pleasure. "I'm going to fuck you."

Ray smiled, lifted his legs, his knees coming up on either side of Bodie. "Then what're you waiting for, eh? Go on, put it inside me. Fuck me, Bodie. Fuck me hard."

There was a bottle of lotion on the bedstand, a lotion usually used for a very solitary and very lonely pleasure. But not today. Today, he would put it on his cock the way he always did, but first, he would put it inside Ray. One hand caressing Doyle's balls as he held them out of the way, knelt between Ray's wide-spread legs, and slowly pushed one finger into the tight hole. Bodie's

breath caught in his throat as he watched his finger disappear inside his partner, and again, as two fingers went inside, flesh stretching around him, widening to welcome him, Ray twisting round on his fingers. Then Bodie felt it, the nub of gland, and he scissored his fingers round it, Doyle's cock pulsing with every touch of his fingers deep inside him.

Bodie pulled back, letting Doyle calm down a little, then he put three fingers into him, stabbing him, fucking him like that, until the hole was loose and ready, sucking at him, Doyle clutching at him as he pulled free.

"Ready?" he asked, Doyle's legs over his shoulders, his own cock poised at Ray's arsehole, the slickness irresistible.

Doyle pushed up, and the first inch of Bodie's cock went into him, then all of him, as Bodie thrust hard, going straight in, hands braced on either side of Doyle's head, Bodie's belly hard against Doyle's cock and balls, Bodie's cock hard inside Doyle's body. Bodie pounded into him, Doyle meeting every thrust, the two of them finding the right rhythm, pleasure spiralling. Doyle's hands were urging Bodie down, his cock finding a deeper angle as Doyle's open mouth met his, as Doyle's tongue claimed his mouth, and they kissed for the first time, their chest and bellies pressed together, Doyle's hot seed splashing, making them slick, Bodie's cock sliding in and out of his arse with ferocious passion, until his whole body stiffened, and he spilled himself inside Doyle.

Then there was silence, only the sounds of their breathing, and flesh slipping from flesh, and two people becoming separate once more.

Bodie lay beside Ray on the bed, as he had done when Ray had come home from hospital, as he had done when he himself had come home from his sojourn with the bedpans. They weren't touching now, as they hadn't touched then, and the doubts began, chilling him. Maybe the gun didn't mean anything. Perhaps Ray had simply left it behind because he was off duty for the day. Perhaps he was going to put it back on the minute he got back to London and the old life, and this was going to be a one-off, a temporary giving-way to temptation.

Or maybe it was pity. That fucking postcard! Christ, what if Ray were here out of pity? He wouldn't put up with that, would sooner watch him walk away than have it be that.

"Ray?" he asked, softly, almost fearful of bringing speech in to disturb this fragile silence between them.

But Doyle said nothing, and Bodie lay beside him alone, waiting for the moment when he would hear Ray get up and dress and leave.

The bed dipped, and he thought to himself, this is it. He's getting up, he's leaving.

Then he felt Ray close beside him, sensed Doyle leaning over him. Felt the kiss pressed to his mouth.

And knew that this was never going to end.

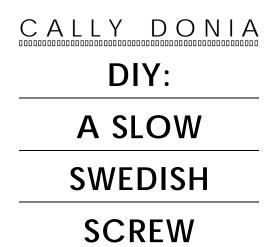
BY THE SIZE

OF THEIR TOOLS,

AND THE PRICE

OF THEIR TOYS!

Well, it's back to the frothy and the slightly ridiculous. "A Slow Swedish Screw" is the first in a planned series of DIY (Do-It-Yourself) Professionals stories. On the other hand, "Blame It on Ray-Oh!" is definitely not planned as anything other than a single alternative universe *Pros* piece. A need for this type of story was expressed, and the Glaswegian self-sacrificingly wrote it.



He had just settled himself down to watch the racing, and thereby find out if he were going to end the weekend richer or poorer, when the phone rang. Before the first trill had faded, he was on his feet and half way across the room, one hand automatically smoothing his hair, the other popping the first of a big bag of Revels into his mouth.

Pausing, to allow the phone to ring an egoprotecting number of times—for it would never do to let Claire think he'd been sitting round on the off-chance that she might forgive him after all—he finally picked the phone up. "Hello?" he said in his suavest voice.

"What took you so long, Bodie?" Doyle demanded in his most peeved voice. "The old arthritis slowing you down, is it?"

Oh. Doyle. Not Claire and the possibilities of a lovely afternoon of sex at all. Just his tormenting bugger of a partner who sounded in a really charming mood today, even by Doyle standards. "What d'you want, Doyle?" he asked, refusing to let himself be conned into jollying Doyle out of his fit of the moodies the way he usually did. He'd given that up for Lent, he'd decided, before he ended up being Doyle's permanent doormat.

"Remember that stacked Swedish blonde thingy I was telling you about?"

Actually, no he didn't, but stacked, Swedish and blonde—even with the typically Doyle-ian unflattering 'thingy' added on—sounded a lot more appealing than Lester Piggot on a three-year-old Arabian grey did. "Swedish? Planning on *entering* the Common Market, are we, my

old son?"

"What are you going on about now, Bodie? Never mind, I probably don't want to know. Listen, I'm having a hell of a time screwing—"

"Never! Not the Long-Haired Lover from—"

"Shut up, Bodie! If you're going to be a prat about this, I'll ring Murphy and get *him* to come and help me put it in."

For once in his life, Bodie was left absolutely speechless. "Come again? I mean, did you say what I think you just said?"

There was an extremely expressive sigh from the other end of the phone, one that warned Bodie had been given enough rope and was just about to hang himself. "Look, Bodie, I need help with the screwing—"

This was too good to be true! "What, you want me to draw you a diagram?"

"No, I've already got one of those, fat lot of help it's been. I want you to come over here—"

Bodie's voice had risen at least half an octave, and his pertinent little parts were rapidly following suit. "You want me to come over there and help you screw?"

"No, I'm fed up trying to get this stupid fucking thing up and properly screwed. I want *you* to fucking well do it for me!"

Bodie wanted to make sure that there was no room for error in this, and that he wasn't going to wind up *in flagrante delicto* with Doyle's gun doing the shooting. "You want me to do your screwing for you?"

"Christ, the penny finally drops! Any slower,

and my Gran'll be beating you at draughts." Doyle's voice took on a cadence usually reserved by the terminally insensitive for the severely mentally retarded. "Yes, I want you to come here and fit everything in and do my screwing for me."

Bodie looked at the phone as if he absolutely, positively had to have misheard what he thought he had just heard. "Em, Ray, it's not that I want to be difficult or anything...

"You? Christ, this is a first! You feeling all right, mate?"

"Fine, fine, I'm absolutely fine." Although he wasn't so sanguine about Doyle's mental health. "Listen, you did just say that you want me to come over and show you how to do your screwing?"

"You must be deaf as well as daft, you. I don't want you to come over and show me, Bodie, I already said I want you to come over and do it for me! Now, has that finally penetrated your thick skull?"

Yes, and judging by the way his prick was pricking at his track suit, his skull wasn't the only thing that was going to be penetrated this afternoon. But for all his mum had always told him never to look a gift horse in the mouth, he'd known Ray Doyle long enough to fear to tread where angels wouldn't even spit. "D'you mind if I ask why?"

Another sigh, this one saying that Doyle was an absolute saint to put up with all this. "Because you've always been good with your hands, Bodie. And though I hate to admit it, you're better than me in fact—but that's not saying much, so don't let it go to your head."

Bit late for that, Bodie thought, as his cock gave a healthy throb—it was going to one head already.

"There," Doyle was saying into his ear, "that do you? Now will you come over here and get on with it?"

Get on with it? He could hardly wait! Doyle had fantastic taste in women, and God knew where he found some of his beauties, although Bodie had tried. And if he suddenly wanted to share, well, who was Bodie to complain? "Right, fair enough. I'll come over and screw your Swedish blonde thingy—for you."

He almost slammed the phone down, he was in such a hurry to get there before Doyle changed his mind, but just before he'd cut Ray off, he heard a snatch of something that made his blood tingle even more than the thought of Ray's Swedish beauty: he heard something about him and Doyle screwing together... Not a bad idea, having a

threesome with Ray. Bodie'd always enjoyed troys, and never been overly fussy if the third were male or female, as long as the sex was good and the body attractive, and the latter was certainly true of Doyle, and if the way the randy little bugger walked was anything to go by, then the former was going to be positively heavenly.

If Cowley had had the faintest idea of the speed with which Bodie made it through London on a Saturday afternoon, our Bodie would have been stuck in Records until the Queen abdicated. As it was, he made it to Doyle's flat with positively indecent haste—in more ways than one. Pale grey track suit trousers are very good at covering, but they fail miserably when it comes to concealing a young man's rampant enthusiasm. Especially when said enthusiasm is so forthright, bold and, not to put too fine a point on it, bloody enormous.

Doyle buzzed him in almost quickly enough for Bodie's taste. "Right," Bodie said, rubbing his hands gleefully as he strode down the hall to Doyle's bedroom, "where's our Swedish friend then?"

"In the living room, where the fuck else would it be, you stupid great prick?" Doyle's voice shouted out from behind him, making Bodie about face and go into the sitting room. Where he was greeted, not by a stacked blonde to make Britt Eckland look nunnish, but by a very hot, very bothered and extremely red in the face Ray Doyle.

"Here," Doyle snarled, slapping a screwdriver into Bodie's right hand and an appallingly mangled illustrated diagram into the other, "show us what those magic hands of yours can do."

"Kinky, Doyle," Bodie said, handling the crumpled paper and the phallic screwdriver, unwilling to twig to what he was slowly beginning to dread was going on.

"Ha, bloody, ha, very funny mate, I'll split my sides laughing, you're so fucking funny. But if it's not too much trouble, Morecambe, you can just shut your face and put that fucking Swedish stacking shelf thing together for me, because I've had it up to here with the stupid fucking thing!"

Christ, but Doyle really was going to split his sides laughing, if certain details Bodie was trying so hard to ignore turned out to be true. "You don't have a girl here?"

Doyle gave him a funny look, and then, with great theatrical flourish, turned in a small, slow circle, surveying the vast kingdom of his living room. "Funny, that, I could've sworn I had my harem in here last time I looked." His tone of voice swerved from bemused back to aggrieved, Bodie being pinned by the bad humour of his stare. "Course I don't have a fucking bird in here, Bodie. I'm trying to put shelves up—remember them, the shelves you talked me into getting, the Swedish blond-wood ones? Perfect for your hi-fi, Ray, you said," Doyle muttered, doing a very credible Bodie. "Those bottom racks are just the ticket for your albums, Ray, you said." He was talking under his breath now, as he gathered up strewn nails and screws and hammers and one rather sticky tube of Bostick. "Be an absolute breeze to get it up, do it in an hour, Ray, you said."

Bodie was still trying to get his balls to believe what his eyes were seeing and what his ears were hearing. He was, unfortunately, having little success, for every time he convinced his cock that now would be a really good time to lose its enthusiasm, Ray would move, and the twitch of that luscious arse would have Bodie running up the mast with all the speed of greased lightning.

Doyle, noting the lack of agreement, turned, and seriously peeved, demanded, "Are you listening to me?"

Not a tone of voice to ignore, especially not when coming from either the George Cowleys or the Raymond Doyles of this world. "I'm listening, I'm listening. Hanging on your every word," Bodie lied blithely.

"More like getting yourself hung and me with you, as per bloody usual," Doyle was muttering from somewhere behind a rather large sheet of pale blond pine. "Come up with these brilliant ideas, every one a winner, you say, but who is it who ends up in shit to his armpits? Muggins, that's who." The wood was manœuvered, none too steadily, to prop up the back wall, while Doyle poked and prodded at various holes.

Bodie, staring at a ripe rump hugged by patched denims, was thinking about poking and prodding a few holes himself.

Doyle, oblivious to various erections going on behind him, was trying to erect something entirely different in front of him. "I mean, look at this!" he shouted. "Piles of fucking wood all over the place, screws everywhere, a how-to that's more of a bloody how-don't, glue on my carpet—"

"Need a hand then, do you?" Bodie asked, the perfect picture of innocence—now that he had

pulled his track suit top down far enough to hide a multitude of sins, one of them particularly large.

Doyle turned on him with a look that could have curdled UHT milk from fifty paces. "Me? Oh, no, not me, mate," he said, sarcasm dripping even more profusely than the glue. "Wouldn't've have called you over if I'd needed a hand screwing together this stupid bloody idea of yours, would

"Allright, allright," Bodie sighed, long-suffering as usual, but the longness this time was his cock, and it wasn't so much suffering. "Give it here, and I'll sort it out for you."

"I," Doyle said with great dignity, considering there was a tear in his T-shirt and a biro stuck between his ear and his curls, "already gave it to you. That," he nodded at what had once been pristine, neatly folded instructions, "used to be the diagram of how to do it."

Bodie looked down at the mangled lump he had dropped when trying to cover up his rather dishonourable intentions towards his partner. "Oh. Well," he rubbed his hands together, then came over, snagged the pen from its nest of curls, copped a quick feel, and then turned towards the chaos of wood and metal before his partner could react, "we don't need diagrams to show us how to do it, do we? So let's have a look-see at this then..."

Doyle, never one to stop Bodie from making a complete fool of himself, found a convenient wall to lean against, draped himself comfortably, crossed his arms, and grinned. This, he decided, was going to be worth the four hours of aggro he'd already gone through trying to put this stupid damned thing together.

Half an hour later, the grin had been wiped off his face and he was no longer propping up the wall with supercilious ease. He was, much to his surprise, crouched on the floor behind a kneeling Bodie, acting for all the world like the green apprentice.

"Cam," Bodie muttered.

Doyle put a cam into the groping hand.

"Three-quarter inch nail," Bodie said.

Doyle put a nail, this time, into the groping

"Small hammer," Bodie murmured.

Doyle put a small hammer into the groping hand, and wished, not for the first time, that the groping hand was groping where it could do him some good. He shifted, for the millionth time,

sitting nose to delectable arse with Bodie not the most relaxing position to be in. I mean, he thought to himself, just look at the way that track suit stretches across his bum! His fingers were itching to see if that shadow was just light, or if it were the cleft between Bodie's buttocks. His cock was itching, too, for much the same reason, but with greater cause. Christ, he hoped Bodie finished putting this stereo shelf unit together soon, otherwise, Bodie was going to find it wasn't only the wood round here that was going to have its holes drilled.

"Half-inch screw," Bodie said, innocently.

Oh, god, screw, Doyle thought, supremely uninnocently.

He handed Bodie a very platonic screw, and wished with all his lascivious heart that the screw in question had fulfilled the old Platonic ideal.

Bodie was now scrambling around, up and down, stretching and crouching, giving Doyle a cornucopia of interesting aspects on his partner.

"There," Bodie announced, small cabinet light now firmly screwed in place, which was more than could be said for poor Doyle. "Now all we have to do for that is attach the extension they were so very kind to supply you with." He glanced over his shoulder at a somewhat glazed-looking Doyle. "They did supply the wires?" Doyle didn't even blink. "You do know what wires are, don't you, Ray? Ray?"

It finally dawned on Doyle, who had been having a lovely time imagining a thoroughly screwed Bodie panting out "Ray, Ray," that the "Ray, Ray," he was hearing had a hell of a lot more to do with impatience and sincere doubt than with impatience due to a sincere desire to be fucked into next week. "What?"

Bodie repeated his question, somewhat rephrased now that his prickly—oh, how prick-ly Doyle was!—partner had actually come back to the land of the mentally aware. "I said, did the kit include extension wiring for the cabinet light?"

"Oh," Doyle said, trying very hard to concentrate on something other than how hard he himself was, "yeh. It's around here somewhere..."

Bodie saw it first, grabbed it and muttered something unflattering under his breath about dozy bastards who can't even help someone else who's doing all the work.

A small silence, while Bodie checked the wiring and then cursed, slowly and quite eloquently.

"What?" Doyle asked again, still sounding no more intelligent than before, but at least under enough control to pay attention to more than Bodie's bum. And crotch. And legs. And the way the hair curled on his forearms. And the way his back flexed... Needless to say, he missed Bodie's

There was a monumental sigh from his martyred friend. "This is just the wiring itself, we need to put the plugs on the end. Hand us one, will you?"

Doyle picked up the first vaguely electrical thing he could put his hand on.

That tore it. "No, you stupid berk, a *male* plug!" Was there any other kind, Doyle wondered, when sitting not three inches from the most luscious arse in Christendom? Still, he felt a proper idiot for getting muddled over such a simple instruction. He reached out to get the male plug from the packet, intending to moan right back at Bodie to cover up how stupid he felt, but then temptation stirred fractionally, and under such a terrible onslaught, Doyle immediately surrendered completely. "What's a male plug, Bodie?" he asked, sounding as guileless as a novitiate nun.

Bodie gave him a peculiar—in fact, one could almost say queer—look for that. "It's the one with the bit sticking out—"

Doyle was so innocent that, compared to him, Mother Teresa would look like the local sleazebucket. "But I thought all plugs had a bit sticking out."

This was odd, Bodie thought. Very odd. If he didn't know better... Nah. Not Doyle. Oh, all right, so he'd wondered about Doyle a time or two, but then, being as bent as the proverbial three pound note, Bodie wondered about every man he met, never mind someone as positively edible as his partner. So it was just himself having a filthy mind and indulging in wishful thinking, Bodie told himself. But then, they'd only been partnered a few months, and it wasn't the kind of thing you brought up over the football results in the morning, was it? He could just picture it, Doyle sprawled on the flea-bitten old sofa in the rest room, nose buried in whatever paper Bodie had brought in with him. See Spurs won last night. Definitely in the Semis, then. Oh, and don't know if I remembered to mention it, mate, but I'm queer. Fancy shoving it up my bum during our tea break? Yeh, right, and Cowley was going to double their wages. Down boy, he told his cock, reminding it that not even buggering

Doyle was worth being thrown out on his ear. Doyle, he realised, was still sitting gazing at him with his eyes all wide and his lips parted and, oh, god, the rotten sod was wetting his lips with his tongue! Bodie turned back to the hi-fi unit before his cock revealed not only itself, but Bodie as well. "Yeh, but there are some that are designed to go into the female—," he had to swallow then, hands fumbling as he attached wires to plug, "that's the one with a hole in it—" Christ, trust Doyle to wind him up like this! It had to be deliberate: no-one was that innocent, not in this day and age, and Doyle was good with his hands—which thought made him almost drop everything, including his inhibitions and trousers, "so it's got a long piece that sticks into the hole..."

Into the unsurprisingly tense pause, Doyle said, still playing the innocent, "Oh, you mean like a prick?"

Bodie turned round for a second, just long enough to look disbelievingly at his partner, then turned away again, obviously still not convinced by the patent expression of innocence he found on Doyle's face. Silently, he attached the wiring to the light, started working on the incidental details now that he had the main frame put together. "What're you up to, mate?" he asked, shoulder muscles flexing as he adjusted the hinges on the door that would hide the stacking components of Doyle's new and hideously expensive hi-fi system, with it's fancy tape deck and separate turntable and a few other bits Bodie was too embarrassed to admit he didn't know the proper name for. "Come on, out with it."

Doyle very nearly obliged, until he conceded that his cock wasn't what Bodie was referring to. "Tell me what you're up to," Bodie pushed.

"Up to? Me?" Doyle almost added, 'anything you fancy, Bodie, anything at all', but cowardice reared almost as high as his cock, and so he wormed his way out of it, postponing the moment of revelation until he had found out if some of his suspicions about Bodie were, happily, true. "The only thing I'm interested in getting up is this bloody shelving unit."

He got another curious look for that—which made Doyle wonder if he'd, shall we say, blown it—but Bodie let it slide, going back to the job at hand, even as the rippling of his muscles forced Doyle's hand to readjust himself within the far too confining closeness of his jeans.

A fair amount of time passed, with Bodie fiddling with hinges, checking the hang of the door, whilst both partners contemplated how hung the other man was. Bodie took a good, long look at Doyle, then turned back to the unit. He wondered, sometimes he really wondered... There was an interesting edge to Bodie's voice when he finally spoke. "Screw dowel."

For one moment of bliss, Doyle thought Bodie had said, 'Screw, Doyle?'. But then reality set in, and it was a truly peeved, not to mention terminally frustrated, Doyle who muttered under his breath: "Right now, I'd fucking screw anything!"

Bodie, suspicions confirmed entirely to his soonto-be satisfaction, murmured an indulgent and fond: "Yeh, you would, wouldn't you?"

Doyle jumped, eyes startled: he'd thought he'd been quieter than that.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," Bodie was going on, preening a little now, making sure Doyle was getting a good view of his arse, not to mention a lovely view of his balls from the rear. In fact, now that he'd added all the pertinent information and prurient deductions together, Bodie was positively smug. It was a great feeling, knowing that Doyle was not only on the simmer, which was a fairly common occurrence, but that Doyle was on the simmer for him, Bodie, and available. Oh, that was the best part: from what he'd finally put together and from the way Doyle was looking at him like a cat with a canary—now there was a thought: Doyle, eating him. Delicious!—and the things Doyle had been saying, well, Doyle was not only available, he was looking a bit on the desperate side. Smiling to himself, he started setting the dividers in place, checking to make sure the records would be held absolutely upright and not end up warped. Timing it to the last second before Ray jumped in with both feet, Bodie turned round to face Doyle, smiling, rather pointedly at a certain rather pointed part of his partner. Then, with Doyle almost squirming in front of him, he went on: "Randy old toad like you, stands to reason you'd fuck anything that stood still long enough."

Doyle, unsmiling, stared right back, giving nothing away: leastways, not until he'd added two and two and come up with a four he wanted. If Bodie was setting him up...

"Well," Bodie said, quite casually to cover his nascent trepidation that maybe, just maybe, he was wrong and his partner wasn't as bent as a corkscrew, "I'm standing still."

It was worth it, just to see Ray Doyle's mouth drop open.

"You what?" The implication hit Doyle smack in the face and went straight to his cock, which throbbed and stirred visibly, much to Bodie's delight.

"I said," Bodie repeated, smiling all the more broadly, "I'm standing still." And then, without having the decency to at least give Doyle enough warning so that he could take a breath in anticipation, Bodie leaned forward, his lips against Doyle's unexpectedly chaste.

Unexpected, full stop, exclamation mark, as far as Doyle was concerned. But not, naturally enough, unwelcome, although this chasteness simply had got to go. Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, but always willing to kiss whatever was on offer, he opened his mouth, drawing Bodie's tongue inside him, his arms coming up to pull Bodie in closer. Only, Bodie, due to what Doyle could only name sudden brain death, wasn't cooperating. In fact, Bodie, the mad bugger, was pulling away, ending the kiss, ending the sweet press of cock on cock. Bodie, in fact, was going back to screwing the bloody shelves together.

"What's the matter with you? You taken leave of your senses or something?" Doyle shouted, quite reasonably, given the provocation—or sudden lack thereof.

After three months of feeling like a dog on a leash, lusting voraciously behind Doyle, Bodie was not about to cede the upper hand. Not until he had Doyle so frantic the rotten bugger wouldn't realise that Bodie was dangerously close to being hooked. Bodie looked at him over his shoulder and simpered, wickedly. "But I'm not that kind of boy, you great butch thing you! A little peck is all you get on the first date."

And then, while Doyle was still flabbergasted: "Pass the drill, please." He held up the large wooden dowel that Doyle had absently handed him, and lisped, "I need to screw this big hard pole in and the hole's too...tight."

Doyle got it, both the drill, and Bodie's little game. So Bodie wanted to tease and draw the whole thing out until they were both so randy they couldn't tell which was heads and which was tails. In other words, put them through the typical Bodie seduction routine: get the other person all hot and bothered and incoherent with lust, and

then Bodie could do whatever he wanted to, and just conveniently end on top. Well, Doyle didn't bend over and touch his toes for just anyone, although Bodie wasn't 'just anyone' and he'd do it for Bodie at the drop of a hat—or any other article of clothing. Once Bodie had learned his lesson, that was. If Bodie thought he could get Doyle so steamed up Doyle wouldn't care who did what as long as he got to come, well, then, two could play at that game, couldn't they? After all this time panting after his partner, he wasn't about to fall at his feet like a doormat. He'd fall at Bodie's feet on the doormat, once Bodie realised that this was going to be an equal partnership here, give and take on both sides. "Here you go, mate," Doyle said, hearty as a lumberjack, then continuing as only a Monty Python lumberjack could, tube of silicone hinge lube in his hand: "But if your rod's too big to screw it in, how's about a bit of lubricant to ease the passage, eh?"

"Oh, no," Bodie replied, burying himself amidst the maze of record dividers and shelves, to hide his cock's reaction and his own half-hysterical urge to giggle, "all we need is a bit of elbow grease."

"Elbow Grease?" Doyle said, capitalising the words into one of the most popular lubricants sold under the counters of gay-oriented shops the world over. "Nah, too messy. Better off with KY or Vaseline."

Bodie gave that the attention he thought it due—i.e., none at all, which saved him from having to come up with a suitably brilliant answer—and gave all his attention to the uprights and horizontals—in other words, a dress rehearsal for what he had in mind for himself and Doyle in a very short time.

But Doyle, being Doyle, saw right through Bodie's silence, and grinned in predatory anticipation: if Bodie was so distracted by desire that he couldn't come up with a smart-arse answer, then Bodie must be absolutely ripe for the picking. Which made Doyle's hands itch to touch, to slide his fingers between Bodie's legs to feel Bodie's arousal for himself. Time, then, for the final assault in the seduction of Bodie. "Being a bit rough, don't you think?" Doyle commented as the drill started up its racket. "Don't you know that if a hole's virgintight, you've got to ease it in gently," his hand stroked the long length of thigh covered in grey track suit, "very, very gently." He could feel Bodie

tense under his hands, could hear the sudden intake of air and the quickened breath. "Need to take your time, get things nice and wet and slick, don't you," he ran his fingers down Bodie's spine, all the way to the cleft of his arse, "so it just slides right in, the perfect fit." Bodie's breathing was doing some very interesting things now, although not, perhaps, half as interesting as the things Doyle's cock was up to. "Definitely need some lubricant for that, to get a big thing like that to slide in just right." He darted his hand, quick as a heartbeat, to press in and out into the crack of Bodie's arse: Doyle wanted to rip the cloth that was frustrating his getting inside Bodie. "Pick up some of that Elbow Grease in Boots' on the way over, did you?"

Bodie, a giveaway flush on his cheeks—the ones on his face, the nether ones still, alas and alack, under cover—gave him an arch look over his shoulder, voice trembling with banked lust as he felt Doyle's fingers rub the soft fabric against his arsehole. "Pick someone up? Whatever would Mr. Cowley say, petal?"

Doyle knew he should lob right back, "Didn't know you and him were married, sweetie", but instead, he looked steadily at his partner, leaching all the humour out of the situation. Hands now stuffed into his back pockets out of temptation's way (unless, of course, you were Bodie and had spent forever fantasising about the things you could do to that luscious rump), Doyle was very sombre when he spoke. "I don't want this to blow up in our faces and ruin everything. You do know where this is all leading, don't you?"

"Haven'tgotaclue, mate," Bodie said cheerfully, turning round fully and flicking a stray splinter of pine from Doyle's collar.

Doyle, with a self-control that would have impressed his boss no end and ruined his reputation forever, resisted the temptation to take that finger and suck on it. "Don't be stupid, you have to know where we're heading. All this—it's leading to bed, Bodie." Bodie was grinning at him, not a trace of seriousness anywhere. "Think about it! You and me, going to fucking bed—"

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong, Ray."

Which nonsensical statement was capable of shutting even Ray Doyle up.

"We," Bodie went on, another brief—too brief, but still making Doyle's briefs far too brief to cover the situation—kiss, then he had pulled back again, "aren't going to fucking bed. We," and now the covered peak of Doyle's right nipple felt the tooquick pressure of Bodie's practised hands, "are going to bed to fuck."

"Or make love," Doyle heard himself say before either cowardice, self-preservation or common sense could shut him up.

That wiped the grin off Bodie's face. He was looking at Doyle with something akin to fear, whether of the risk of failure or the dangers of commitment, Doyle couldn't tell. "Maybe," Bodie finally said. "If we're lucky. If we don't screw up."

This, as far as Doyle was concerned and conveniently ignoring that it was his own fault, was getting too serious by far. If he weren't careful, all the unexpected possibilities begun this afternoon could end up as dead as the proverbial dodo, killed by worries about the future and fears about being hurt, not to mention, he conceded magnanimously, by his own tendency to talk things to death. Not something that appeared on his list of things he wanted to do right at the present moment. "If we don't screw up," he said lightly, unable to quite resist the temptation to rub a pert nipple through soft cotton, "we'll never get this stupid shelf unit up, will we?"

"But you'll get me up. Christ, Ray! Hands off. Told you," and he too withdrew back to the safety of humour, tucking the too-intense emotions back into place, to be brought out and aahed! over later, "I'm not that sort of boy!"

"Then what," Doyle said, grabbing two handsful of Bodie's burn as his workmate turned back to the job that was ostensibly in hand, "sort of boy are you?"

"Oooh, you're beautiful when you're butch. I do so love hard men!" Bodie simpered, making Doyle smile.

Half-joking: "Oh, yeh, and how many men is that, then?"

Half-answering: "The entire Household Cavalry, at least!"

Which meant that Bodie really wasn't stringing him along and more urgently, that Doyle didn't have to worry about what he had in mind to do to Bodie... "Well, that's all right then. As long as it's the half with only two legs."

Bodie, hands braced on one shelf so he didn't fall over with sheer excitement, rubbed a wellplaced foot against an even better placed cock. "All my fellas have three legs."

"Which explains why you were always trying

to get me on the Isle of Man! Christ, but that feels wonderful. C'mon, Bodie, chuck that in and come into the bedroom with me."

So much for Doyle having the upper hand. Bodie was barely aware of what his hands were doing—after all, it didn't actually matter, since he was only doing it to drive Doyle to complete distraction and stretch the seduction out to unbearable lengths (rather like Doyle's arousal, now we stop to think about it.). All he cared about was Doyle, desperate for him, so wild with lust they wouldn't be afraid of sex that was a handspan away from love.

Doyle had always said that his partner was sex mad, but as Bodie was struggling to actually continue building the stupid shelves, Doyle decided that it was more that Bodie went mad when sex was around. "Here, are you sure that's supposed to go in there?" This, as Bodie manhandled— Doyle should be so lucky!—a slender partition into what seemed an awfully small space. Doyle's voice was almost as strangled as his poor demented cock. But if Bodie could control himself, then Doyle wasn't about to give himself a showing up by popping his cork prematurely. "Is that the right bit for in there? D'you even know what that is?"

"Course it is and 'course I do," Bodie replied cheerfully, which was hardly surprising, considering where his foot had been and that Doyle's left hand was now returning the favour in kind—or in lust, depending on how you wanted to look at it. With too much fabric covering too much skin, Doyle would have been happy to look at it any way at all, but Bodie was showing no signs of showing his bum off.

"You what?" Doyle asked, realising that he had been too busy contemplating Bodie's hidden charms to pay attention to a single word his coworker had said.

"I said, of course this is supposed to go here." He looked over his shoulder at the strained expression on Doyle's face and the strained condition, and then Bodie grinned. "And of course I know what it is. This here's what you call a Top Upright. And you know what they say, don't you?"

"Oh, go on," Doyle answered, playing straight man, so to speak and in a very limited meaning, his hands furthering their explorations, not to mention their excitations. "Tell me, what do they say?"

Bodie glanced significantly at the front of his own track suit trousers, where his top bit was

exceedingly upright. "Takes one to know one," he said proudly.

"So you're just another lump of wood, eh?" Doyle said, deflatingly.

"Well, it's big enough," Bodie came right back, completely undeflated and not averse to making a show of it, "so I can see why a titch like you might get confused, Robin."

"An' if you're a bat man," Doyle grabbed Bodie between the legs, getting a very satisfying moan for his trouble, "then we'll need more than a bit of elbow grease to fit it in any of the holes I know about.

"Course," Bodie muttered vaguely, more than a little distracted by big things happening lower down, "we could always work something out..."

"Thought the whole idea was to work something in," Doyle said, and then, because he was a cruel, callous, cold-hearted bastard, he removed his hand. No, not from his arm, from Bodie's cock, of course.

Bodie was no longer—as the Yanks would say—a happy camper. In fact, he was very displeased that Doyle was no longer playing tentpoles with him. "You're a cruel, cold-hearted bastard, Doyle!"

"Yeh, I am, aren't I?" Doyle answered, pleased. "And I'm going to stay that way till you finish screwing this thing together."

Bodie wiggled his bum at him. "Bit difficult to screwittogether," he said. "Nobody's that flexible."

"Nobody?"

Something in the way Doyle said that pricked so to speak—Bodie's attention. "You can't!" He turned round in time to see Doyle lick his lips. "No, you can't."

Doyle winked.

"You can?"

Doyle tapped the side of his nose knowingly.

"You can't!"

Then Doyle laughed.

"No, you can't, can you, you rotten sod."

"Really had you going there, didn't I?"

"You've had me going since the first day you walked into the training centre and waved your arse in my face."

Doyle preened, and patted Bodie on the bum. "Nice of you to finally get round to returning the compliment."

"Yeh, well," Bodie did a creditable impersonation of the naïf innocent he might possibly have

been in one of his former lives, but certainly couldn't claim to be this time round, "told you, I'm not forward."

"You're kidding!" Doyle exclaimed dramatically, hands examining Bodie's rump in minute detail, then slipping round to make an even more detailed exam of a less than minute part of Bodie. "Doesn't feel like it's on backwards." he announced.

Not that Bodie was paying much attention. In fact, Bodie's mind wasn't on what Doyle was saying at all, being far more interested in what Doyle was doing. What was that they said about actions speaking louder than words? At that precise instant, Bodie felt as if his body should be shouting.

Doyle, busy playing their game of oneupmanship (the non-consummated version), was still nattering on. "In fact, it feels as if it's on just right to me."

Bodie decided that this was getting out of hand—precisely because of what was in Doyle's hand at that moment. He cleared his throat and started to get a bit of his own back, mainly by removing Doyle's hand—again, not from his arm, but from Bodie's cock. "You can pack that in right now-"

"I thought you'd never ask," Doyle said seductively. "Here or in the bedroom?"

Mrs. Whitehouse would have been proud of Bodie's truly prissy tone of voice, although she would have been appalled by Bodie's real reaction. "Really, Doyle, I swear you keep your brains between your legs sometimes."

"Only sometimes?" He grabbed himself a healthy handful of Bodie's impressive arousal. "Unlike you, eh?"

Bodie squirmed, and from more than just Doyle's handling of the situation. "Leave off, Ray. Have to get this finished before we go back on call tomorrow or it'll never get done."

"Funny," Doyle murmured, breath whispering against Bodie's back, "that's exactly what I was thinking."

Bodie thought that letting Doyle win this particular chest-beating competition might well be worth it: if it wasn't a chest Doyle beat. In fact, judging by what Doyle was doing to him right now, Ray had picked on just the right anatomy to beat. Oh, yes, Bodie thought, letting his eyes close as Doyle made him feel ten feet (Bodie always did

have delusions of grandeur) tall, letting Doyle win this once might not be such a bad idea after all.

Pity Doyle had a tendency to crow over victories... "Knew you'd fall at my feet if I so much as whistled," his voice drowning out the sound of his zip being undone. "Definitely got you standing still for whatever I fancy, haven't I?"

Bodie, for some reason that to Doyle was inexplicable, decided that after that comment, Doyle could take a flying fuck off the Mersey Ferry before Bodie would let the big-headed bastard win. "Gerroff!" he shouted, pulling away amidst the loud protests of his cock. "Fallen at your feet, have I? Coming to heel like a fucking poodle? You want your head examined, Doyle."

This, Doyle decided, was what Cowley would call a slight tactical error (or a complete balls-up if he couldn't mend it). Not quite the purpose he had had in mind for their balls, which meant he had to do some fancy footwork if he was going to get Bodie back where he wanted him: under his thumb, always presupposing the part of Bodie under his thumb was a bit that needed stretching and lubricant and all sorts of wonderful things done to it. "Don't be a wally," he said to Bodie's diligently bent (sounds like a description of Doyle, doesn't it?) back. "I was only having you on." Chance'd be a fine thing, he thought, staring at Bodie, willing the other man to turn round and look at him. No such luck. Until Doyle replayed what he'd said to Bodie, and how he'd feel if Bodie'd said that to him... If Bodie'd said that, then Bodie would currently be nursing his own balls, and not in pleasure, and quite possibly no longer attached to his body. "Oh, fuck it!" he said.

"You should be so lucky," Bodie muttered, supposedly hammering a nail in, even though no nail was supposed to go there and Bodie kept on missing the damned thing anyway. He was getting up and leaving, he promised himself, just as soon as his body stopped being such a bloody big show of how turned on it was by Doyle. And just as soon as he could drag himself away from the sweet pleasure of Doyle's body so close behind him, and the alluring promise of what they might have—if Doyle wasn't such a fucking prat, he reminded himself, hitting the nail so hard Doyle was always going to have a dent in his shelves to remember this oh-so romantic encounter by.

"Okay, so I'm sorry, all right? I shouldn't've said what I said the way I said it." Such explosively shouted comment got no reaction at all. Doyle tried again, curbing his temper and frustration in enough to be coherent. "I just meant that I had you," which was easy enough to say. It was the next bit that was almost as hard as he hoped Bodie's cock was. "And that you, well, you know

Now this was interesting enough to stop pretending to hammer poor defensive nails. "Might do, if you actually explained yourself."

Doyle ran a trembling hand through his hair, then down his chest, to finger his deflating erection. "I just meant..." Funny, he thought, how all this started with a misunderstanding, and if he wasn't careful, it was going to end for the same thing. "That you, well, you..." He stopped for a second, took a deep breath, and asked himself if scoring one over Bodie was really worth not scoring at all—and worth killing something he thought just might be the best thing ever to happen in his life. There was, really, no doubt, only the old, familiar insecurities and fears that all of us carry with us. Then, before he lost his bottle, he spoke, all the words tumbling over themselves in his hurry to say them before he gave in to the yellow streak blossoming where his spine should be. "If I've got you, then you've got me."

And Bodie, the object of all Doyle's tangled emotions and passions? Bodie gave nothing away. Not a thing, just kneeling there, half in the hi-fi unit, half out, bum up in the air, and not an utter being muttered, his quietness unnerving to say the

"So," Doyle ventured, sexual tension vanquished by an emotional tension he hadn't exactly been prepared for, although he cursed himself for a moron because he hadn't seen what must've been right under his nose for weeks, "d'you want to give this a go or not?"

There. He'd said it, laid all his cards on the table—even if it meant he didn't get to lay Bodie anywhere—and now it was Bodie's turn.

As we said before: and Bodie? That worthy stayed where he was, grinning to himself, pride more than ameliorated by Doyle's somewhat hesitant confession. Blood from a stone, Bodie thought affectionately, more than a little pleased by the path this unexpected afternoon was taking. There were a lot of things he could say, but too many emotions were clamoring to be heard, to be sorted out, too many implications to be faced and

discussed and dealt with. Too much talking by far: not something he wanted to start on right now, not when his balls were heavy from arousal that had flared so brightly and then subsided so unwillingly. So. Talk later—fuck now, he decided. He'd already reminded Ray that this was going to be an equal partnership off the job as well as on it, so he could, he decided (absolutely and utterly uninfluenced, of course, by the fact that he loved being fucked and hadn't had that particular pleasure in what was, in his far from humble opinion, far too long a bout of anal celibacy), afford to be generous, and let Ray do all the work this time. Which meant that all he had to do now was find a way of stopping Ray from anguishing over this for hours until everything was neatly pigeonholed and Bodie's prick had forgotten that sex could be more than a definition of gender. So Bodie did as Doyle was wont to do: after all, didn't they say that lovers did what they wanted done to themselves? Something that put an entirely new twist on the old 'do unto others', and one that Bodie found far easier to live

Doyle was swithering between standing on his dignity and leaving dramatically with a suitable display of camouflaging temper—a plan which was severely flawed due to this being his flat—or pummelling Bodie to a bloody pulp, which was severely flawed due to a) Cowley killing him for hurting his blue-eyed boy, and b) the fact that Doyle didn't really want to hurt Bodie. At least, not irrevocably. But if the bastard didn't give him an answer soon-

Bodie gave him an answer: non-verbal, but an answer nonetheless. Bodie wiggled his bum, an invitation if ever Doyle saw one. And Doyle could be quite quick on the uptake, as his cock was merrily proving, leaping back to its previous state of affairs, even as its owner leaped headfirst into a previously unexpected affaire. "Itake it that means yes," he whispered, pushing Bodie's tracksuit top up and out of the way, his hands and eyes and mouth feasting on the exposed white skin and smooth muscles.

"By George, Ithink he's got it!" But the joke was delivered in a voice that caught on a sudden intake of breath as Doyle's fingers fastened on his nipples, flickering on him the way he had once—God, had Doyle fancied him since then?—mentioned he liked some lover or other doing. The thought flooded him with a warmth that melted into passion, and he reached as far back behind him as he could, clutching at Ray's hips, bringing his friend in closer, tugging at him until Ray was—

"Christ, that's it," he muttered, pushing back against the hardness digging into his bum. Ray must've undone his zip at some point, Bodie realised, fingers scrabbling to get Doyle's jeans down and out of the way, so that he could get his hands on that luscious arse, the one he was going to fuck before this day and night were finished. Defeated by the position he was in, he said, "Gerrem off."

Doyle sat back on his heels, Bodie kneeling in front of him, presenting himself for mounting. Themere sight was enough to make Doyle's cock throb, and he stroked himself, teasing the skin up to snug tightly over the head, feeding on the pleasure of watching Bodie moving restlessly, hungry for attention. God, but it was wonderful to know Bodie wanted him that much, and had done, for at least as long as Doyle had, so to speak, coveted his neighbour's ass. "This what you want?" Flat palmed, starting under the bunched mass of Bodie's tracksuit top, he stroked his way down Bodie's back, not stopping when he got to the trousers. There, he hooked his thumbs in, sliding the elasticated waist down and down, the heat from his hands covering the skin before the air could chill it. "Gorgeous bum," he said, mouth brushing the sensitive skin, teeth nipping tender flesh, hands touching where his mouth had left moisture and his teeth tiny indentations. He laved the deep dimples just above the swell of Bodie's arse, tongue swirling in ever larger circles, until he was caressing the larger dimple where Bodie's flanks hollowed with every move Bodie made under him. "Want me to love you like this?" he asked, hands splayed on Bodie's rear, the words breathed moistly against him.

Bodie wasn't quite sure of the exact and precise detail of what Ray was asking him, but he didn't think it would make any difference anyway. Whatever Ray did felt wonderful, and he couldn't care less about anything other than Ray keeping on with what he was doing. "Whatever takes your fancy."

Doyle's hands struggled with belt buckle and top button and jeans that even he conceded were too tight. Thank God today had been one of the days he hadn't bothered with underwear—he would have done himself a mischief if he'd had to

get himself, one handed, out of his usual French cut briefs. "You take my fancy," he said, jeans pushed open in a wide V, his cock and balls exposed and fecund. "In fact," this, as his thumb returned, pressing against Bodie's arse, "you're going to take more than my fancy, aren't you?"

Bodie's only answer was to groan, and push backwards, arsehole relaxing, trying to suck Ray inside. The reaction made Doyle laugh, breathlessly, his cock pulsing with inrushing desire. "Who's a hungry boy then?" he asked, leaning forward, hands spreading Bodie's cheeks, tongue punctuating his words with flickering licks. "Going to do this for me later?"

Bodie squirmed, reaching backward to touch whatever part of Doyle he could.

Doyle spanked him, once, playfully sharply on the left cheek, hand returning to swathe the pink mark. "Go on, you going to return the favour later?"

"Soon's you give me the chance," Bodie grated out, nowhere near in control of his lust as Doyle seemed to be. "Don't be such a fucking pricktease," he half-shouted, "get on with it."

"Get on with what?" Doyle whispered, teasing him with his prick, barely touching the puckered hole with the moist head of his cock.

"Fuck me!"

"Want that now? Not going to tell me to gerroff then, are you?"

"What d'you want, Doyle? I'm giving you my arse, what more can you fucking want?'

"If I fuck you, will you give it to me?"

Right now, Bodie would have given him the Crown Jewels on a silver platter, even if he had to castrate Philip and Charles and Andrew himself to get them. "Anything! I promise, cross my heart, vou name it—"

"That's all right then," Doyle said, moving back so that he could once more taste Bodie's skin. He began slowly, tantalisingly, tormentingly slowly, until Bodie's breath stuttered and stumbled, and then Doyle was rimming him, fucking him with his tongue, the limber muscle going inside, making Bodie wet, making Bodie open and ready. Then he was fumbling around until he found the bottle of mineral oil that was supposed to finish the wood, but which he fully intended to use to finish Bodie, and himself. A few drops in his palm, stroked gingerly across his cock so that his flesh gleamed and shone, a match for the slick sheen his tongue had left round Bodie's arse. "You ready?" he asked, one hand braced on the small of Bodie's back, the other holding his cock poised and ready, kissing the wet hole.

Bodie reached between his own legs, his wrist deliciously hard against his balls, fingers grazing Ray's as he guided Doyle's hardness into him. Glorious heat and strength and hardness filled him, and now his fingers couldn't feel Ray's cock, only the tenderness of his balls, delicate hair against his fingertips and arse as Ray plundered him to the hilt. Then his fingers could feel the hard shaft again, and his arse tingled with the delight of Ray's cock moving, and then Ray was slamming into him, his balls slapping against Bodie's, and Bodie had his hand on himself, blurring on his cock. Ray thrust into him, and Bodie collapsed, until his forehead was resting on his folded arm, and his arse was in the air, and Doyle was in his arse, and plastered all down him. He could feel Ray's hands clenched into his flesh, gripping his hips, leaving bruises that he would feel tomorrow, but which were purest pleasure right now. Every individual finger, even the ridge of bracelet digging into him, he was aware of all of it. The swell of Ray's cock every time he thrust into him, the lingering caress of Doyle's balls against his own, skin clinging to skin, greedily hanging onto the pleasure. His own cock was rigid, and he was so close to coming he no longer dared touch himself. He reached through again, to feel where Ray was fucking him, to feel where he ended and Ray began and they merged together to form one body, endlessly moving, endless pleasure shoving into him. Doyle's balls were no longer touching him, drawn up hard against the base of his cock, and Bodie braced himself, whole body listening, ready for the moment when Ray would come inside him.

He heard it, the sound exploding from Ray's throat, the come exploding from his body, heat splashing deep inside, a sudden slickness, a sudden stillness, quintessential pleasure flowing from Doyle into him. And then Ray was heavy on top of him, ragged breathing gusting across Bodie's shoulder, shivering through the dampness of sweat.

"That was..." Ray Doyle was at a complete loss for words. He forced his eyes open, made himself move, rolling himself over, bringing Bodie with him, Bodie's erection hungry and demanding, pressing against the taut belly, Bodie's eyes slitted

on the brink of orgasm. Doyle lay his head on Bodie's stomach and his tongue tip traced, with infinite delicacy, the slitted crown. Then Bodie's hands were hard on the back of his head and Bodie's cock was hard against the back of his throat, and Bodie was thrusting awkwardly into his mouth. Doyle propped himself up, leaning over Bodie, letting Bodie fuck his mouth, one hand rubbing Bodie's nipples, the other rubbing Bodie's balls, then pressing them down, away from Bodie's cock, pulling the skin just tight enough, heightening the sensation of being sucked. Another moment of that, and then he was tasting Bodie's seed, splashing down his throat, coming too fast for him to swallow it all immediately, filling his mouth with the taste, as he took Bodie inside him.

Then that, too, was over, the spasms fading into tremors that made Bodie's thigh muscles quiver, which made Doyle want to lick him there, and soothe him, and cradle him close. Dangerous, such emotion, such shattering tenderness: and the answer to why he hadn't seen that he and Bodie were heading for this with all the certainty of Niagara Falls. He wanted, also, quite desperately, to kiss Bodie, but... But there were so many things to be discussed first, so many new ground rules to be laid for this new game they were playing.

Stroking Doyle's hair, feeling his friend's—his lover's? or was this to be just sex, just fuck-buddies, just lust?—breath lingering on the damp skin of his cock, Bodie wanted nothing more than to simply cuddle up with Ray and sleep for a week. He hadn't been this well-fucked in years, couldn't, in fact, remember a better time than this. Tentatively, he drew Doyle up closer, not daring quite to look at him lest he see rejection or contempt in those too-knowing green eyes. He shuffled them around until they were lying, more or less comfortably, on the floor amidst a clutter of instructions and scattered tools and oozing glue. Ray was tucked in against him, arm across Bodie's chest, pleasured nipples content under the weight, Doyle's muscular thigh across his own, the fine hair on Doyle's leg the barest whisper against his balls. Perfect, he thought. Quite, quite perfect. Well, would be if he could kiss Ray, and cuddle him, and stay with him forever... Later, he told himself. Give him time, let him get used to us being like this, then you can tell him that this is it, never going to let him go...

Ray, for his part, was thinking very much

the same thoughts, mind chewing over the problem of how to make sure that Bodie didn't get any stupid ideas about leaving, or ignoring this, or pretending that it didn't mean anything. If the stupid bugger so much as mentioned this being just for fun, he'd kill the sod. Slowly, and imaginatively. But for now... His thumb traced the elegant arch of Bodie's collarbone, followed it to the hollow of his throat. Which simply could not be resisted. Barely needing to move, Ray leaned forward and kissed Bodie there, quite, quite tenderly. And when Bodie didn't hit him, he kissed him again, a little higher, and then higher still, again and again, small, tender kisses, until he was kissing all around Bodie's mouth, and Bodie's arms were clutching him tightly, and Bodie's mouth was open, and Bodie was kissing him with a fierceness of emotion that neither one of them was quite willing, as yet, to name. Although they both knew it for what it was, knew it and welcomed it, even as they feared the vulnerability it brought. But that was something to talk about later, when they had had their fill of kissing and holding and sex.

Spreadeagled across Bodie's body, Doyle arched

his back and rubbed their cocks together, and Bodie sucked his nipples and kneaded his arse, finger promising where his cock was going to go. "Bed," Doyle said hoarsely, pulling himself away, reaching down to grab Bodie by the hand and pull him to his feet. "Begging for trouble, doing it amongst all this stuff," meaning the spilled nails and screws and stacked dividers surrounding them, "and the only screw I want in me," he took Bodie's cock between his hands, thumbs pulling the foreskin back, his own cock kissing the exposed head, "is this one. So come on then, into the bedroom, where you can fuck me properly."

Bodie turned Doyle around, giving him a shove in the right direction so that he could follow along behind, eyes glued to the aforementioned behind of his choice, cock swelling in anticipation of being buried in that luscious construction. "Tell you something for nothing, though, Ray," he said, unable to resist reaching out to grab what was soon going to be his.

"Oh yeh?" Doyle, looking over his shoulder at Bodie, sun setting through the window gilding his skin. "And what does Confucius say then?"

"You and me doing this together—beats the hell out of Doing It Yourself."

BLAME IT ON RAY—OH!

Many's the time he had been seated here behind his desk, some disreputable, derelict lump of humanity hauled in to sit opposite him. It was always the same, or a variation of the same: he would ask questions, they would refuse to answer, he would become implacable, slide back into the old gallus aggression that had kept him unscarred on the streets of pre-war Glasgow. Then his prey would quiver, and relent, spilling their secrets as readily as they spilled the stench of fear into his office.

But this one... Oh, this one was different. There was no fear in this one, only defiance, and a banner of pride, head held high, as if that pride weren't tattered and stained by the life this man led.

"So," Mr. George Cowley, head of CI5, said conversationally, "you've not the slightest intention of telling me what I need to know?"

The man opposite him grinned, wicked amusement glinting brightly. "I could tell you a lot of things you need to know." The eyelids lowered, until a sultry gaze tingled along Cowley's nerves. "Not that you'd want to hear them—not in here at any rate. Don't walls have ears in Big Brother's spy shops?"

"So you think we're spies, do you? Well—"

"Aren't you?" An impatient gesture, beautiful hands capturing Cowley's attention. "What else'd you call yourselves? Crawling around under people's beds, listening to them having sex—in my books, that makes you either bloody spies or Mary Whitehouse." Then he smiled, slowly, with all the knowledge and experience of the rent-boy hewas, alluring and dangerous and wildly exciting.

And knowing, all too-knowing, the smile the preening confidence of a man sure of his attractiveness and surer yet that he was wanted.

Cowley suffered the fear that should belong to his recalcitrant informer. Doubts crowded him for the first time in years. Had he really—no, that was stupid: he'd done nothing in front of this young man to betray himself, nothing that could make this Doyle character even suspect him. It was street-bravado on the young man's part, that and nothing more. "I've no time for your stuff and nonsense, laddie," he said, making sure his voice was perfectly steady and utterly stern and betrayed none of the effectiveness of those seductive green eyes staring at him. "But perhaps the fault's mine perhaps I haven't explained the situation to you well enough," he went on, sounding not in the least apologetic, making his very reasonableness seem a threat. "What you know could save the lives of scores of people. Flaherty was a regular...customer of yours, and according to our sources, his terrorist pals are worried what he let slip."

Doyle's face was impassive, only the eyes betraying his anger and his vitality. So much life, so much vitality: enough life, perhaps, to take some ofthe years off Cowley's shoulders, enough vitality, perhaps, to bring his body back to the passion of youth. Cowley pulled himself up short, calling himself for every tumshie-heided ijit under the sun. He was supposed to be interrogating the man, not indulging in fanciful daydreams. He took his glasses off, rubbed the bridge of his nose,

examined a file—anything, in fact, to give him a second to pour cold water on airy-fairy notions he had long thought safely interred under years and years of work. Tension erupted as anger: "Your head's full of clouds if you think you should keep your secrets to yourself."

"But they're not my secrets, are they, Mr. Cowley?" Doyle asked, uncrossing his legs so that the light cast intriguing shadows on the cusp of his moleskin trousers. "And since they're not my secrets, maybe you should ask one of your spies to weasel the truth out of the man the secrets belong to."

Cowley knew he should look up then, stare the arrogant git down, but his mind was overflowing with the beauty of the tightly-clad thighs, fabric clinging so snugly, and the sweet swelling of groin... Get yer mind out of the gutter and back on the job! he shouted at himself. You can go to the Club later if you need to, but you've got a job of work to do, and start thinking what this yin's so desperate to hide that he's flirting with you.

And then he remembered the man's profession, and amended that to: that he's trying to seduce you with the merchandise. The mental cold shower was useless, for having thought of 'the merchandise', he couldn't help but wonder how much the man charged, and for what. And whether or not the checks would turn Doyle up to be a security risk or the soul of discretion. Disaster, or everything Cowley had hoped for, until age and common sense had cured him of dalliances with men as luscious and alluring as this one.

"Thought you were supposed to be questioning me?" Doyle, casual, completely confident, his sexual attraction both weapon and shield. "If all you're going to do is sit there staring at a closed folder, then I'm off home." He rose to his feet, that simple motion turned into a work of erotic art, thigh muscles flexing, one hand coming to rub absently at his chest, the other resting, open, on his hip, the fingers pointing inwards and down...

...down, Cowley noted, swallowing quickly, to where the man's prick was clearly delineated, a thick curve, a sheen on the fabric to show that he habitually dressed left. And habitually walked through life partially aroused, as in love with his body as everyone else was. Mouth suddenly dry, Cowley needed a drink, the crack in his tough image be damned. This Ray Doyle character didn't seem to be at all impressed with his image anyway,

if that knowing little smile was anything to go by.

"Get back in your seat," Cowley snapped, getting to his own feet as Doyle sat down, the two of them moving as if choreographed. Then Cowley was crossing the room to where he kept his drink, two glasses clinking as he brought everything back to his desk—and to his silent humiliation. He had, he admitted, appalled, tried to hide his limp, tried to walk straight and tall and proud, as he had when he'd been young and his hair had still been red and not faded out to this middle-aged sandiness. He took a good swig of whisky that was better savoured sipped slowly, but it was the kick he was after, not the taste. He almost choked on it as well, as Doyle took his first mouthful of malt, and managed to make it all look like a hedonist's delight. The worst part of it was, Cowley would have bet good money that it wasn't even for display, the tangible pleasure nothing more than Doyle's natural sensuality.

He knew he should be asking questions, browbeating the younger man, harassing him into confession, but he didn't dare speak quite yet, for fear that his voice would betray him. Pathetic, he chivvied himself, truly pathetic, to have his head turned by a pretty face and a beautiful body. Ah, but, that rebellious voice in his mind answered, it's not a pretty face, is it? Cowley glanced up, now that he had the excuse of trying to categorise the face. No, not pretty, he thought as he made a note in a margin that needed no annotation. Interesting, intriguing, with those green eyes—put him in mind of a boy he'd known at school, a teuchter brought down to Glasgow by his father's need for work. Aye, and that hair, all rich chestnut and curls, thick enough to lose his fingers in. Even the broken cheekbone attracted him, with its tacit statement that here was a man tough enough and hard enough to fight for something.

Probably his payment, Cowley's sensible cynicism reminded him. With a sigh, he took a proper sip of his whisky, and forced himself back to his job. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour, he paraphrased in his mind. "Flaherty," he said, ready to begin again.

Doyle shook his head, and even the light was conspiring against Cowley, the late afternoon sun dancing through the curls like kisses. "Nothing to say about Flaherty. He was a friend of a friend that I helped out once or twice, and that's it."

"A friend of a friend? You mean, he was in-

troduced to you by one of your other...clients?" "That's none of your business, Mr. Cowley."

"But it is yours. Are you denying that you sell your sexual favours?" Ah, that was better. Always best to sound disgusted and morally superior in situations such as these. It tended to keep the lust out of one's voice.

"I don't sell anything," Doyle snapped.

Cowley, absurdly he told himself, was disappointed that Doyle was going to pretend to be something he wasn't.

"I let people borrow bits of me that they want and I don't mind sharing."

"And in return," as sour-faced as a Minister from the Free Kirk confronted with a Sunday mother in make-up and trousers, "they let you 'borrow' large sums of money."

"No, they give me presents."

Pity, that, Cowley thought, disappointed in spite of himself. He had thought Doyle had pride and courage, an honesty that was refreshing and exciting.

Doyle chuckled then, the filthy laugh going straight to Cowley's groin. "Course, the presents are usually in cash or jewellery that I can then sell for cash, but I have been known to smile prettily when they give me a car or something."

He should, he told himself, be seriously dismayed that this man had no shame over being a prostitute and was obviously destined for a life of abasement. But he was too busy being charmed by the self-deprecating humour, the attitude that owned to neither sin nor shame. And that, perhaps, was the most attractive thing of all about Ray Doyle. What would it be like, Cowley wondered, to be without sin? To see no harm in a wee bitty pleasure or a nice present? But there was a job to do, had to get on with it. "And while you're earning these presents of yours, do any matters of importance get dropped in front of you?"

Another one of those irreverent, appealing grins. "Only knickers," Doyle said. "And yeh, yeh, I know what you're trying to get at, but my answer's still the same. Anything I hear doesn't get passed on to anyone else. Not even someone like you."

"Not even to save lives?" A flicker then, in those bedroom eyes.

Doyle looked away, out the window, obviously thinking hard. A man of principles, albeit very select and sporadically applied. "All right, I'll tell you this much—although why I'm trusting you

even this far is beyond me. Mike—Flaherty—did say a few things here and there, but nothing that even hinted at something you'd need to know. No mention of bombs or guns or any of that." Doyle shrugged then, and as Cowley's mind listened to what was being said, his body responded to the way the T-shirt rubbed against the taut nipples. "I mean, I don't go round gossiping, but I'm not going to keep my mouth shut if I hear anything about blowing people up. Anyway, as far as I knew, Mike was just a businessman, over here for a while working out some distribution problem and getting away from the attitudes back home." Doyle looked at Cowley then, and something in that honest gaze made Cowley's heart leap with unease. "Something to do with the Eire government not being too keen on the likes of us.'

It was the first time in years anyone had seen through his façade. Or the first time in years that anyone had dared mention it, here, in his own office, the *sanctum sanctorum* of his heterosexual rôle. He did what any closeted government official did under these circumstances did: he attacked. "There's not many who are keen on your sort, Doyle. Walking the streets the way you do, or molesting children—"

An explosion of movement, and Doyle was half-way over the desk, hands braced on the blotter, face a mere inch or two from Cowley's. "Now hang on just a minute," he snarled, voice kept low to prevent others from hearing and coming to the rescue. "If you want to pretend you're not what you are, then that's your problem. But don't you sitthere and say things you fucking know aren't true. If you don't have the balls to be honest, then at least don't make it worse for the rest of us. All right?"

"And you'll sit yourself back down before I use this on you, won't you, laddie?" Without even thinking about it, at the first hint of attack, his hand had grabbed the gun taped under his desk. Now, he brought it out slowly, making sure the light glinted threateningly on it, as it did in the films, usually the only place the average person had ever seen a gun. The old ploy had lost none of its effectiveness: Doyle sat, slowly and carefully. But not, Cowley noted, with any craven cowering. Fear, aye, but who wouldn't be afraid of a gun pointed at them? He put the weapon away, into the drawer this time.

"That was a bit much, don't you think?" Doyle asked him, and there was, amazingly, an edge of contempt in the voice.

Cowley locked the drawer, to prove that he didn't need the gunto protect himself, and because, quite frankly, he agreed with Doyle. It wasn't often he over-reacted like that. Not often at all. But then, it wasn't often he felt this threatened. He took a moment to look at Doyle, to assess him, to see what he could do to pull this interview back from the complete disaster he was turning it into. He needed, he knew, to get a grip on himself, get himself back under control. He'd been tempted before, he'd hungered after some handsome man in circumstances not unlike this, but he'd never been this stupid.

Of course, he'd never been this close to yielding to temptation either, had he? That, he confessed, was the problem. It wasn't Doyle's anger that was the threat, it was his own weakness for Doyle's considerable charms. "Betty," he said into his intercom, "d'you have those reports for me yet?"

"Just finishing them, sir," she said, "I'll be in in just a moment."

Cowley sat back, waiting for Betty, watching Doyle and deciding how best to handle this.

"Sir," Betty said as soon as she came in, "everything's here, apart from the situation regarding the conference and the duty roster. As soon as I have them, I'll type them up for you."

"Thank you," he said, not looking at her, devouring instead the papers in front of him. The first report was a disappointment, but not unexpected: the SAS were very polite, but they weren't willing to second Sgt. Bodie to a civilian organisation, and what's more, they were pleased enough with him that they were hoping he was going to sign on for another tour. Aye, well, Cowley had a few tricks up his sleeve to make sure that didn't happen. Next, a memo from the Minister, approving his leave, but due to that damned conference, the Minister was insisting that Cowley move his holidays up to the 6th—which was barely a fortnight away. Disgusted, Cowley slapped that paper down on the desk, and picked up the next. Ah, now this was much more what he wanted to hear. Murphy's report on Doyle: not on the streets, then, but an intimate friend of several important and very rich men who, apparently, were willing to put up with Doyle's refusal to be kept by any one of them in order that they could at least have him on Doyle's terms, which seemed to be fiscally wise and as moral as a rent-boy could

manage. Sandy eyebrows raised at some of the men Murphy had seen Doyle meeting—the man had better contacts in Whitehall than Cowley had! The security aspects were unnerving, to say the least. Frowning, Cowley went down the list, the names ranging from those high in Government to powerful in industry, and even one very influential TUC leader. Still, according to Murphy, Doyle was almost better known for his discretion than his bedroom skills.

Temptation knocked a little more loudly, and Cowley wet lips gone suddenly dry. Doyle, again according to Murphy, had no set prices, merely accepting the generosity of his 'sponsors', which meant that Cowley himself could afford Doyle, if he wanted to. If he wanted to! He was having a devil of a time not having Doyle right here and now in his own office with his own staff perilously close. Back to the job, he told himself, trying to be stern enough to make the command stick, get back to the job.

And for the first time in as long as he could remember, he didn't give a damn about the job. He shifted uneasily, unused to the need to adjust himself in his trousers: he usually had his libido so thoroughly repressed that he could concentrate elsewhere and any recalcitrant interest faded in due course. All that was fading in here today was his own determination to do the job he was paid for. He was far, far more interested in Doyle doing the job Doyle was paid for.

"If you've forgotten about me," Doyle said abruptly, "d'you mind if I leave? What with waiting for you to see me and then sitting here while you catch up on your paperwork, I've been here over two hours already, and it is past dinner-time, in case you hadn't noticed."

Cowleypermitted himself the dangerous luxury of looking at Doyle, and admitted then that he was going to avail himself of Doyle's services. Not here and now, but later, discreetly, when Murphy was back on the Philips case and Doyle had been added to the 'secure' list alongside a certain Club and one or two very discreet friends. "I'll be with you in just a moment," Cowley said, going back to the paperwork, an unexpectedly sweet feeling of anticipation unfurling in his belly. "I suggest you use this time to go over everything Flaherty said to you that might be a slip-up we could use to prevent any more of these letter bombs going out."

Too busy looking at the report, Cowley didn't see the man himself start at the mention of letter bombs. Under Murphy's report lay the garish holiday brochures. One or two places were definitely out of the question now—there were some places a man did not want to go at the tail end of the nastiest European winter in many a long year. But Brazil, now, that had possibilities. Excellent weather, lush countryside, practically nude beaches, and yes—a glance at his desk calendar confirmed it—the trip would coincide with Carnival in Rio, that wonderfully hedonistic celebration which attracted humanity of all sorts to the city. Oh the pleasures to be had in Rio during Carnival and with Doyle at his side! It would be everything a man of his nature in a job of this kind so rarely had available to him.

He looked at the pictures that had first attracted him to Brazil, the tanned and lithe young men cavorting, nearly naked, on the beach. Doyle would look wonderful in those skimpy swimming trunks. Doyle, wet from the blue sea, sun shining on him, warm and salty, growing brown in the sunshine, coming willingly to bed, smiling that seductive smile for him, the beautiful mouth descending upon him, Doyle as erect as he himself would be...

Cowley almost blushed, half with embarrassment, and half with fury at himself. What was he playing at, indulging himself in fantasies when he was still behind his desk and supposed to be working? Flustered, he fiddled with the papers while he tried to get a grip on himself. Never, absolutely never in his entire life had he been this quick to lust, nor had he ever been this...this... He couldn't think of a word to describe his reactions to Doyle. For that matter, he wasn't even sure he was thinking at all, too wrapped up in every tiny move the restless Doyle was making, too engrossed in these foolish fantasies of himself and Doyle together in the luxury of a five star hotel.

But was it really so foolish? Doyle accepted presents, after all, and perhaps a first class trip to Rio de Janeiro was a gift he'd quite like. Especially if Cowley were to add a cheque to the plane tickets...

"You said this was about letter bombs," Doyle broke in, voice very decisive.

Cowley went back to work, only about half his mind on the undeniable need he had to stare at Doyle, to drink in every detail and linger over the most appealing bits. "Aye," he said, and had he

but known it, he would have been proud that there would have been precious few able to see beyond his hewn-granite expression. "There've been a rash of them, and all we have to go on is this one hint that Flaherty might be involved."

"Look," Doyle said, and even as serious as he was, there was no denying the man's sexual lure, "I don't talk about anything my friends say, not usually. But if it's about those bombs I've been reading about... Wasn't there someone killed?"

"That's right. A secretary, mother of three, and none of the children over nine."

If Doyle had been willing to reveal one or two things before, he was ready now to give every detail he could think of, just in case it might be useful. "I was still there one day when the phone rang. Mike went into the living room, and I could hear him talking about sending the orders out and making sure the merchandise was delivered on time."

"Can you remember anything else?" His body forgotten for the moment, Cowley focussed on the information he had needed to hear.

"Well," Doyle said thoughtfully, "there were one or two other things that might help..."

Half an hour later, Cowley sat back in his chair, well-contented. Doyle had delivered his information with pellucid attention to detail, and with a fine grasp of minor facts that would mean nothing under normal circumstances but could, and in this case would, be the difference between stopping Flaherty and the rest of his break-away group and some other poor soul opening a very nasty surprise package.

Another half-hour, and agents were dispatched to begin the slog of watching and waiting and gathering enough proof to put an end to the nasty business. Nothing to do with this now but wait patiently until the time was ripe and then go in for the prize. Cowley caught sight of the brochure half-hidden under a pile of notes and Murphy's report. "A good hour's work," Cowley said, sitting back and watching Doyle's animated face: the man had been intrigued by all the hustle and bustle, not a question asked, but the intelligent eyes had missed nothing.

Right now, the intelligence shifted into annoyance, albeit tempered with amusement. "A good hour's work? I've been here for days!"

"I know the feeling myself," Cowley replied, and the warmth in his voice gave clue to the other man. "In fact, there's nothing I can do here until several other reports come in, and there's none of them liable to come in before morning." He paused, fingering the brochure, thinking about possible risks and definite benefits, weighing costs both fiscal and other against this unheard-of sweep of purest desire. "As you've been so helpful, I think the least the Department can do is see that you have your dinner. Would you care to dine with me, at my Club?"

That made Doyle narrow his eyes suspiciously and glance, meaningfully, at the locked drawer where the gun festered. "Is it you I'll be having dinner with, or your department?"

A hesitation, while all doubts were shoved aside by the need to taste that insouciant mouth and to touch that sweet, sweet swell of groin. "I'm a generous man, but not so generous I'll pay for an entire Department."

There, that was clear enough, in the somewhat foggy language that formed negotiations for services rendered.

"Generous? Generous enough to make me forget that you pulled a gun on me?" Doyle rose to his feet then, not waiting for an answer, and Cowley found himself suddenly, breathlessly, eye to eye with the tight crotch of Doyle's well-filled denims. "I'll tell you something, shall I? Even if you weren't, you've got me interested. I like men with power, but you're the first man I've ever met who's made me back down, even if you did have to use a gun to do it. Fair enough, I'll have dinner with you."

Cowley too rose to his feet, exchanging the view of the delectable groin for the view of the fascinating face. "And the rest of the night?"

Doyle grinned again, the smile that made Cowley's heart beat that little bit faster. "Oh, I'll have you for the rest of the night as well, if that's what you fancy."

Eyebrows raised at that. Attractive Doyle might be, but Cowley wasn't going to lie there and take it from some young pup he barely knew. "You'll do as I tell you, laddie," he said, and was rewarded by a flash of interest in eyes that he could quite easily become addicted to staring at.

"Oh, I will, will I?" Doyle answered, following Cowley over towards the door. "Might at that. You're a handsome old bugger, aren't you?"

And Cowley, absurdly pleased by the compliment, paid for or not, grinned like the Cheshire Cat and felt quite as giddy. He was, he admitted

finally, besotted. Completely, totally, utterly besotted, taken in by a prickly package of beauty and intelligence and the serenest honesty he'd ever encountered. Hand on the handle, Doyle stopped him by the simple expedient of groping him.

"Oh, yeh," he heard whispered in a lush voice, "definitely a handsome old bugger. I think I'm going to enjoy this one."

Swollen with pride and lust combined, Cowley opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. Agents passed him and he nodded, properly imperial, and was pleased that not one of the welltrained men even noticed that their boss was anything but his usual self.

But Cowley knew the truth, was acutely aware of it as he sat in his car, Doyle sprawled comfortably beside him in the passenger seat, his gaze steady on Cowley's hands steering them through the crush of cars on city street. Cowley knew that he was in deep water and was drowning in the heady excitement of desiring this man. Cowley knew himself to be possessed by this handsome face and even more handsome body.

Cowley knew it, and was too far gone to care. He wasn't going to suddenly start passing on secrets, nor neglecting his job. But he had that holiday coming up, and all those days and nights in Rio would be heaven indeed with Ray Doyle at his side.

"Have you ever been to Rio de Janeiro?" he asked as they sat at a traffic light, too impatient to wait until after dinner to broach the subject.

Doyle shifted slightly, just enough to better display what was on offer. "You inviting me?"

"Would I be asking if I weren't? Of course, I'd make sure you had plenty of spending money if you came with me..." Silly, of course, to be nervous over whether or not his offer was accepted. Doyle wasn't stupid, nor was he greedy, according to Murphy's report. Nor, if those glances and comments and sultry sighs were anything to go by, was Cowley himself exactly repulsive to this man who had confessed a taste for older men of power.

"So when are we going to Rio, then, George?"

And George Cowley, bewilderingly infatuated with a man who was blessedly not a security risk, was still grinning when they arrived at the Club four hours, one detour home and two orgasms later.

And that, he blamed on Ray—oh!

For hJc and Cat—be careful what you wish for!