

...ASTHREE

£3

NOTES
by M. FAE GLASGOW

*Issue Number Three
in the
BENT COPPERS Series*

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BENT COPPERS Series*

A Slash Zine of The Professionals

WARNING: THIS ZINE CONTAINS
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The fiction word count for ...As Three £3 Notes is 94,700

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TO THE READER

Welcome to the third *£3 Note*. This issue contains 8 stories by M. Fae Glasgow. There is no particular theme to these pieces and, contrary to some of her writing in the past, M. Fae has produced no stories to arouse great controversy. Instead, you will find two very lengthy, serious pieces. (*Step We Gaily* and *Rough Trade*) which are unusual and psychologically demanding. The other stories range from the hopeful ‘this could be the start of a beautiful relationship’ to the utterly silly. You will also find additions to both the Sports and DIY series. For those who may have noticed and those who will now check, the physical layout of this zine is a bit different from our previous publications. I’ve reduced the size of the type a little and increased the width of the columns a tad. Also, the justification of the type is only on the left side instead of on both. Why make these changes? Well, as an experiment, for creative reasons, and to reduce the number of pages printed for each zine. (This *could* be taken a step further by leaving no unused space between the end of one story and the beginning of the next. I say *could* because it hasn’t been done.)

Does any of this affect the contents of the zine—the quality and the quantity? Absolutely not. The former remains at its same high, low, or variable level (depending on your viewpoint) and the latter is completely independent of the zine design. For comparative purposes the first *£3 Note* had a fiction word count of 103,400, while the second was 78,300. This issue has 94,700 right in between.

Thanks this time to M. Fae for persevering despite physical failings of the body (I didn’t say brain!), to LDM for possessing all kinds of odd and esoteric knowledge, and to Kota for keeping the printer warm by sleeping on it.

—Caroline K. Carbis, editor

STEP WE GAILY

As an opening story this is a rather unconventional piece for Professionals fandom, and therefore quite appropriate from the Glaswegian. Told entirely from one character's viewpoint, it excavates past the public surface and into the private interior, bit by bit revealing both the perfections and imperfections of the man, examining the control of self and others that he strives to maintain, and watching as he finds himself unraveling with a passion and lust that may bring his ruin or his salvation. Two notes to the reader: certain events of the 1980s have been moved backwards about five years or so. Think of them as creative anachronisms meant to enrich the story. Also, beware the Scots English throughout. A dictionary which defines Scottishisms may be helpful to the lexicologically inclined.

CURSING himself for both his cupidity and the mortal weakness that drove him here even when he knew better, George Cowley passed through the street door and pushed open the inner door that led to the scene of so many of his downfalls, so many of his defeats at the hands of his own carnality.

Packenham's, it had been in his day, this discreet pub with even more discreet clientèle. For all that the name over the lintel was different these days, some things never change, although others had changed beyond all recognising. Oh, it was still the same odd mixture of the sort of rough pub that soldiers and workmen would frequent, with the elegant touches here and there to ease the sensibilities of the upper crust aesthetes who came here for the coarseness of base passion but who would shudder if enclosed by unplastered walls and uncomfortable seats. Within these walls, the décor had scarcely altered, the unlit murals touched up for years and then gradually, one panel flowing infinitesimally into the next, the images were updated, until the entire history of this place could be seen on its walls, from the early days of starched upright collars, boating on the river and the Elysian backdrops to summon thoughts of Greek love, into the War years and beyond, coming to War once again, moving eventually into handsome, stylish profiles that could have graced the covers of *Homme*—or been perfectly at home in the original murals. The tables were still the small round ones

on sturdy legs, but there were no soldiers' names carved into them with pocket-knives, no society sobriquets linking themselves with favourite Guardsmen. The tables along the walls were of the same half-moon shape, polish gleaming with the reflections of light and the hopes of those looking for love or sex, but the banquettes now were of textured cloth, the plush velvets and leather of before worn out and discarded. Small pools of subtle light still that bespoke and begat intimacy seeped from the same low-hanging lamps, and the high-backed booths topped with a topiary of carved wood promised the same seclusion and secrecy that George Cowley had enjoyed more times than he would ever confess.

Clothes and hair and chatter different, yet the clientèle of today would be instantly identifiable to the founders of the inner circle of this pub, as would the mix of ages, older men with younger, a group of older women sitting together, providing the only loudness of laughter, the occasional young woman hesitating by the bar until a gentleman of her choice invited her to a table. Of course, once our vision adapted to the subtle shadings of light, as did George Cowley's from the safety of the doorway, we would realise that the women were actually those brave souls who dared transform themselves, some arriving in full regalia, others stepping into the private rooms upstairs as stolid businessmen and emerging, chrysalis-like, as painted beauties, or as the still-ugly with attempted

beauty painting over the cracks.

Some things never changed, indeed, but others were so different as to be inconceivable to a man who had been scarce out of his teens the first time he had taken a deep breath and pushed open those doors to step inside a magic world of acceptance and seduction. Cowley looked around, taking his time, identifying the difference before he would commit himself fully once more to this den of his iniquities. It took him a moment before he realised that his suspicion was caused by the atmosphere that had become so different in the year since last he'd yielded and come here, but most of all, the problem lay with those things that had been transformed since he'd come here as a young man. It was far more than the immediately obvious, the reduction of blue tobacco smoke clustering at the ceiling and the absent undersmell of Brylcreem and Kölnischwasser: it was in the ambience itself, the attitude of these people. In his day, when he'd been young and spry and handsome and his hair still gleamed redly in the sun, the laughter in this place had been undercut by despair, the jollity barely masking the fear, the invasive knowledge that this place was but a temporary respite, and that the law and prison lurked outside.

Not so different today, for the men of his own generation still coming here after so many years, but the young ones, oh, they were the ones who were so different, and deserving of the new word. Gay. He tried the word for himself, the fit awkward and uncomfortable, alien to his own image of himself. He wasn't like these blithe young men who had come to maturity—what little of it they had—after the sword of 'justice' had been lifted from their necks. He was of the old school, who had first thought themselves diseased and insane, corrupt and debased, for whom epithets defined the names they used for themselves. He was a dinosaur, a remnant of the days when 'gay' was an adjective to describe a mood or a colour, not the word that told the world the self-same secret men had died from. In his day. For these young men, their loyalties were forged from friendship and the embattling of disease, where for him, in his day, loyalty had come from mutual fear and protection, friendships formed to take care of those few who were one of 'us'.

In sadness and in relief, he thought about the man he'd been then, and what he'd done and for which reasons: thought about the rôle he'd played

and the benefits he'd garnered. Thought, again, of how young he'd been, his body whole and unscarred, knee not yet maimed into ugliness, skin not yet wrinkled by the years. Remembered his own laughter in here, remembered how he had flirted and danced and flattered, and the changes in him were bitter at the back of his mind and the corners of his eyes. But as he looked around at the handsome young men, his body and soul reminded him that there was one thing that never changed, never altered for him, and that was the need that haunted him and drove him, herding him in here like lamb to the slaughter when the hunger and loneliness became too much and the dangers were nothing compared to the siren-song of sex. For all that everyone from his agents up to the Prime Minister herself would doubt it, even George Cowley was only human, a failing for which he never could forgive himself.

The door dunted him from behind, someone else wanting in, someone less inclined to linger, or perhaps simply someone with less to lose than George Cowley, head of CI5. He moved forward quickly, stepping aside to permit entrance to the collieshangie tumbling in with such a riot of noise and movement, the chaos sorting itself out into disparate people, the group claiming several tables, the racket of them settling themselves and garnering drinks covering Cowley as he slipped quietly up to the corner of the bar. He had to wait while the chattering, laughing horde—'gay', as they called themselves, well-deserved here, with their bright smiles and laughing eyes—were finally satisfied with their drinks, but eventually, the barman was finished with them and was there in front of him, his pretty face bedecked in a prettier smile.

"Yes, sir?"

"Laphroaig, please. A double." Enough to see him through the initial uneasiness, the time when both his conscience and his security awareness troubled him. There still lingered in him the horror of first understanding that the sweet joys he shared with Alec McCluskey were the sins of Sodom, the sins that caused God to destroy Sodom and all the sodomites. And the words in the New Testament, letters from Apostles long dead to church groups long turned to dust but condemnation potent enough still to turn his love to ashes in his mouth. And then there was his dear Annie, taking him in hand and promising him the Cure, one that faded

and died as soon as she left him behind, the love of a good woman naught but a temporary denial to hide the hopeless truth from himself. Not that he could blame her for leaving him, mind: running and hiding and hating himself, he hadn't been much of a catch, had been less of a companion. Free only within the discretion of this club and within the circle of friends that stemmed from here, lying had been the only other way of life he could even imagine—in his young days. Looking around himself now, he could imagine, dimly, faintly, but inescapably, a life unrecognisable to the one he now knew. If he were willing.

Not that he ever would be: freedom to 'be himself' seemed precious little to gain when he would lose CI5 and all his past triumphs worth nothing at all if the truth became public fodder. How far, he sometimes wondered, as he did now, sitting in the pub where his life had changed in the giddy, tense years before the War, would he have come, with his accent and his proclivities, without the network of fellow inverters he had found here? Him, with the wrong accent, the wrong regiment and not a school tie to speak of: without the friends and contacts made here, without their invitations and introductions, without them vouching for him with that special nod, that meaningful pause, that precise turn of phrase, he would have slowly worked his way to the upper echelons of his own regiment, and there he would have stopped. Oh, aye, he'd have had his spell with the SIS, but with the War's end, he would have been sent back to his own regiment with a 'thanks awfully, Jock' and a firm handshake. But if he were of this age, these young men with their demands for gay rights and legalised marriage, would he be one of them, would he have found some other career, some other talent besides the Army and Intelligence? Or would he be miserably hiding away still? There was an old song, and it came back to him, the words whistling through his mind as he whistled the tune under his breath: *Step we gaily on we go, heel for heel and toe for toe, arm in arm and row on row, all for Mairi's wedding*. Mind, he thought, not sure if he should be contemptuous or jealous, this lot would be changing that to *all for Barry's wedding*, although such a thing was too far beyond even the wildest of his dreams.

Ach, you're just being a big jessie, crying into your drink, he told himself. It's not as if you came here to ponder the universe, is it?

There was a particularly handsome young man holding court at the centre of the group that filled the pub with their liveliness, and staring at him, Cowley found himself drawn not only by the man's good looks, but by the mystery of what a man like that—his proclivities worn not on his sleeve, but on his lapel, the pink triangle bright against the deep black of jacket—what a man like that needed a pub like this for? And wondered more at himself, looking round this pub, taking each face in, one after the other, cataloguing and identifying. Wondered what *he* got from a pub like this nowadays. A sense of belonging, perhaps, but then, these men with their confidence, with their talk of Stonewall and gay rights—these men were light years ahead of him and more alien than he could imagine.

Face sour, he sipped the smooth, rich peatiness of his single malt, not even the luxury of Laphroaig enough to soothe away the bitterness of his own poverty. He was here for the same reason the older men—not the old men, not yet, not yet—had always come here. He was here for youth, and sex, and perhaps, if he paid enough, and if the younger man were subtle enough, perhaps he was even here for the illusion of love.

Oh, aye, some things never did change, did they, the play remains the same until one day, a man woke up and found himself playing the part of the old man.

Aye well, he didn't quite permit himself a sigh, that's the way the world's ayeways been, and girning over it won't change a thing. Still, he turned back to the bar, nursing his drink, sipping it slowly, letting time and bitterness pass before he would risk looking again at the young men who would look back at him with fiscal hunger disguised as lust.

He refused to allow himself to feel pathetic; reminded himself that there were always the young who were drawn to experience and power and the danger of hard men doing a violent job. He had been himself—still was, and temptation never more than a briefing away.

Which was why he was here.

A small gesture had the barman over and refilling his glass with more amber warmth; a small sip, the flavour savoured, the peat on his tongue reminding him of his early days, army manoeuvres amidst the hills, a clutch of men crammed into a bothy, wind howling and swirling with the snow outside, and inside, a dance of seduction that could

not be acknowledged but might, if he were lucky and reckless, be consummated later. Turning his back on both the memory and the bar, George Cowley faced the pub that had started his career on the right path, introducing him to men he would otherwise never even had the opportunity to glimpse from the distance.

Over there, in the far corner, a man who had been young in here at the same time as himself, and so Cowley nodded to him, and knew himself Ministerially safe for another while, at least until the next election. Longer, if the political punters were to be trusted. And there, in the shadows, leather jacket gleaming seductively, brown hair glistening, the young man leaning against the wall had perfected the fine art of playing rough trade for the sedate and closeted queen.

He barely contained his sneer, mockery spilling into his eyes: *thon big saftie* wouldn't last two seconds with one of his lads. One wrong move would teach him a thing or two about rough trade! And the pose—*crivvens*, one absent-minded motion from Ray Doyle would give this would-be seducer a proper showing-up.

Uninterested in a poor facsimile of a reality that tempted him every day, Cowley's attention moved on, his gaze missing nothing, gathering every detail, hoarding it to be tasted and explored later, when this night was long ended, and the dangers of coming back here once more outweighed the driving need for sex. And company, he confessed silently, not allowing himself to stare at the two young men holding hands and leaning so closely together, the merest hint of a kiss apart.

A blur of light caught his attention: just someone coming through the side door that led both to the upstairs and to the public lavatory, protecting the guilty by giving them a legitimate excuse for departing through that doorway. Another slow look around the large room, keen eyes seeking out any detail that he might have missed. Sharp mind noting those patrons who bore the unmistakable mark of the military man, self-consuming cynicism noting how many of those Armed Forces types were ages with himself, the days of the handsome young Guardsmen and the sizzling GIs too many years in the past for Cowley's vanity to appreciate. Mind, that one over there, the one sitting with his back to the wall, cigarette a red-tipped whiteness against the darkness of his skin: that was a soldier if ever there was one. And available, of course,

otherwise he wouldn't be here sitting there with such insouciant ease and such insolent sexuality.

And some things had changed so much that George Cowley was no longer certain that it was a straight cash transaction these days, or if the military men who came here were here for the same discretion that Cowley himself needed. Or if favours would be demanded, where in his day they grew from the need to band together. Not that it mattered, though: George Cowley didn't do favours for anyone, and he'd destroy his career sooner than give in to blackmail. The cigarette glowed again, and the smoker smiled, teeth beautifully white and even, reminding Cowley of the handsome, wild GIs with their jazz and jitterbugs and weakness for Scottish accents. A foregone conclusion, then, that this man would be the one Cowley would approach tonight. Not as young as he had hoped—the younger they were the easier they were to appease with a few folded banknotes. Still, the first flush of youth usually left behind the bloom of experience and skill, and a military man—quick assessment of age and demeanour, assumption that the man was a sergeant at least—wouldn't risk ruining his own career for the blackmail possibilities of a businessman wandered down from Glasgow. The soldier stopped smiling, took another drag on his cigarette, moved so that his shirt fell open a little more, and desire uncoiled in Cowley's belly.

Still, it didn't do to rush these things, not even in this pub that was the closest thing to a public closet the Cowleys of this world could depend on. Another few minutes wouldn't hurt—would only heighten the anticipation—but haste could lead to disaster: how many Whitehall careers had been ruined not by homosexuality but by being caught with their hand down the front of the wrong pair of trousers? A measured sip of his dram, and as the heat slid down his throat, tactile memory rose, times of other heat sliding down inside him, of other hot liquid splashing inside him, of other handsome young men who had sat there, one young man in particular: himself, resplendent in his kilt, the leather seat sticking to the backs of his knees as he'd sat there, trembling with his own daring at coming to a place the likes of this, heart pounding with the excitement of seeing other men who were just like himself, other men looking at him the way he wanted to look at them...

The past hit him like a blow, blood flooding his

groin, passion dimming his natural caution, the whisky depleting his inhibitions. Almost enough, now, to let himself go, to take the next step. He felt in his pocket, fingering the folded money, one that matched the cash in his back pocket and in the inner silk pocket of his good jacket. No need to set himself up for robbery by flashing too much money—and no need to risk falling short of an offered pleasure. His I.D. and wallet were locked in his desk drawer, car keys were with his own CI5 mechanics, the Rover's service the perfect excuse for him to take the tube, the intersecting circuits the perfect route for him to lose any possible tail. A few coins had secured a locker at Victoria Station, where he'd left his house keys, a bus ride had brought him to a bustling street where a few crumpled, old banknotes had paid for a hotel for the business traveller just down from Glasgow for a meeting, a visit to one of the 'tourist' pubs and a few wee nips, then on to the next, a miniature pub-crawl in perfect keeping with a man here off the wife's leash for a few precious days. Then, and only then, with all the precautions taken, it was a simple enough thing to make his way back to this pub which was so close to his own office, had he cared to simply come straight here.

He relaxed infinitesimally, the alcohol mingling with his precautions, the ambience of the pub working its usual magic on him. The man was still sitting where Cowley's observing had left him, the face as sculpted with beauty, the body as ripe with promise. Aye, George Cowley thought to himself with a smile quite startling in its charmingness, he'll do me the night. Straightening, drink in hand, he went over the man he'd picked for this night's relief.

And the abrupt prickling on the back of his neck made him cut aside from his intended path, leading him to an empty table where he, too, could sit with his back to the wall. Not a thing about him betraying his sudden tension, nothing to indicate his sensing of danger, he sat down quietly, nursing his drink like a caricature of the stingy Scotsman. The only source for his unease had been the opening of the main door, and the three men who came in were no reason for concern, all of them the worse for drink and loud with this alien gayness that was a distant cousin to the giddiness the young men were once wont to flaunt.

Not them, then, and not the men who had already been sitting in the pub: had to be, then,

someone who had come back from the toilet or upstairs, or someone who had come in, discreet as Cowley himself, hidden behind the tumult of the men now draping the bar. Aye, there, someone watching him, shadow detaching itself from the wall, approaching the small light spilling over the tables.

Cowley's heartbeat tripped, a terrifying sensation the likes of which he hadn't known since his first days of combat. Justified, he thought, taking a very blasé sip of his whisky, glancing at his watch, calmly finishing the last few drops of his drink, rising and leaving like any man who's just noticed the time and has to get on to the theatre or dinner or his wife. Neither hurrying suspiciously nor lingering unconvincingly, he walked briskly out of the pub, the doors swinging hissingly shut on the terrifying image: Bodie, walking towards him.

Route retraced, the habits of years carrying him through the routine of making sure he wasn't followed—insidious doubt whispering, whispering, asking if he would know he was being followed if it were Bodie doing the following, one of his best men, trained by the best, filled with Cowley's own secrets, Cowley's own experience, Macklin's subterfuge, SAS's ruthless skill: would he know, if it were Bodie—all his precautions fulfilled by rote, his mind carefully becalmed on the surface as he went through the implications coolly, and all the while his stomach churned like his heart, fear and chaos vying for control, only his will, clenched tight, painfully, achingly tight, only that keeping the horrors at bay.

His own home at last, so neat and tidy, picture-postcard perfect, locks intact, alarms untrung, the carefully chosen idiosyncrasies undisturbed by searchers. His coat he hung in the hall cupboard, jacket replaced by the thick Aran cardigan his sister had knitted for him, the heavy near-white concealment for the weapon reason told him he wouldn't need and foreboding demanded he keep on him.

"Alpha One," he said into the phone, the direct line to his HQ. "Status report."

"One moment, sir," the unidentified speaker told him, and Cowley made a mental note to remind Johnson that all his staff had to maintain proper procedure: slack that, Smith not giving his ID nor asking Cowley for the correct code before transferring him through.

A few clicks and then Murphy was there, following procedure to the letter, only then giving

his report as precisely as ever.

“Aye, aye,” Cowley said distractedly, routine operations given only the bare minimum of necessary attention, “that would be for the best. Put Matheson and King on stand-by, and see to it that Stuart has a back-up available.”

In his precise hand, he made a note on the pad kept by the phone, listening to the rest of Murphy’s report, his hand faltering momentarily when Murphy mentioned a name Cowley was going to have to deal with all too soon. “Picked up the files I sent him for?”

Even down the length of the phone wire, Cowley could hear Murphy’s grin. “Yes, sir, picked them up not five minutes ago.”

“And did he say anything?” Not that he really thought Bodie would: not yet, and not to Murphy. No guarantee, of course, of what he might say to Doyle, or what would be said to himself, later.

“Only the usual,” Murphy said dryly, Bodie’s rather imaginative comments at having his leave interrupted by a Scrooge of a boss too typical for him to need to repeat them to said boss himself.

A glance at his watch, genuine this time, and not the charade to get him, unnoticed, out of a pub he should know better than to go to. With the way Bodie drove, that gave him fifteen minutes at best before Bodie would be here on his doorstep, looking at him, knowing. “Aye, I can imagine what Master Bodie had to say,” Cowley replied, sounding just like himself, feeling like a stranger. Bodie, on his way here, already, no time to prepare, no way of knowing what Bodie was up to. “Anything else?”

“Not at present, sir, and even the Günther Hass situation has stabilised.”

“Right you are, then,” he replied, one part of his mind automatically arranging the work schedules the various operations would be needing over the next few days. “I’ll be at home working on those files if anything comes up.” He waited just long enough to make it sound so casual, nothing but pure routine and completely unremarkable. “Did Phillips finish the security sweeps today?”

A ruffling of paper, then Murphy spoke again. “Yes, he did the last of them, and your place was clean as of 7.27 this evening.”

So he could be thankful for that small mercy. “Fine, fine,” he said, counting off the time he had left before Bodie would turn up. “And tell Pettifer that I’ll make my own way in tomorrow.”

He could still hear Murphy’s voice as he hung up, but that didn’t concern him: his agents were well used to him cutting them off, his time too precious to waste on the niceties. With measured calm, he went over to the table in the corner, pouring himself a drink, hesitating, and then pouring another, setting both glasses on the low coffee table. The gas fire next, the low hiss barely audible, the heat welcome on the abstract ache in his leg. Leaning there, he waited, marking the minutes, running every last possibility through in his mind, sorting and sifting, rehearsing his replies and responses. Steeling himself to resist a temptation that wouldn’t be even a briefing away this time.

The ache ameliorated by seeping heat, he moved away, going slowly round his sitting room, touching this and that, going over other things, intangible things he usually did not permit himself the remembering of. Faces, not many once he’d climbed a certain height on the right ladder, but not a single face that couldn’t immediately be conjured in all its detail, with an immediate replay of activities he could have been arrested for once and could still be quietly ousted for today. Well, he smiled to himself, might perhaps be asked to retire early due to ill health. It wasn’t only his own skeletons he kept locked in his closet, enough men’s bones squirrelled away to wreak havoc in Whitehall if he decided to speak.

Of course, that was always assuming Bodie was stupid enough to attempt blackmail. If he weren’t, if he came here simply asking for minor favours—c’mon, sir, we’ve been on the go all week, the least you can do is give us the night off, Doyle here’s knackered—or worst, a nightmare of promise—what if Bodie came here offering what Cowley had gone to the pub to buy?

This time it was his grandfather’s old clock on the mantelpiece that he looked at, the sonorous tick tocking the minutes away as they had all his life.

For God’s sake, Bodie, where are you? he thought fiercely, cursing the man for keeping him waiting, hanging on tenterhooks to find out his own future.

The bell went, telling him precisely where Bodie was. On his doorstep, no doubt with enough files clasped under his arm to allay the suspicions of the most gutter-minded of observers. There were times when Bodie’s near paranoia had its uses, and sometimes they served his possible victims well.

Hand on the door knob, George Cowley paused, breathed deeply, arranged his expression, and still hesitated. It was one thing to want it over and done with, quite another to face one of his own agents, one who would look at him *knowing*, his secret reflected back at him by eyes that had always been too observant for Bodie's own good.

Mocking himself, he flung the door open, glowering at Bodie as if this were no different from any other time an agent had taken too long in delivering the files.

"I was beginning to think you'd decided to walk," he snapped, knowing it would throw Bodie off his stride. "Well? Are you going to hand them over or are you going to stand there all night?"

And Bodie, never one for conveniently obeying orders, direct or indirect, smiled politely and stepped forward, ignoring George Cowley's outstretched hand, ignoring the infamous glower, walking right past his boss, strolling casually into the sitting room with all the grace and threat of the lethal weapon he assuredly was.

The files were tossed onto the polished desk, fanning out in an arc of bland manilla, one glossy photograph of a minor suspect spilling forth to lie there, frowning over his newspaper, unnoticed by the two living men in the room.

"The Jeffreys file's in amongst that lot. Five minutes reading that in the morning and you can flannel Murphy, convince him that you and me spent hours poring over the bloody paperwork." So confident, obscenely jaunty, Bodie turned towards his boss, smiled with the white teeth of the predator. "Not that you'll be looking at much else tonight, will you?"

Almost anyone else, and Cowley would bluff his way out of this, or at least buy himself a few minutes, but that wouldn't work, not with a man who was as implacable as a Chieftain tank and was too good to be fooled by much. "And what the hell is that supposed to mean? Seeing me there is no proof of anything, and especially not that I'd welcome advances from the likes of you."

"Isn't it?" That one eyebrow raised, and the eyes twinkled, not with humour, but with something closely akin to hunger.

It shivered along Cowley's spine, colliding with the two doubles he'd already drunk, smashing right into the too long self-denial that had driven him to the pub in the first place. "Do you think I went there looking for a cheap thrill? I've had to

speak to you before, Bodie, about you sitting in judgement on folk for no reason. Not every man there was after sex, not by a long chalk. And the last time I looked, this was still a free country—"

"And still smelling ever so faintly of roses," Bodie broke in before Cowley could make him doubt if the moon might actually be made of green cheese after all. The smile was wicked now, inviting Cowley to share its seductive humour. "Or should that be smelling ever so faintly of lavender, if it's thanks to the likes of me and thee?"

Bodie was too sure of himself by half, the sheer cheek of the man taking Cowley's breath away: a convenient enough excuse, and one that suited him better than it being Bodie's dangerous good looks that were forcing his breath into a race against his heart. "How many times have I warned you about jumping to conclusions, eh, Bodie?" Voice so sharp, stinging, the same dressing-down that any agent would get, everything else held in tight check so that Bodie couldn't find fault and see the truth as clearly as he had in the pub. "Goin' in there like dam-busters, seeing one wee thing and making an entire range of bloody mountains out of it—" Hiding his smile as Bodie's certainty faltered, feinting fast to keep the other man off balance, throwing enough sticks and stones that Bodie would be too busy chasing them to sniff out the real truth. "Ham-fisted as ever, an' if you've ruined the plans I've spent *weeks* on, oh, laddie, by the time I've finished with you, the Outer Hebrides in January are going to feel like a rest cure."

"But sir—"

"Don't you 'but sir' me! Not after tonight's little performance, strutting around, for all the world like a cross between a Hell's Angel and a pop star." It was working, perfectly, Bodie losing the conviction of what he'd seen with his own eyes, Cowley's reputation for triple-think performing its usual magic. "Ach, don't stand there gaping like a landed fish. The damage's done, if it's done. On your way, Bodie—"

But so close to fruition, Cowley's safe retreat was beaten, those too-quick eyes seeing the glasses on the table, two stiff whiskies already poured, and Bodie's suspicion flared again, struggling with the well-earned habit of faith in his boss. "Is one of them for me? Or," he punctuated the comment very precisely, one of the very few who would dare question George Cowley on his home ground, "were you expecting...someone?"

At his most urbane, indulgent as he sometimes was, Cowley waved Bodie to a seat, settling himself opposite, picking up his own glass, allowing himself only one sip for the sake of appearances, even while he thundered furiously at himself for being so bloody lax—or so bloody tempted that he would sabotage himself. Painting himself into a corner, where he could give himself an excuse for indulging himself with Bodie? He'd like to think not, but with Bodie sitting there, large as life and twice as handsome, George Cowley was, for once, unsure of his own motives. "Go on," he urged, the same way he had the last time forgiveness for Bodie's sins had consisted of a good dram and the end of the lecture, even while he totted up the months upon months that he had wanted this man, and discovered that the sum of all that time was more desire and affection than he should ever risk in a lifetime, "drink up. You're not cleared for the reason I was there tonight, so I'll let you away with that. But," and now he was the one to pause, Bodie's eyes flickering to meet his as the atmosphere changed, Cowley manipulating the mood and the attack, all the better to defend himself, "you've a bit of explaining to do yourself, haven't you, Bodie? And I've a busy day tomorrow, so you might as well come up with a convincing excuse tonight."

Cowley sat back, leaning away so that the lamp-light didn't mark his face and the glow of the fire didn't touch him at all. In front of him, Bodie didn't squirm, coming instead to the poker-backed posture of the professional soldier, the plush armchair seeming as Spartan as a ladder-back wooden chair. Some habits, it seemed, did indeed die hard. "Oh, come on, come on, Bodie!" he said harshly, harrying his quarry, trying to ignore the lick of desire that all Bodie's self-contained dangerousness inspired in him. "I've not got all night!"

"Sir."

"Not yet I'm not, but at the rate you're going, I'll have my peerage before you've finished." He wasn't gentle, not even close, his every move perfectly honed, cutting Bodie's perceptions to shreds, the firelight glinting hellishly on his skin as he leaned forward to interrogate his own agent. "Well, Bodie? What was a CI5 agent doing in a known homosexual pub?"

"Would you believe having a perfectly innocent drink, sir?"

"What'd you take me for? Willis? Five seconds

in there and a blind man would know the sort of place it is. Try another one, Bodie, and this one had better be an improvement."

Bodie, of course, would never shift nervously, not yet anyway. "I was curious?"

"Not when you're in CI5 you're not. Anyway, an ex-services man like yourself, trying to tell me you didn't know thon was a place where army men go to rent themselves out?"

Perhaps Bodie's smirk was supposed to defuse either the situation or Cowley's table-turning suspicion. "I thought that was the Grenadier. Sir."

"This is no time for one of your sick jokes, Bodie!"

"No, sir." The merest flicker of his eyes as Bodie took stock of the expression on his boss' face. "Sorry, sir."

The old unwritten rule had always been that homosexuality was grounds for dismissal only if and when a man was caught: and did Cowley himself seeing Bodie there count as Bodie trapping himself? Or did it count as them each catching the other? Steeling himself against Bodie's undeniable appeal, Cowley gave Bodie a look of his own, conceding that the real reason he was tempted to kick Bodie out of CI5 was because of what Bodie had seen—because of what he had to convince Bodie he hadn't seen at all. He leaned back in his seat once more, but sitting so that the lamplight would fall on him this time, perfectly aware that the light would cast enough shadows upon his face to make him unreadable while still making his face a threatening mask. "I don't appreciate having to ask you again, Bodie. What were you doing in a pub that's a known haunt of homosexuals?"

The silence was almost complete, the faint noises from outside growing larger to fill the maw of quiet in Cowley's sitting room, the comfortable room become torture chamber.

Very, very softly: "Don't make me ask you a third time, Bodie."

Over the hiss of the fire and the far-off whisper of car tyres on the wet road, Cowley heard Bodie swallow, heard him clear his throat, could nigh near hear the wheels turning, and with them, Bodie's future spinning round slowly, the outcome largely dependent upon Bodie's input.

"I..."

Cowley sat motionless, waiting out the other man's nervousness.

"It's never been a security risk," Bodie an-

nounced, voice too loud to be truly convincing, although that might be nothing more incriminating than the natural fear of being caught. "I mean, I've always been careful, and discreet."

There was nothing from his boss, neither help nor encouragement nor condemnation, only that preternatural stillness and impenetrable stare that could impale more effectively than the sharpest of spears.

"I swear no-one knows."

"No-one, Bodie?" Asked, smoother than any whisky, more potent than any bottled spirit. "Surely the men you..." George Cowley knew precisely how to imply without revealing an atom of truth, that one pause laden with disgust and contempt, "...picked-up know, and what protection do you have against them."

"Durex." Then quickly, the facetiousness going against him: "Yeh, yeh, I know what you said about my sick jokes. Sorry." Another deep breath, another attempt at explaining the inexcusable. "I've never gone anywhere but there or the Grenadier, sir, and not one of the blokes that go there could say anything without getting themselves in worse shit—I mean, worse trouble than they'd get me."

"So you were depending on joint guilt to keep them quiet, just as they depend on your need for silence?" Like myself, he thought, selfish anger growing, in-turned fury at how stupid he had been, what a fool he'd been to delude himself that he was safe if he went to one of those few special, select pubs: such certainties were for the likes of Bodie, not a man in his position. It was pathetic, really pathetic, to let nothing but lust put him in the position where he was dependent upon the loyalty of one man being enough to suborn that man away from the truth and convince the sorry bugger that he couldn't even believe his own eyes any more. "And did you have anything in mind for if they didn't hold their wheest?"

Bodie looked at him then, the honesty an indictment of Cowley's own multi-layered deceit. "Come to you, sir, and ask for permission to resign."

Only the occasional thickening of his accent revealed the stress Cowley was under, his measured and mellow tones such a lush contrast to the choked tightness of Bodie's voice. "And in telling me that, you're admitting to being a homosexual."

Grounds for dismissal; conduct incompatible with service needs; security risk: that one word

held all those meanings, and it echoed between them.

Homosexual.

Applicable to both, unadmittable to the one, inescapable to the other, disaster for both.

Unable to risk meeting his boss' eyes, Bodie looked downwards, only then remembering the glass on the table in front of him. A sudden dart of a stare glanced off Cowley's uncommunicative façade, and Bodie, called a liar by no more than the expression on Cowley's face, looked away once more.

The quiet stretched, marked by the asthmatic ticking of the old clock on the mantelpiece and the receding footsteps of someone passing by on their way to a home that was, hopefully, happier than this.

It was an old technique of Cowley's, this sitting here silently, saying nothing, asking nothing, his very stillness more demanding than mere questions could ever be. Invariably, his victim eventually succumbed to the guilt-sparked need to fill the gaping holes of silence and the only doubt was how long it would take to broach the damned mouth.

Slowly, made dignified either by the grace of his well-trained body or the gravity of the occasion, Bodie came to his feet in front of the fire, automatically coming to parade rest, although any drill sergeant would have screamed at him for those shoulders that drooped more miserably than his mouth and for that faint sheen of defiance. "So are you going to let me resign with a clear name, then?"

"Or what?" George Cowley asked softly, knowing perfectly well that Bodie wouldn't be able to tell if he were being given the chance to insist on doing the right thing for the Department or if he were being given enough rope to hang himself.

"Or," Bodie straightened perceptibly, standing nigh near at attention, a soldier awaiting his commanding officer to strip him of his rank, "you can sack me and have me blackballed as a security risk."

"And which one d'you think I should do?"

There was another look for that, and a pause that in less steadfastly masculine situations might have been called pregnant. "That depends, sir."

"Aye, I suppose it would." No-one who knew him trusted Cowley when he was smoothly plummy and so terribly mild. "And what is it that it depends on?"

Pointedly, and a part of Cowley couldn't help but approve that one of his agents would be so bravely adamant even while he decried the man's tenaciousness, Bodie looked at the second glass of whisky that had been sitting there, poured and waiting for him, hardly common practice if his being drummed out were a foregone conclusion. "It depends on whether or not you really were on a operation or if you were there off your own bat. Sir."

"Are you," and Cowley's voice was as smooth as acid dissolving steel, "implying that I'm a practicing homosexual? Me, the head of CI5?"

Brave, but not stupid. "I'm not implying anything, sir."

"Then what the hell d'you think you're doing?" If it were blackmail, oh, then Bodie would wish he'd been drowned at birth along with all the rest of the rats. "What's your game, Bodie?"

"All I'm saying is that you caught me where I shouldn't've been, but you were there yourself. And I don't have any definite proof as to why."

"An' jist you remember that! You won't get very far wi' your baseless accusations, I'll tell you tha' for nothing." On his feet now, pacing, his surging accent revealing more of his emotions and reactions that he wanted anyone, particularly Bodie ever to see, and he quickly wrestled his temper back under control, sheer will-power the yoke to hold it all in place. And all the while, there was Bodie standing there like the Angel Gabriel just waiting to blow his horn and bring Cowley's career tumbling down. One thing for folk to know he was one of those—or one of themselves, in more than a few instances—but purest calamity for it to come out officially, where it would have to be seen and acknowledged. Prosecuted, perhaps, if the ones that hated him decided to dig deeply enough and link him to the shame that had soiled his old circle of confrères, the old names that were the stickiest of mud for any man's reputation. The gutter press would have a field day with their speculations and their muck-raking, and they wouldn't care one whit how false all of it was, just as long as the scandal sold more newspapers. Gimlet-eyed, he pinned Bodie. "If you're trying to blackmail me—"

"What d'you think I am?" The shout barely leashed, the real emotion bursting through the old soldier façade. "I've been caught with my trousers down, and all I want to do is get out with my rep intact—might actually be able to get another job

that way." A very honest, very intense stare, unflinching, meeting Cowley full on. "I'm not asking for anything but you to let me leave under my own steam."

God help him, but he believed Bodie, even though trust was the last thing he should be indulging in right now: surviving, that was all he should be thinking about, surviving and keeping his own doorstep swept so clean Willis wouldn't have a leg to stand on. "Ach, Bodie, Bodie, what did ye have to go and get yourself caught for?" he asked with more regret than was proper and more dismay than he ought. He should be throwing Bodie out right now and wiping his hands in public and ostentatious distaste—Pontius Pilate crept into his mind, and another hand-washing, another victim thrown to appease the appetites of the mob—but the way the man was standing there, refusing to bow his head, refusing to be cowed, even in the sense his men used the word. Pride goeth before a fall, he reminded himself as Bodie stood there with head held high, but still, Bodie standing there like that served notice that this was, after all, one of Cowley's best agents, and a fine man, if not for that one fault.

A fault, his conscience shrilled all the more loudly, that he and Bodie shared in full measure. He didn't want to even think the word again, preferred not to admit it into the privacy of his own head, but the truth was whistling through his mind like winter's bitterest gales. It takes one to know one, they used to say in the playground when he'd been a wee boy at Napiershall St., and he should be putting all his energies into convincing Bodie that that old adage was a load of tripe.

Should, should: life was full of them, shoulds and oughts and musts, and what was he doing? Sitting here like a doolally-dip, with Bodie standing there like a big wally-dug, and for why?

For the simple reason that beyond his fear of discovery was the repugnancy of throwing a perfectly good man away, just tossing him onto the midden, and for doing nothing more than Cowley himself had done many a time. How many young men had he paid over the years? Oh, he'd never traded favours—but he'd done for certain young men what had been done for himself in the dim past: an introduction here, a useful phone number there, a quiet word in a sympathetic ear.

Made restless by Cowley's uncomfortable silence, Bodie shifted uneasily, his tension as

obvious as the fine musculature his movement revealed under the enticing black of his clothes. Out of the corner of his eye, Cowley saw all this, took in the pose of hard-man that still understated the true strength and ruthlessness of this man, and which denied completely certain details only the psych tests and background information had revealed. Of course, hindsight always being of the 20/20 variety, George Cowley could have kicked himself for being as blind about this young man as he had been about the changes in his old friend Barry Martin. Reading, writing and quoting poetry, the overkill of female companionship, the complete lack of anything approaching a social or long-term relationship with a woman, that terse comment about his reasons for leaving home to run away to sea—good God, the man had dropped hints all over the place. Or so Cowley could tell himself now, with Bodie just standing there in front of him in the alluring clothes picked with obvious care, everything about him guaranteed to draw the eye of like-minded men.

And that, of course, was the one thing that George Cowley should never admit—if he were a lesser man, but brutal honesty had always been both his bane and his blessing. Tonight, it was nothing less than a curse.

Seeing him in Pakenham's tonight: if Bodie hadn't worked for him, if Bodie had been some stranger, would this handsome man still be standing there on Cowley's Indian rug?

Of course not, Cowley told himself.

He'd be upstairs in my room by now, face down on the bed, chewing the pillows.

Not the first time he'd had thoughts like that, not that he usually allowed himself gutter fantasies with a single one of his 'lads': they were sacrosanct, because, as George Cowley knew only too bitterly, his own reminder thumping through his brain, the oft-repeated words a mantra of warning: temptation was never more than a briefing away.

Temptation was even less distant tonight. After all, what proof would there be, apart from Bodie's word? And what was it they were called these days? Disgruntled employee, obviously trying to tar and feather the very man who had caught him in the act. For it would be easy enough to manufacture the evidence to 'prove' that George Cowley had been there in the line of duty: there was always at least one diplomat or industrialist or scientist dabbling where he ought

not, always one line of CI5 inquiry that could be re-activated by a conveniently-timed anonymous tip. Oh, aye, he could protect himself easily enough, as long as he discredited Bodie in the first place—and how hard would it be, in this man's chequered past, to find the pattern of perversion? Martell, for starters, a blatant homosexual and gun runner: link Bodie's name to Martell's—just the smallest whisper of Bodie's time in the Congo and the rumour-mill would provide all the 'evidence' the security forces needed—and Bodie could provide autographed photos of himself and Cowley in the act and not a soul would believe him.

So easy. And if he were Willis, and if Bodie were one of Willis' preferred buxom blondes, then he might even do it. But he was George Cowley, and his name and his honour mattered, to him if to no-one else.

Which left him in the position where he should get rid of Bodie, but couldn't quite silence his conscience long enough to do so.

Which left him disgusted that he had even considered having sex with Bodie before ruining the other man—but still, he couldn't silence the hiss of desire leeching at his will.

All of it left Bodie standing there, parade-ground still, waiting.

And knowing, if Cowley hadn't convinced him that Bodie had been wrong about what he'd seen tonight.

"Sir—" voice unsteady, the strain more than telling.

Cowley acknowledged him with a small look.

"What are you going to do?"

I wish to God I knew, he thought sincerely.

"Just tell me—"

Tell him what—the answer, when Cowley himself didn't have an answer because his own motives were so corrupted he couldn't entirely trust himself at this moment?

Look, his body whispered, at the way Bodie's trousers cling to him. Fear and its adrenalin had given him an erection, pressing hard against the black fabric. Think about it, his lust sang, think about that in your mouth, the taste of him, the size of him, the hardness of him—

"Oh, for God's sake, get out, Bodie," he rasped, appalled at where his libido was wandering, furious with himself for succumbing at this worst of possible moments. "I'll make my decision

tomorrow, when I'm not so bloody furious with you."

"Yes, sir," Bodie replied with a meekness that was usually conspicuous by its absence. "In the office?"

"At ten o'clock sharp, after I have my meeting with the Minister."

Another man he'd seen in that pub tonight, information that he would use with subtle ruthlessness tomorrow under the guise of comrades-in-arms. Unfair, so unfair to get rid of Bodie, and so unthinkable to keep him on.

"One thing—"

From behind him, where Bodie was standing in the doorway, not looking at that faux pas of a second whisky.

"If it makes any difference, I'd give you my word that I'd steer clear of places like that in future."

"Aye, but is that the sort of promise a man can keep?"

There was no answer from Bodie for that, although Cowley already knew his own answer, his presence in that pub tonight being more than enough.

"On your bike," he said wearily, for once not even hearing the tiredness in his own voice. "Go on, Bodie."

For a moment, he thought there was going to be an argument over that, thought the mutinous tilt of Bodie's mouth was going to spill over into aggravation and words hurled in haste. But Bodie didn't let him down, taking his tacit rebellion with him, the slamming of the door his only comment.

Respite, but only a short stay of execution. By tomorrow morning, he had to have his answer, decision made and tied up neatly in red tape. There was no surprise in the fact that there was no simple, clear-cut right answer: the surprise lay in the amount of pain the choices wrought. Of course, there was the rocketing he would have to give Rawlinson in 'Reference & Research' and there was the revelation of where they had fallen down so badly. Going through the usual nightly ritual, he succeeded in occupying his mind not with thoughts of Bodie himself, but Bodie as an abstract problem, an aspect of an operation, one where he would have to protect himself, start putting a bit more emphasis on that Soviet 'trade' negotiator who had been seen glad-ragging his way round some of London's mixed clubs and pubs. Perfect cover for

himself, of course, this decloseting the Russian, perfect excuse for him to be in a queer pub himself.

Later, in the wee sma' hours when he needed to be asleep to face the coming day, he was still lying there awake, the blankets a burden across his chest, weighing him down. Uneasy, he shoved them aside, the damp chill of night air slinking over him, welcome for its freshness against the staleness of his thoughts, although his leg would be giving him gyp when he got up.

Worth it, though, to feel that he could breathe again. Worth it, to cool the heat in his flesh and chill his imagination.

The decision should have been easy enough, for didn't they say that such things grew easier with practice, and how many times was it now that he'd thrown some poor soul to the wolves?

Aye, but before, it had always been for the department, and this time, with fear gnawing his bones worse than anything his knee ever gave him, he wasn't so certain that his motives were pure. For the sake of the department, he could argue that. But the stench of self-interest clung to him until he barely restrained the urge to get up for a shower.

After all, Bodie hadn't compromised the department, not this time—and if George Cowley were to sack a man on suspicion of what he might do in the future, then who would he have left? Not even Murphy was entirely beyond doubt, not with those pot plants of his.

On the other hand, there was himself. How many times had he promised himself that he'd never set another foot inside that sort of place? Never lay a finger on a compromising situation, never set himself up for the latest variation in the badger game, never succumb to the hungers of the flesh?

Too many times, so many that the weight of them pressed down on him until he could scarce catch a breath. The cold was getting to him as well, his muscles stiffening, his knee whingeing at him. No chance of regaining sleep, no chance for anything approaching rest, and he was damned if he were going to lie there like a broody hen but twice as useless. A bath, and then into the office—do them all the power of good to have the boss walk in on them when they were all smugly sure he'd be tucked up in bed. Still, he couldn't quite bring himself to move, his mind roving slowly over the evening, highlights replaying. Bodie, ever the soldier; Bodie, too bloody handsome for anyone's

good. Standing there on his dignity when he should have been either begging, calling in every favour he could think of, or going for the jugular.

Looking the way he did, Bodie wouldn't have been on his own in that pub for more than five minutes, and that long only if he were playing hard to get. The military man who had attracted Cowley's attention was already nothing more than another mugshot in his private rogues' gallery: he could remember everything from the way Bodie walked to the way his eyelashes cast shadows across his cheek. Could remember every single detail of Bodie in that pub tonight. If only, when he'd turned round he'd seen nothing more complicated than a stranger's face, if only Bodie had been an unknown quantity and not one of his own agents... Aye, and if wishes were fishes and fishes were currency, he'd be a millionaire.

Lying here wallowing just because he was in a quandary—pathetic, that's what it was.

And dangerous forbye, his mind supplying his hand with the memory of the way the muted light had danced on Bodie's hair, and the way Bodie moved with such stolid control, all that passion secreted within like an old coal fire banked for the night. His hand itched to transfer the knowledge on to other rebellious parts of his body, and his fingers dabbled in wiry curls and stroked along smooth skin before he wrenched body and mind back under the yoke of self-control.

Knee shrieking at him, he launched himself from the bed, wincing as the cold hit his feet and his body weight hit his knee. Dawn was many a long hour away this far into winter, and the bathroom light was cruel as it staved his eyes, but not so cruel as the mirror. Not half as cruel as he was to himself.

Every line was catalogued, every fraction of an inch that had decimated his skin, the jawline that was softening, sagging with over a half century on this planet. The coldness of his eyes next—no fool he, to think his eyes were the colour of the warm summer sky. Mouth, intractable, inclined towards sourness that had nothing to do with taste. Hair, fading or faded, thinning, the vibrancy nothing more than something he remembered and missed, his vanity battered worse by that than any other single thing. There was a full-length mirror on the inside door of his wardrobe, but he thought the small bathroom mirror was more than enough.

Old, his reflection said. You're getting old.

His body, pulse still heavy in his groin, dis-

agreed, every small movement setting his genitals swaying heavily, skin brushing softly on skin, an echo of the last time he'd had a man's hand on him.

He'd pretended it was Bodie that night as well.

And just how many times had he promised himself—sworn upstairs and down—that he'd never do that again either? Never go to the pub, never pick up a strange man, never allow himself to pretend he was with Bodie—oh, aye, he had definitely been buying his future on the never-never, and like credit, he'd never get his feet clear of the debt.

Water, teeth-chittering cold, splashing his face, icy drops hitting him in the chest like sharp kitten teeth, a spot or two runnelling down his torso to make him shiver, the cold all the more bitter on the heat of his groin. Unmoved by his mind's mewlings, his cock was rising slowly, filling and lengthening, growing heavy against his will.

Bodie. Of all the men who'd ever served under him—in the purest terms only, that is—Bodie was the one who troubled him most, with his black humour and glittering eyes, his insolence and his loyalty. Stony faced, George Cowley looked himself in the mirror and admitted it was so tempting to throw the mad fool out before this new knowledge of Bodie coloured everything and he made a mad fool of himself throwing himself at Bodie's feet—or on his neck, Bodie bowed under him, the long lines of his back, that scar on his left shoulder, just made for a man's tongue to trace...

At this rate, it wasn't a shower he'd be needing, it'd be Niagara Falls. In winter.

Still, when he stepped under the cascade, it was hot, the steam rising, the water easing some of the strain out of his muscles, his knee unlocking, the pleasure soaking into his bones the way the water soaked his hair. Bodie. There, in the pub, not effervescent and gay like some of the new young men, but dark and dangerous, available in the way the other military men were: for a price, no more than a token to salve the raw wound of their need for men.

To give credit where it's due, Cowley was slow to touch himself, washing himself impersonally with the clear soap he'd used since he was a boy. Slower yet to permit the fantasy, reluctant to yield, but the needs were too great, denied for too long, this evening starting off in the adamant expectation of ending in sex. And if Bodie had been a stranger...

His pulse throbbed in his cock, lust uncurling in his belly, his body's demands implacable, his mind going round and round in circles that refused to stay with the safe, impersonal images of other men he'd had, other men he'd seen in surreptitious videos, always coming back to Bodie in that bloody pub.

The minute his hand finally touched the hooded head of his cock, he had lost a battle he had fought only half-heartedly. Who would ever know what he'd thought in his own shower, and since when had he ever allowed his favouritism to show as anything other than aggravation?

Bodie, then, he thought, closing his eyes, leaning his forehead against the warmed tiles of the wall, Bodie walking towards me, a stranger, a dangerous man available for rent, the swagger in his walk, the set of his mouth, the caress of his trousers. The offer, the acceptance, walking out together, him only a step or two ahead of me, and his jacket short enough to see his bum, his flanks hollowing with ever step, and nothing between me and his arse but a wee bit scrap of cloth.

His hand was moving faster now, flesh as hot as the water, fantasy hotter than hell itself. Dark street, scarcely enough light to see by, but there, an archway into a back alley, the granite polluted black as midnight, and Bodie darker still, a shadow, waiting, hands pale, unbuttoning, opening, unmasking, half naked in front of him, already hard, hungry, needing him. Bodie kneeling, mouth agape, begging to be filled, sucking him in, sucking him—

His seed splattered the wall with diluted whiteness, water dissolving him immediately, flushing him down the drain, and his legs were left weak, knees not quite steady, only the stiffness of his arms holding his limp body upright. On his head, running down his neck, into his ears, across his back, even between his buttocks, the water was no longer so hot, the boiler emptying itself until warmth slowly faded into coolness.

Impassive, he stepped out carefully, drying himself on thick, Turkish towels that were a definite concession—a harmless one, he had thought—to the secret pearl of hedonism that lurked at his core. The big towels, soft and white, rubbed slowly over skin he had touched himself, had imagined Bodie touching, and the fabric drank up the beads of water the way he had wanted Bodie to—

But passion was past, the sin done, time and

past time to get on with it, put it all into perspective, recognise Bodie's appeal and deal with it. And well past time to stop thinking of his own agent like that: he was a professional, and he came to believe that, little by little, as he donned his clothes, article by article. Everything perfectly in place, impeccable grey suit over snowy white shirt, dark blue tie knotted precisely, and he was finally presentable. A pause, definite hesitation, but then he looked at himself in the wardrobe mirror, not at all liking what he saw. Oh, aye, the image of the punctilious civil servant was exactly as it should have been, but that wasn't what he was looking at. Did it show, in his eyes, the set of his mouth, the way he stood, the way he used his hands?

Would someone—had someone—guessed about him? Someone not 'in the club', not of his ilk, but someone who could turn that secret into disaster?

And when he looked at him this morning, would Bodie know what his boss had been doing, with the hot shower pouring over him and the lustful thoughts flooding him?

Did it, did any of it, show?

A purely metaphoric straightening of his tie, and the doubts were shunted aside, dunted into the dark areas that would be poked and prodded only after a fair few wee nips, areas that could be ignored and left insensate. For now.

Had anyone been able to muster enough enthusiasm to actually ask, then any census would have clearly declared today to be the worst in the history of CI5.

Bombs in shops were never very pretty, and uglier still was the fact that George Cowley found that there was a very small part of him that welcomed the public crisis as panacea for the private one.

The Press were screaming, the Prime Minister was screaming, the Minister was screaming, and Cowley had gone very, very quiet, a detail that worried his agents no end.

"Answers!" George Cowley thundered in a barely restrained roar, his outburst perversely reassuring to a department used to a boss who spoke. "I've already told you, it's answers I want, not peely-wally excuses. On yer bikes, the lot of you. Every stone, d'you hear me? I want every stone looked under, and then you bring whatever crawls out from under back here to me. Understood?"

Feverish nodding from the assembled partnerships and solo operatives, with even the laconic Murphy acknowledging tersely.

"Well? What the hell are you lot doing still standing there?"

A few murmured, but none loudly enough for the discrete words to be heard, Cowley's office emptying rapidly.

"And where the hell have you been?" A definite shout this time, the show of temper flawless camouflage for the sinking in his belly as he looked up from his desk and saw Bodie, standing there as he had in the living room the night before.

"Checking with Martell, sir," rapped out, militarily precise. "No information available, but as he hasn't heard anything from any of his associates or enemies, he assumes that it came in via the Basques because there was a very large shipment of semi-automatics went over to Spain not a month ago."

"Aye, that would make sense to their sick little brains, wouldn't it?"

"Sir." And before Cowley could ask: "Doyle's talking to a couple of his informers, thinks that if he oils the right palm, he just might come up with the goods."

"Which means I'd best triple check his expenses at the end of this month." Usually a joke, this morning it lightened the atmosphere not one whit, the awareness of the night before, and for Cowley, the illicit pleasures of the early hours, damming up between them, professionalism become a struggle to achieve.

"Permission to speak, sir."

Cowley's hackles actually rose, and his eyes narrowed, all his instincts going into sudden, uncomfortable alert. "Granted," he said without thinking about it, dropping easily back into the old patterns.

"I need to report a possible security risk, sir."

Just look at the pride in that face, dignity clung to by the skin of his teeth, the jaw so set, that muscle jumping, giving him away. As he had last night, as he had too many times before, George Cowley felt a slow, threatening warmth deep inside.

"And what would the nature of that risk be, Bodie?" he asked calmly enough.

"Perverse, according to some people, sir." Another one of those quick glances that Bodie always sneaked in when he was truly nervous. "I

was somewhere I shouldn't have been, and although I left before I did anything I'm not supposed to, I was out of bounds."

That was it? Nothing more? An official notification that would put Cowley in the clear and Bodie in the dung heap? And now, for God's sake, why now, when he had bombers on the loose and a lethal PM roaring down the phone at him? "There's a Force 9 flap going on, in case you hadn't noticed, Bodie, and I've no time to be dealing with your personal life and your sordid little girlfriends. Make an appointment with Betty, and report immediately if anyone tries to blackmail you."

Stoic, it would seem, bar the gleam in his eyes and the relief oozing out of him. "Yes, sir. Brilliant idea, sir."

"Aye," Cowley said, smiling in spite of himself, knowing full well he should be castrating this upstart instead of sinking into a pit of attraction, "it certainly was a brilliant idea." Coming to me to report the incident, letting me right off the hook... "That appointment, Bodie."

"Yeh?"

"There's no rush, unless you're stupid a second time."

"Who, me? Rhodes Scholar, that's wot I am, in't I?"

He really was going to have to watch this appalling tendency to smile at Bodie indulgently. "Then swimming the Atlantic must have mildewed your brain. Now, away with you—I want those bombers found, and I've no intention of letting you off the leash until they're in my custody and off the streets."

"Yes, sir," Bodie said obediently enough, turning on his heels and leaving quickly. Still, twirling his glasses absently, George Cowley was left with the distinct feeling that he wouldn't enjoy finding out why Bodie had developed that gleam to his eyes and that bounce to his step.

They never did find any actual provable evidence against the bombers, although the industrial espionage case was a feather in their collective cap, and the usual run-of-the-mill murder and mayhem was dealt with well enough that the Minister, the Rt. Hon. David Stratford-Johns, invited Mr. Cowley to dinner at his club.

Unimaginative food, thin soups and parsleyed potatoes, bland conversation fitted in meaninglessly between courses, the chat nothing more than

an aperitif for the real meat of the discussion. The usual comments, his usual replies, but his mind wandered, the banality undermined by the sharp, graven images of Bodie in all his guises, the man a cipher, everything from callous gun-runner to saviour of abandoned kittens with innumerable levels in between, a man who used his intelligence to play dumb. And the different looks of the man, all of them experienced in the weeks since that night, every expression and every nuance of appearance paraded in front of Cowley until the unacceptable implication burned in his belly.

Over the port—an overly sweet concoction Cowley had always heartily loathed, especially when he had to drink it instead of a decent malt—the Minister was his usual self, as overly mannered as the port and the self-consciously masculine décor of the club. There was none of the subtle elegance of Cowley's own club with its neutral colours and understated comfort. Here, there were actually big-game hunting trophies on the wall—hardly conducive to a man's appetite and so anachronistic as to be laughable: not that he would ever laugh outright, of course. Oh, no, dinner with the Minister meant shaded conversations about budgets and information, about prosecutions and other things to be swept quietly under the nearest carpet.

"Oh, I understand you completely, Minister," he said, smiling pleasantly, barely touching the rim of the glass to his lips, the smell of the port not quite as bad as its taste. "And I'm sure you'll understand my position completely as well." He leaned back in his chair, apparently replete, apparently concedingly. "Justice must be served, and of course you're right—there are times when the letter of the law is a wee bit too harsh to serve justice properly."

"Then you'll make sure that poor old York's father-in-law isn't prosecuted for this unfortunate incident?"

Sharks should smile so sweetly. "I'll be happy to have one of my lads look into it."

This, obviously, wasn't quite what the Minister wanted to hear. "I don't think you follow me after all, George," and the Minister proved that he, too, could smile with all the sincerity of said shark meeting a surfer. "It would be most upsetting to certain personages if the gentleman in question were to have his name splashed all over the tabloids—" a pause, and they both knew what was coming, "you know how the Fleet Street rabble can

be when they see the slightest hint of clay feet treading the corridors of power."

"Aye, Minister," and how he wished he had a decent whisky in front of him instead of this filthy swill, "I think I do follow you perfectly now." He waited until the Minister's smile was urbane and satisfied, until the other man was quite, quite secure, and then he leaned forward, and spoke. "Now, David, you know that you can be absolutely honest with me," he said, referring less obliquely than usually to that part of their lives that went forever unspoken, "and you can rest assured that I'll take care of any little... indiscretions that come back to haunt you. If you'll just give me the pertinent information...?"

A slow flush rose up over the Minister's face, and his eyes hardened, narrowed dangerously, the suave politician's mask dropping away like scales to free the ruthless former intelligence officer underneath. "I'm sure Mrs. Stratford-Johns would have told me had we received any threats or the like at home."

Touché, Cowley thought, a bit on the amused side. Next the stupid old windbag will be thinking he can dance me hither and yon—and with me paying the bloody piper an' all. "I'm quite sure she would, Minister, and it's always nice to hear that things are so harmonious on the home front. So much better for a man, isn't it? A good wife is always such a stabilising influence, I think."

"Then in that case," the annoyance loud in the snapping, crackling tone of voice, Cambridge smoothness overlying white water rapids, "it's remarkable that you yourself have never married, George."

"And when would I have time to get myself to the Church, eh, David? It takes time to court the ladies, and anyway, it was you yourself who said it when you stood me for membership in the Firm—"

Oh, it was a real pleasure when so civil a barb struck so deeply, David Stratford-Johns in no position to threaten George Cowley with exposure, not when the Minister had been so instrumental in ushering him in. Mud, when flung by Fleet Street, had a tendency to stick.

Cowley was continuing, speaking as if he hadn't noticed the taut expression on his Minister's face, "—I'm married to the job. Dedication, and all that."

"Yes. Quite." A filthy look that should have been stamped out in prep school, and then the curtain of politeness was once more drawn. "And

speaking of the job, we both of us have a considerable amount of work to do tomorrow, haven't we?"

"Oh, yes, you're meeting with the PM, aren't you, and with one or two other personages?"

"Yes. And I had rather hoped to go into the meetings with some good news."

"The news will be good—from your point of view. I hardly think the clientèle of a massage parlour is any of *CI5's* business, do you?" Which, while it wouldn't necessarily protect a certain father-in-law, the Minister could say that he'd persuaded George Cowley to be reasonable in this matter, and that one slight emphasis would keep George Cowley's and *CI5's* consciences clear: the department wouldn't poke its nose into this minor domestic matter, but a quick wee phone call to Jackson over at Special Branch...

Or better yet: set Stuart on them, and then file the information away until such time as it would do the most good... He smiled once again, setting his mind to the task of smoothing the Minister's ruffled feathers, plastering over all the cracks until it seemed that the Old Boy's Network had held once more, which it had, but this time, to Cowley's advantage.

When he opened the door to his house, the heat hit him, inviting him in, putting him in mind of coming home from school or the football, his Maw waiting for him in the scullery, floral pinny nowhere near up to the task of covering her great water-wing breasts and doughty arms. Course, back then it was a coal fire that heated them up, all crackling and popping, the flames burning orange and red, blue and yellow, even an occasional lick of green. Now, all he had was the sterility of underfloor central heating, discreet brass grates blowing almost as much hot air as the Minister. Clean, modern heat, in a clean, modern house, with quiet, mature neighbours who would nod a hello if he passed them going in to their tidy, sere little houses.

He absolutely refused to feel lonely: after all, look where it had led him last time. Anyway, he reassured himself, taking a bottle and a glass from the sideboard, putting his briefcase on the table, it wasn't loneliness that was wrong with him, just a lesser, baser need. He hadn't gone near a single one of the safer sources since the last time, when Bodie had caught him. Hadn't dared, not until he'd made the usual discreet enquiries to find out who knew what about him, who knew enough to land him in

it. He was still safe, his squirrelled stock of secrets better than anything anyone else had on him. Case in point: the way the Minister had caved in tonight without a bit of fuss. Oh, aye, the scales were definitely still tipped in his favour.

The level in his glass went down slowly, rising again rapidly as he poured more good whisky in to wash away the taste of the bad port. He should have been warm, but winter clung to him.

"Getting auld," he said aloud, needing to hear a human voice, his father's photograph looking down at him, the expression of half a century ago trapped on the paper. The Peoples' Palace back home was going to get all these photographs when he died, all these mementos from an era as dead as the people who had lived it. His own photographs, what few they were, would go to his sister, if she were still alive. The rest of it, too bulky to be traipsed all the way up to her new house in Gallo-way, would be sold, and the money transferred up to her using the magic of modern technology. But the things from the past couldn't be updated, couldn't be made convenient, so they'd be shoved somewhere, or thrown out, or sold to rich Americans who had the luxury of not having lived their roots, only read about them.

There'd be precious few who'd miss him when he was gone, and many's the one who would be quietly delighted to see him six feet under. Not much of a legacy for a man's life, was it? His department, his medals gathering dust in the desk's bottom drawer, the letters of recommendation filed neatly away: none of it was much of a comfort, sitting there in the too-warm room, surrounded by the chill of his loneliness.

But when had George Cowley ever given in to misery? Steadily, he put the bottle away, allowing himself only the one more glass that sat, fat and filled with the best money could buy, his one form of comfort alongside his only real refuge. He didn't sigh, for men like George Cowley never do, and reached for his portable office, the briefcase full of folders.

The clock had struck the hour more than once and pages lay across the richly polished mahogany of his coffee table, glossy photographs capturing the occasional glint of colour from the pseudo-coal fire burning in the blocked-off grate. Notes, written in a precise, strong hand, the words very black against the white paper, comments made, plans of action dictated, everything going with its custom-

ary smoothness until his shaking of the briefcase insisted that no, he really hadn't remembered to bring the Simcox file home, would have to drag someone out here with the damned folder.

Of course, that brought it all crashing down on him: the loneliness that had been worming through his bones, the sexual hunger that no amount of work could bury any more, Bodie standing there *knowing* a truth about him and worst, worst, of all: Bodie, a model of decorum who still managed, somehow, to flirt with him, to smile at him just so, to share the right—or wrong—sort of private joke.

No, he thought, staring at the fire, peripherally aware of the weight of his father's disapproval down the long march of years, the worst thing of all isn't the way Bodie's been.

It was the way he himself was starving for it.

Oh, aye, worst of the worst was himself, and his hunger, and the voraciousness of his desire, and the devouring of his stare. Night-times spent in a bed that had always been solitary and was now peopled with Bodie's flesh, Bodie's differing incarnations. Experience and dreaming sparking off each other, his loneliness the flint, his lust the tinder, and his pride the ashes afterwards.

There were times he allowed himself the tormenting luxury of having Bodie's lust match his own, Bodie willing in his bed, even Bodie content to be at his side, unreal times that were always in the safe hours of the early morning when Bodie was well out of reach, or in the unpredictable hours when Bodie was off working with Doyle, not a penny to choose between them.

And with the pair of them lying gassed on that road, he'd known that he could, and would, and had chosen between them. Dangerous that, a well-honed sword of Damocles hanging over his head, and another swinging between his legs as his desire thrived against all will and common sense.

Perhaps, he thought, tapping the Hunterston file that would be a lot more useful with the Simcox file to compare it to, if he were to have Bodie, know him in the Biblical sense, get him out of his system, reduce Bodie to nothing more than a body he'd once buggered...

Then he ran bang smack into one of his own rules: non-fraternisation.

But then again, wasn't he the one who always said only the good rules were the ones that couldn't be broken?

And Bodie had proved himself to be discreet,

and controlled, and bloody good at throwing even their own lot completely off the trail.

Had offered to discard his own career to help protect his boss'. Loyal, then, and to a fault, but one which Cowley could depend on.

As for the Biblical side of things: he'd been arguing that forever and ayeways would, until the Last Trump anyway. There were no answers there, only the hopes his own interpretations fed him, and only the dogged belief that God would never have done so wicked a thing to him as to make him need a sin to survive.

Bodie, of course, with his own hell-bent philosophy, with his own set of morals, he would have no trouble with any of this at all: so fierce it was a physical pain, George Cowley envied him that, would have cheerfully discarded a lifetime's values. Always supposing he could. Not discard then, but...misplace, perhaps. Lose, temporarily, the way he had to for an Operation Susie or one or two particularly nasty situations during the War. Put his morals and his objections somewhere safe, and not find them again until morning...

The last drop of his whisky slid slowly down his throat, and when he set the glass down, the decision had been made. Not for better or for worse, nothing either so optimistic or so permanent: this would be for the worst, for both of them, and his intellect and his pride shrieked at him in his father's voice, and still, he couldn't change his decision.

Wanted to walk away from this, to ignore this lust, subsume it in his work; wanted to wait until this infatuation—for aye, that's what it was, and the shame in him was a terrible thing—was no more relevant than the glowing handsomeness of Sandy MacIlvain in Third Year.

And the wanting was useless, a feeble runt of a thing routed by the consuming, festering need he harboured deep in his bones.

Bodie.

Unable to contain himself, he jumped to his feet, the spasm in his knee reminding him of how old and raddled he was, how far from the desire of youths he was and how pathetic his desire for youth was. There were no two ways about it: Bodie was too young for him and he too old for Bodie.

But he wanted him, oh, how he craved him like an addict begging for his fix. No better than a junkie in the street or hanging about the stench of public toilets, willing to do anything for his fix.

And he was, willing to break his own good rules, willing to risk his career, willing, even, to make a fool of himself.

He could imagine it, had seen it in his mind too many times, had seen it other peoples' lives: the agèd queen, simpering after the handsomeness of youth. And youth, laughing.

Not that Bodie had been laughing any of the many times they'd seen each other since. Fretting a bit, aye, there was that, enough that Doyle had given Bodie one or two worried looks of his own, although not enough for anyone else to have noticed. Good at keeping his own counsel, was Bodie, poker-faced to those who didn't know him, and the few that did know him were still kept at a distance, for all that worthy's bantering jokes.

But even if he could trust Bodie's discretion, and set aside his own policies about non-fraternisation, even if he could test just how absolute Bodie's loyalty was—was any of that even a drop in the ocean compared to his lust for having Bodie, a lust both perverted and perverting, turning everything it touched into the funfair-mirror image he wanted to see?

And you could sit here swithering all night the way you have about what to do with Bodie in the first place, and then where will we be? he thought dourly to himself. It was ridiculous, him so indecisive, when he'd built a career out of his ability to make good decisions and instant choices.

More information, perhaps that honestly was what he needed. Test Bodie out a bit, see the lie of the land, do a recce to find out whether or not Bodie could be trusted on this one thing that Cowley couldn't trust himself on.

Aye, well, it was as good an excuse as any, and better than the many he'd come up with before.

Glasses dangling from his left hand, his right hand reached out, and he watched it, as if to pretend that he had nothing to do with this, that this was just some impulse of his body and not what, in cold reality, it was.

Procedures had been gratifyingly tightened, crisp questions and dry answers, and then Murphy was on the phone again, sounding bored and therefore tired. The minor details that had cropped up since Cowley'd left for his dinner with the Minister were quickly mowed out of the way, and then, again as if this were no more than mere impulse, as if this were something he hadn't really thought about, something that he could evince

some small surprise at, he was saying: "I've left the Simcox file there, and I need to go through it tonight."

Of course Murphy didn't show any surprise: he had no idea the Simcox file was a minor document to clarify a point in something else.

"Who's going off stand-by just now?" Cowley asked, as if he didn't know—another of those little surprises, no doubt.

"That's Bodie and Doyle. D'you want me to send them over—"

God, no! One was hard enough to deal with, and if he were going to give in to this impulse, then Doyle would be an embarrassment of riches.

"No. No, there's no point in paying the pair of them overtime for a simple message. Send Bodie—he deserves to be kept late after the cheek he gave me this morning."

"Yes, sir, I'll send him—running all the way."

"Probably be safer than letting him behind the wheel of a car. Just make sure he doesn't forget that file."

The receiver fumbled from his hand, hitting hard enough that there was a tiny ping from the phone: with what he had in mind, with what he'd just done, there should have been a major alarm bell going off. Methodically, he tidied the papers up, checked the various alarms and then, with the monitor he kept at home these days—another impulse that didn't bear close examining—he did a quick and thorough sweep of the whole house, checking the bedroom twice, resolutely refusing to consider the sordid details of this 'impulse' of his.

Satisfied, about the lack of bugging devices at any rate, he stowed the monitor away and went back downstairs, seating himself to belie his agitation. He would not pace, would not let himself get worked up: would sit here, patiently waiting for Bodie to turn up on his doorstep, as the other man had once before.

Of course, he could still his body, make invisible the tension, but as it always seemed to be these days, his mind was on an endless treadmill called Bodie. Speculation, doubt, hope, fear—lust. All of it, and a million more moods besides, spinning around and around in his head. He could do with a drink, or better yet, a whole bottle, but though alcohol was a lovely excuse, he actually needed to stay sober, to keep full control under the appearance of abandonment. He went to the sideboard, took a horribly small sip of malt, swirling it round

and round before he swallowed; took a small dab from the mouth of the bottle and dabbed it on his neck and collar like eau de Glasgow, just enough to smell as though he had a fair few glasses under his belt, more than his usual evening tippie. Enough to convince Bodie that he had been drinking heavily and was, therefore, vulnerable.

Quickly, he put the bottle away before he could give in to the terrible drouth that had come over him. Walked, dignified, back to his chair, still wishing he could get plastered, but no longer so young that he could drink and still be in any condition to act on this ever-more carefully planned impulse.

Up the stairs again, this time to arrange, within easy reach, a few odds and ends that he hoped they would need before too long. Mocking himself as he put clean sheets on the bed, tucking the corners in with tight military precision. Next, the curtains were pulled firmly shut, overlapping to ensure complete privacy—best to do the same with the bathroom window, no need to take the chance of anyone happening to see compromising silhouettes through the frosted glass. The stair window was fine, overlooking the back court and the blank wall of the building behind. Back to the living room then, to check the last details there.

But of course, he was supposed to be pretending that this was all a test of Bodie, that this was all to see if Bodie could be trusted to stay in the Department and that the sexual aspect was nothing but a necessary evil, the ends justifying the means.

He laughed at that one: keep the excuses for the morning, when you'll need them, he advised himself, shoving his hand in his pocket so that he wouldn't touch himself where polite men shouldn't when fully clothed in their own living room. He gave the clock on the mantelpiece a filthy look, wishing that will alone could make time flow faster.

Eventually, a good twenty minutes late by estimates far more conservative than George Cowley's, the bell went, hopefully heralding Bodie. Or perhaps, Cowley's cold feet thought for him, hopefully heralding the resistible Doyle or Murphy, Bodie safely on his way to someone else's bed, someone who had the right and the freedom to be thinking about sex with handsome men. He did not, at that moment, want to remember that he was Bodie's boss, but the remembering was unavoidable, the door opening on a smartly dressed Bodie,

files under his arms like the civil servant he occasionally pretended to be.

It would be wise to simply reach out, take the files and shut the door on temptation, but wisdom was beyond him at that point, and common sense was making itself scarce. "Come away in," he heard himself saying, wincing at the thickness of his accent and the hoarseness of his voice, noticing Bodie noticing, watching the reaction to his own too obvious lack of unconcern. In the living room, Bodie yet to say a word, standing there impassively, every letter of body language giving all the decisions to Cowley to make of them what he would.

"Ach, don't just stand there—you're making the place look untidy. Sit yourself down." Inches behind Bodie, hands itching to touch the forbidden flesh, his own flesh rising to reach that which he refused to permit his hands.

"Thanks," Bodie said, and they were both aware of how he had not said sir, had not questioned why his boss was inviting him in at nearly midnight when all he'd done was bring a file over.

"You'll have had your supper," Cowley was saying, not out of inhospitality, but out of haste, out of the fear of turning this into too mundane an encounter, too much like too many other, genuinely innocent, visits from various agents over a multitude of years. "D'you fancy a drink?"

Bodie looked at him, and while his mouth said the polite and proper things, his expression was far more speaking, making blatant statements of what, precisely, he fancied.

The pleasure of that kicked Cowley in the balls, and he couldn't decide if he should leap on Bodie and fuck him where he sat, or if he should bend over double, clutching his vitals and crawl off somewhere to die on his own in dignity. What he actually did, of course, was to smile distantly, coolly, and politely enquire: "Would you prefer a beer or—" no, he wouldn't ask Bodie if he wanted anything 'Scotch', it was never safe to give a man like Bodie even an inch of rope, "whisky? Or there's gin, vodka, rum—"

"Rum, please," Bodie replied blandly enough, his next words insinuating their point between Cowley's ribs. "Rum's one of the things I acquired a taste for when I joined the Merchant Navy."

And what was it Churchill had said? Don't speak to me about Naval tradition, it's all rum, sodomy and the lash.

Oh, Bodie, he thought, hand betraying the slightest tremble as he poured the dark rum, don't tempt me too much...

They were seated then, the coffee table playing no man's land between them, the files in neat little squares marking off the distance between them, Bodie sitting tidily contained in the big winged armchair, the dark glass of rum cupped in large, capable hands that threatened death and destruction and promised sensual delight the likes of which Cowley just might regret sampling. Perhaps, George Cowley thought with something akin to self-satirising amusement, another wee dram would be just the ticket, for his hands were threatening worse than anything Bodie's could come up with, the trembling in them too great a betrayal.

As loudly as if he'd been home on his own, the clock wheezed and gasped on the mantelpiece, and the fire, almost a museum piece itself these days, kept up that faint hiss which was so readily drowned out by the smallest of other noises. There—the faint shuss of fabric on fabric as Bodie crossed his legs, the slight click of his shoe against the edge of the coffee table. Time, then, well past time, for Cowley to say something, the right word to get this rite under way, to begin this thing he was so determinedly calling an impulse. But his mind blanked on him, or rather, it filled with all the right words for the right occasion, but this was the wrong occasion, and those words would be disaster here, in the supposed comfort of his own living room. He looked at Bodie, for all the world as if he'd never seen the other man before, and saw himself in Bodie's eyes, in that seriously set mouth. Such a beautiful mouth, so wide, so generous—so able to swallow a man into dark, wet heat—

Refusing to blush or flinch, Cowley wrenched his gaze back under control, eyes going to the files and folders on the table, the innocuous manilla envelope Bodie had brought lying there untouched. Easy enough to open that, take the pages out and let this slip, safely, so safely, into the banality of the job. It would all be a lie, of course, he and Bodie sitting here calmly discussing the finer, nearly unimportant points of some case, with all the other major knowledge massed between them. They both knew, and this sitting here pretending was making him look like a fool. Say something, take command, put Bodie in his place, let him know who's boss and who holds the upper hand...

But before he could so much as breathe, Bodie

was moving, jacket slung across the seat of his chair, his normally silent tread crashingly loud after so much muteness. Coming closer, incredibly tall in this small room, towering over Cowley still seated in the low chair. Stopping, face steadfast and serious, a footstep away from Cowley. Looking at him, calmly, one quirked eyebrow asking the question that words failed.

"Aye," George Cowley said, permitting himself that sigh, "aye..."

And then Bodie was on his knees, and his hands were on Cowley, and then the air was on Cowley, bared, naked, there, his most private of parts exposed to view, taken out and cupped, cradled and caressed, Bodie's hands cool against his heat, and then Bodie's mouth, oh, so wonderful, strong tongue and strong hands, mingling, harmonising, playing Cowley to perfection. That mouth sucking him in, the throat swallowing him down, all that strength consuming him, and his own hands were in Bodie's hair, the softness addictive but softer still was his skin, there, behind one small ear, and there, at the temple, where the vein pulsed with Bodie worshipping Cowley's cock.

There was noise in the room now, a surfeit of sound, a humiliation to be borne later, when memory and sense and shame returned: wet, sucking sounds, the lapping of tongue, the swallowing gulps, the deliberate gag that was such heaven along the length of trapped cock. And over it all, drowning in it, drowning everything else out, was Cowley's voice, hoarse, aching, half-words spilling from him before he could complete a thought, all of him concentrating on the numbing pleasure of release, months of frustration and subsumation erupting into Bodie's throat, not a drop escaping, Bodie's mouth cradling him, soft, soothing strokes of his tongue bringing out the last drop of need, comforting him until his breath and his mind had returned to him, and his cock was small and soft and wet.

Lying back in the chair, the white sleeve of his shirt pressed over the flushed redness of his face, Cowley reached down to fumble, one-handed and clumsy in the aftermath, to tuck himself away. His fingers found himself, wet and sticky, and he wanted to die: to have given himself up like that, and to have orgasmed so quickly, desperate as a boy with his first two quid whore...

But then his fingers were gently dusted aside and Bodie was tidying him, his own hand free to

brush against Bodie's mouth and the skin beside it, and touching, to register how smooth that skin was—and why did it frighten him so that he was moved because Bodie had shaved for him? No beard-burn to betray him, and comfort for skin that was notoriously sensitive, oh, sweet, flattering that Bodie should have thought enough to do that for him—and the tension underlying the skin, muscles too tight in the jaw that his fingers followed. Not the near cramp from sucking too long—he'd been too quick off the mark for that, but he didn't want to think about that, not when Bodie was still here to see his wounded pride—but the tension...

Bodie moved away before Cowley could finish the thought, and slowly, he moved his arm to see if his ears were betraying him. No, he'd heard right: Bodie had stood, was walking stiffly away, keeping his back to his boss as he picked up the discarded jacket, dismissing what he'd done as a trifle. "D'you need me to drop anything off at HQ for you on my way home?" he asked, and precious few would have recognised the strain in his voice.

"No, I'll bring everything in with me in the morning." Surely Bodie wasn't doing what he seemed to be doing...

"Well, I'll see you at work tomorrow then," Bodie said with apparent ease and cheerfulness, as if he hadn't just performed an act of fellatio on his boss, as if he hadn't just completely changed the relationship between them.

But that, precisely, was what he was doing, and George Cowley should have been grateful, but for all his cock had had its fill for the moment, he was still emptied by an unnameable hunger, and over that lay his anger, fuelled by humiliation. To have had Bodie do that to him, to have made sic a fool of himself, and for Bodie to just stand up and walk out as if it was nothing—

"Thanks for the drink, sir," Bodie, at his most polite, at his most distant, unsmiling.

Walking past, leaving, and then Cowley saw, and reached out before his brain could stop him. His hand, so pale, palmed the blackness of Bodie's trousers, and felt the acute erection, felt the balm for his pride.

"Go out like that, and you'll be arrested."

"You won't suck me off," Bodie said flatly, shifting uneasily, moving away enough that Cowley had to reach out and pull him closer, the firmness of buttock lush beneath his hand.

He neither confirmed nor denied the statement,

his own opinion on the matter divided. "Upstairs," he ordered, slapping Bodie sharply on his rump, more gratified than he should be by the way Bodie's face lit up and his cock leaped under Cowley's hand. "Go on," he said with a valedictory squeeze of Bodie's cock, "get on with you. I'll be up in a minute."

Cold, wet weather like this, he could never depend on his knee, and after having come like a teenager, he didn't want to be seen struggling like an old man to get out of his chair. The leather was slick where the sweat of his palm touched it, and cold after the heat of being with Bodie. Listening to the sounds of footsteps climbing the stairs, and then movement overhead, doors opening and closing, the rattle of the piping, the flush of the toilet, his mind providing the images to go with the sounds, all the way to Bodie crossing the hall, entering his bedroom and the absence of sound as he got into the bed: when the noise stopped, Cowley had finished bolting the door and turning off the fire, the heating off for the night, and enough lights left on to make it look like he and Bodie were still up working, should some awkward draught open a chink in the curtains. The radio, too, was switched on, the low murmur of voices indistinct, enough camouflage to pass casual muster. Everything, then, as it should be, and finally, he was on the first step on his way upstairs.

The upstairs hall light was on as he had left it from coming home, but the bedroom light was out, not even the bedside lamp switched on. Oh, aye, his Bodie was discreet and cautious, and it was a measure of Cowley's own state that he didn't even pay attention that he was calling Bodie his.

Light poured from the hall into the bedroom, along the wall where his chest of drawers and wardrobe hulked, only the bottom left corner of the bed catching any of the light. Pulling the door almost completely shut behind him, shutting them in here together, Cowley stripped slowly, folding his clothes and putting them, almost entirely by touch, on the chair. In the dark, the bed was a whitish blur with a ghostly figure on it and he was staring at it, trying to make it come clearer. Closer, eyes adjusting to the near dark, and he could see where Bodie had folded all the bedclothes neatly at the foot of the bed, and could see, now, Bodie lying face down, arms folded under the pillow where his face was pressed, his legs spread, hips undulating as he rubbed himself against the

smooth, crisp sheets.

Better than any commercial pornography, better than anything he'd ever seen in magazines or films brought over from Holland or California, because this was no primped and bleached beauty, this was a strong man, a dangerous man, making himself vulnerable and available for his pleasure, to be used as Cowley saw fit. Bodie must have been able to hear him breathing, might even, Cowley thought, rediscovering something of his sense of humour along with his pride, be able to hear the thudding of his heart. Could certainly hear his footsteps, with that tell-tale hitch to mark his limp. Unhappily, he touched the scars on his thigh and remapped the ridge and the hollow that were so unnatural and made him squirm as his body remembered what his mind had so desperately forgotten. All his mind remembered was waking in a hospital with disembodied voices threatening him with permanent disembodiment, leg cut off, crippled, maimed...

But they hadn't, and he wasn't, and Bodie was making low, subtle noises that shivered through the air to land, exciting and arousing, on Cowley's skin. He could see Bodie now, but still as if in soft focus, all the details there, but blurred as if to take the sting. Kneeling now, the bed dipping beneath him as he positioned himself between Bodie's legs, Bodie's own scars were visible. A knife wound, one that Cowley had seen when it was still bleeding. The pock marks of a shotgun wound, never explained, never alluded to. The mark of a burn on his left buttock, from an incident only those with access to SAS files would ever know about. And there, on his shoulder, the deep mark of a machete. Leaning forward, using the arcing strength of Bodie's back to brace himself, with the breath hissing from Bodie as his excitement rose, Cowley fitted his tongue to the scar, eyes shut tight, as he laved that scar, kissing it and caressing it, taking the sting of ugliness out of it with all the tenderness of a man who knows himself to be scarred.

Under him, Bodie was in a tumult, obscenities pouring from him like sweat, and Cowley pressed him down, eased and incited him by pushing a finger, hard and stabbing, into Bodie's arse. Rotated that finger, moved it in and out to the sounds of Bodie's filthy words and helpless gasps. Withdrew it, Bodie's arse pushing upwards, the empty flesh blindly seeking. A bit of gel from the tube, and then he could sit back on his haunches and watch two of

his fingers disappear inside Bodie, his other hand pulling slowly, carefully, on his own cock, the sheer excitement of being with Bodie enough to convince his body that it was young again.

"Oh, please," Bodie was saying, over and over and over again, "oh please..."

"Please what?"

"Fuck me. Stick it in, go on, oh, please, shove your cock up me, let me have it in me..."

Cowley swallowed hard, mouth gone dry with lust. "Over with you, come on, come on, onto your back," and Bodie was trying to move, uncoordinated by his needs and his attempts to keep Cowley's fingers inside him. "Come on, laddie, let me see you..." And was greeted by a beaming smile and softened eyes and hardened cock, Bodie's nipples small peaks in the smoothness of his chest, hard little nubs of colour in the pale expanse of skin. Unable to keep quiet, Cowley groaned as he leaned over Bodie and took his left nipple into his mouth, licking and sucking and biting it, Bodie's cock digging into his belly, Bodie's hand rooting around clumsily until it found Cowley's cock and then fastening onto it like a baby at a teat. He was growing hard again, and he curled round a bit so that Bodie could reach him better while he engorged himself on exploring Bodie's body. It was glorious, as perfect as Michelangelo's David but far more responsive, the skin shivering under his tongue, Bodie's cock rubbing against whichever bits of Cowley it could reach.

With an intensity that might yet frighten him, Cowley made his way down Bodie's torso, following the alluring scent of musk rising in heated waves. His tongue touched hair, dabbled in it, felt Bodie's hands in his hair, and then, a moment of shock, utter stillness, when the very tip of his tongue brushed against the head of Bodie's cock.

"No..." Bodie moaned, either in denial that Cowley would actually be so generous as to do this, or in begging, pleading that Cowley not stop, should go on, take him inside...

He hadn't done anything like this for years, not since he'd climbed far enough up the ladder of success. But for once, he wanted this more than he cared about any balance of any power, or any position apart from the purely sexual. Only the tip, with its flaring flange and richness of foreskin coiled beneath, the prickle of pubic hair on his chin, the delicacy of testicles balanced on his fingers.

And Bodie, moaning and crying out, stomach muscles spasming as he fought off the urge to thrust, Bodie completely in his thrall.

His own cock was hard again, the thick vein swollen, tangible under the pad of his thumb, and he was consumed by curiosity about Bodie, exploring his hard cock, his tongue tracing every tiny feature until he knew it perfectly and until Bodie was almost sobbing.

"I'm gonna come," Bodie whispered, hoarse. "I'm gonna—"

"No," hissed fiercely, a strategic pinch staving off orgasm, the edge of pain enough to bring Bodie back from the edge. "Not without me in you, you're not. D'ye hear me, laddie? You'll not come until I'm up you, until I've got you spitted on me."

"Oh, god, yes, just hurry, for fuck's sake, hurry—"

He didn't intend to, of course, but seeing Bodie like that, seeing the nearly painful need in him, Cowley couldn't drag it out the way he had intended. Next time, he promised himself, next time I'll make him wait until he screams for it. But for now, he raised Bodie's legs, draping them over his own shoulders, Bodie's arse open and wide, the small dark hole waiting to devour him whole.

"What is you want?" he demanded, the crown of his cock dimpling Bodie's arse.

"You," and Bodie's eyes were devastatingly clear and horribly honest. "I want you to fuck me. I want you to shove your cock in me, ram it all the way in, fuck me so hard you'll come in my mouth."

Cowley pressed in, sliding in slowly, so slowly, Bodie's mouth opening as his arse did, a silent scream of pleasure smothered by a hand across his mouth. Hungry as Bodie was, experienced as he was, Cowley was in him to the hilt, his balls snug against Bodie's arse, his belly flat against Bodie's cock. Every time he thrust in, Bodie's cock scraped against him, and every time he withdrew, Bodie pushed upwards, trying to pull him back inside, the two of them shifting until Bodie's arms and legs were wrapped around him, Bodie taking his weight and his cock and his passion, an endless stream of meaningless murmurings pouring from Bodie's mouth, almost-words that Cowley could not believe in.

Harder now, and faster, both of them sweating, their bodies ever slicker, and moving together, and it was better than it had been for years, this unison, this sensation of a union that far surpassed the

merely sexual. Inundating him were the same fractured words just on the edge of comprehension, words that could make a man believe himself wonderful. Freeing one hand, he grabbed Bodie by the jaw, turning the sweat-beaded visage to face him.

"Look at me," he demanded.

Bodie's eyes stayed shut, his hair dampened by sweat as his head tossed restlessly on the pillow.

"Look at me!" Almost shouted, the tone of command that was never ignored. "Let me look at you."

"No, don't. Just fuck me, look," and Bodie grabbed Cowley's lean flanks and pulled him in suddenly, shocking them with the depth of penetration, "oh, yesss, like that, come on, fuck me—"

Deliberately, cruelly, Cowley withdrew, only the head of his cock inside Bodie to emphasise the emptiness of where he had so recently been filled.

"Look at me."

Nothing.

"If you want my cock back up your arse," and the obscenities shuddered through Bodie as he had known they would, "if you want me to fuck you up the bum, then you look at me, laddie, you look at me *now*."

With palpable reluctance, Bodie opened his eyes, and looked, until George Cowley closed his eyes in misery and looked away.

Aye, well, he had wanted to know that Bodie was thinking about him as he was being fucked, had wanted to know that Bodie was doing this because he wanted *him*.

Had not, oh, definitely not, wanted to see into Bodie's very soul.

"Fuck me!" Bodie whispered fiercely, surging upwards, impaling himself on the thick heat and hardness of Cowley's cock. "Come on, fuck me!"

No matter how willing the spirit, the flesh in this case was far too strong, and Cowley felt himself drawn back inside Bodie, back into the darkness and the wetness and the heat. Fucked him, hard, shoving home harder every time Bodie demanded it, fucked them both senseless so that they wouldn't remember what Bodie's eyes had said. He couldn't get deep enough inside Bodie, couldn't thrust hard enough, reaching, reaching for that pinnacle of perfection that would let him dissolve, and then he looked down at the wildness pinned beneath him, saw the anguish on that face, found it and echoed it and matched it, tentatively at first, the scarcest

touch of lips to Bodie's, and then the desperation overtook them both, and his tongue was inside Bodie's mouth, and Bodie was wrapped around him, and his cock was deep inside Bodie's body. Bodie was suddenly in counter-rhythm to him, belly shuddering and cock jumping, semen splurting from him to splash, hot, potent, against Cowley's belly and tangling in the light hair on his chest. He waited a moment, and another, keeping his cock deep inside Bodie as the muscles contracted round him in glorious passion, and then he was moving again, slower at first, then faster, fucking Bodie hard while his face was covered in kisses and his tongue sucked back inside Bodie, arms and legs wrapped all around him, Bodie keeping him safe as he orgasmed, body spasming, utter pleasure suspended in a moment of stillness, his seed spilling from his body to fill Bodie's, the passage suddenly slicker, Bodie's grip on him tighter, the desperately affectionate words flooding them both with another, more devastating potency.

Gradually, they disentangled themselves, neither one meeting the other's eyes, neither one of them quite touching the other beyond the necessary. Bodie, with an uncharacteristic diffidence, disappearing off into the bathroom, returning with a warmly damp face-cloth, and Cowley watched, bemused, as Bodie bathed him, his eyes downcast and face turned aside.

"Bodie," Cowley said, needing Bodie to reveal those expressive eyes to him.

"Yeh?"

"Why won't you look at me?"

Oh, aye, his Bodie was braver than any one man ought to be. "Once was bad enough, wasn't it?"

"And are you going to be spending the rest of your life not looking at me?"

Bodie did look at him then, the sudden startlement, the quickly strangled hope making Cowley hear what he'd just said through Bodie's ears.

"Sorry," he said, not sure whether or not he meant it, but honestly regretting the swiftly hidden pain he had seen.

"S all right," Bodie shrugged, pulling the covers up, all but tucking Cowley in, the matter-of-factness of his movements doing very little to hide their tenderness. "Not something either one of us asked for, is it? And it'll pass, these things always do."

They did indeed, if poisoned or only left

unnurtured. "It's early yet," Cowley said, making a liar out of the alarm clock and obviously making Bodie think he was referring not to the time at all. He went on abruptly, to stop the clothes from being re-donned and to clear the cloud from Bodie's face. "Aye, for that an' all, but I meant it's early yet for you to be leaving."

Bodie, to his credit, displayed none of his pleasure, simply climbing in beside Cowley before the Scotsman could change his mind as his rapidly awakening sense told him he ought.

Time passed, as did Bodie, slowly edging his way closer, Cowley content enough to permit it, waiting with apparent passivity to see how far Bodie would go, how far the younger man would push. As far, it seemed, as lying on his stomach with one arm casually draped across Cowley's middle. Absurd though he thought himself to be, George Cowley was deeply pleased that he'd never allowed himself to run to fat, that he was still not, entirely, physically past it.

He should, he supposed, be checking Bodie out, giving himself some pretence to hang onto when tonight was part of the past and he had to face himself in the mirror—and Bodie in the office, either on the job or to fire him. Should be such an easy decision to make, there should be no doubts, there should be straightforward, clear procedure to follow in a straightforward and clear manner. But instead, all he could think of was the taste of Bodie in his mouth, and how he hadn't had long enough to discover it, couldn't quite remember it even now, and how he wanted to taste Bodie again...

"Why did you come here tonight?" he asked into the darkness.

"Could always claim it was because Murph told me you'd said to send me over with that file."

"But the truth is..."

There was a ragged intake of breath and Bodie's arm tightened on him for a moment, so that he had to resist an unnervingly strong urge to pull the other man closer, hold him and kiss it all better.

"I haven't done blokes much since I came back from Africa, what with the Paras and the SAS and all, but once I was in CI5, the old urges came back."

"And so you started going with men—"

"Not straight off," said quickly, reassuringly. "Fact is, the night you saw me in that ruddy pub was the first time I'd ventured out."

Oh, Bodie, he thought sadly, why d'you have to go and start lying to me now? He had sunk so

easily into Bodie's flesh, and with hardly any preparation to ease his way, and George Cowley had cause to know how quickly a man's arse tightened when he was no longer being fucked.

"That a fact?" Supposedly mild, but with a sting to it.

"Yeh. Been making do with a couple of video nasties I managed to pick up. Them, and my right hand and..."

The hesitation, no doubt the truth would come up: apart from my right hand and Doyle, and half the other men in London...

"Don't lie to me, laddie. Don't you dare lie to me."

"Wasn't going to!" The surprise actually sounded genuine. "Was just, well, it's a bit embarrassing, admitting you've been so desperate you've taken to shoving a dildo up your bum. Why—is it important to you that I've not been done before? Cause if it is..."

"No, no, I like a bit of experience."

"But you thought I was lying cause it went in a bit too easy."

"Yes," said drily, this not the sort of conversation he was either used to or comfortable with having.

"Christ, what kind of an idiot d'you take me for? If I lied to you about that, you'd find out and have my guts for garters, wouldn't you?"

"An' what else d'you expect?"

"Nothing." A heaving upwards, Bodie's shoulders gleaming palely. "I mean that, you know I do. I'm not expecting anything. And you don't have to ask or threaten or anything else. I'm not going to say anything and seeing as how I saw you at the pub, you've got a bloody cheek thinking I would."

"Did you believe me that night?" Cowley asked, surprising himself at his own lack of subtlety and sophistication. "About why I was there?"

"Wasn't sure." A very tentative hand, drawing pictures in the few hairs on his chest, one pinky too briefly touching a nipple. "Didn't think you were lying, but you're a devious old bastard."

"Aye, I am, which brings us to another question," he said levelly, wishing that finger would come back to his nipple and bring all its friends to join in the fun. "I'm an old bastard, and you're a handsome young bugger. So what brought you here?"

A wicked grin, visible in the near dark. "Could

always say it's because I'm such a bugger, couldn't I?"

If he were going to be hung, he might as well let them lynch him for a sheep than for a lamb.

Cowley took Bodie's hand in his own, bringing it back to his nipple, tacitly giving Bodie permission to be bolder, although he did suspect that give Bodie an inch and he'd take several miles in this as he did in everything else. Ach, well, there were worse things in life, many of which he'd have to face the second he walked into his office in the morning. He sighed as Bodie's clever fingers caressed him, getting to know his body and what it responded to. It had been a long, long time since he'd allowed anyone to do that, a very long time.

"So anyway, as I was saying," Bodie murmured, moving closer until Cowley could feel Bodie's breath tickle over his chest, "I'd been getting to the point where if I didn't have a bloke soon, I was going to burst. Bit messy that, didn't think you'd approve."

"Mmphmm," he mumbled, right hand pressing Bodie's head more firmly against his chest, Bodie's tongue suddenly wet and hot, flickering against his nipple.

"Christ, but you do love that, don't you?"

"I'll thank you not to blaspheme in my bed, laddie!" he snapped sharply before the true absurdity of it hit him and the laughter bubbled up out of him. "Och, don't look at me so," he hiccupped between the gales of humour, "I've not taken leave of my senses." He sobered a little, stroked his hand across the smooth dark hair, stared down into very warm blue eyes. "But I might have taken leave of a few of what you lot nowadays call hang-ups." And in my day, what we called morals. But Bodie had a balm for that as well, hiding his face against Cowley's chest, nuzzling sweetly at him.

The heavy pulse in his groin was unexpected, but Bodie fed it and fed on it, his hand covering Cowley's cock, warming it, beginning to stroke it again. "Been a while?" came the sympathetic murmur from somewhere near his left oxtter where Bodie was kissing and licking him now.

"Something like that," Cowley managed, breath taken away by the wash of sensual delight coming over him from the laving tongue and caressing hand. He wouldn't be up to another performance, not for hours at least, but the sensuality of it was wonderful, and deeply satisfying, at least in part because he could feel the effect all this was having

on Bodie. He reached out himself, taking the weight of Bodie's tumescent cock in his hand, enjoying the simple joy of giving another man pleasure.

It took a long time, a time of caressings and kissings, of Cowley's bemusement that he, of all people, should be lying here in a bed like a tip, indulging himself in total carnality.

"That's it, laddie," he murmured as Bodie rubbed his cock against the sharp outthrust of his hip. "That's it, come on, laddie, come on, spend yourself against me, let me have your jism..." So odd to hear himself talking like that in anything other than the extremity of passion, but so perfect to feel his words have their effect on Bodie, to feel Bodie shudder as he kissed him deeply, tongue inside Bodie's mouth, hands on Bodie's arse, one finger shoving deep inside and then, as before, Bodie's cum hot on his belly, their skin slick with it, and Bodie suddenly heavy on top of him, a dead weight he didn't really want to move.

Heavy body, heavier breathing, Bodie slipping into sleep, his body slowly slipping to one side, shifting restlessly as Cowley moved with him, Cowley manoeuvring them until Bodie's back was against his belly and his own cock was nestled warm and snug between Bodie's nether cheeks.

"Worn you out, have I, laddie?" Cowley asked, eminently chuffed to have outlasted a man a good twenty years younger than himself.

"Mmm, for the minute..." A wriggle, Bodie not settling again until Cowley had put his arms round him, the position a bit awkward in its newness for them.

There wasn't much point in asking any questions now, was there, not with Bodie snuffingly asleep, body completely sated and finally limp. But perhaps Bodie's being here was for no more sinister a motive than his own had been; when he'd been a lot younger than Bodie, he had gone with men for all the familiar political and career reasons, and the other reasons, the ones he rarely admitted to

himself: the power older men held, their control, their strengths. Or perhaps it was the feeling that he was someone Bodie could lean against, someone who might actually have a few answers, if only because he'd already made the mistakes. Aye, it could well be that.

Regardless, he still had decisions to make, his head arguing against the rest of him. Some things were as clear as a bell: Bodie knew too much and Bodie meant too much, in everything from his emotions to his passions, and mainly, Bodie knew and meant too much to all the once sleeping depths he had awoken in George Cowley, a man who had actually believed himself resigned to the solitary life. A man, fool that he was, who had actually believed himself untouched by anything save the lonely hankering after something that would never be part of his own emotional repertoire.

The pity of it was that he hadn't seen any of this coming, which made the shock, of course, all the worse, and made his life reel madly.

Whatever it was that had started it, in either or both of them, he had seen the end results in that one unguarded moment, had heard the oblique references to it. Small wonder that it had taken him so unexpectedly: it had been so long and so little for him, that it really should have come as no surprise that he hadn't recognised it until he saw it mirrored back at him in Bodie's too honest eyes.

So he lay there in the dark, with his career quite possibly about to come crashing down about his ears, with his sere and controlled life a pile of ashes at his feet, and the biggest bombshell of his entire life lying trustingly asleep in his arms. He lay there as the birds heralded the dawn and the hands of the clock measured the passing of his life, running things through his mind, planning and unplanning, examining every option that might possibly exist, swithering again, made indecisive by the one thing even George Cowley couldn't control.

Love.

PERMANENTLY ATTACHED AT THE HIP

'The best laid schemes o' mice an' men

Gang aft agley'

—but contrary to Burns' opinion, sometimes they 'gang' exactly as you'd like them to. Here, in the second of the DIY (do-it-yourself) series, what seems to be courting hilarious disaster turns into a courting of a different persuasion. And was it Cowley who referred to Bodie and Doyle as the Bisto Kids? Nahh! They're the Banter and Bicker Boys

WHISTLING under his breath, Bodie let himself into Doyle's latest flat, the tune changing to a low whistle of pure admiration. Well, perhaps not so pure admiration: compared with where Accommodations had stuck him this time, Doyle's place would put the Taj Mahal to shame, which brought out Bodie's impurest jealousy. In no hurry, he took the time to have a good look around as he started in on his partner's new home for the duration. Proper garden door, nice bit of patio—be great for tomatoes, Bodie thought to himself, not that he'd ever admit to a green thumb let alone the know-how of growing a vegetable garden. No need to ruin his reputation by confessing he had more than a passing knowledge of those things that grew and blossomed and ripened. Still, that corner there would be perfect for a tub with strawberries, and that wall would be just right for runner beans... Shaking his head at the domestication even his raucous life had never quite stamped out, Bodie crossed the small patio, picking up his tune again, enjoying the afternoon sunshine, made even happier by the simple fact that the bloody conference was finished, Nîmes was more than a Hovercraft away, Cowley was safely at home in his mews flat, and Bodie could scoop up his mate and go out for a pint of real beer, not that cat's piss they had in France.

Even through the glass door, Doyle's kitchen fairly screamed the personality of the occupant, making Bodie smile. Yeh, a nice drink or two, then

back here for something to eat, cup of Doyle's good coffee after, feet up, watch the telly or gab, and all of it done in perfectly reasonable, absolutely comprehensible English. God, but it was good to be home—and two days early at that. Brilliant. Be nice to give Ray a bit of a surprise—and if the gods were smiling, then Bodie might even give Doyle's bird of the moment an even bigger surprise. Always fun that, landing Ray right in it, enough to bring a grin to Bodie's face as he dumped his over-stuffed duffel bag on the doorstep and dug through his pockets.

Skeleton key jemmying the lock, Control already warned that Doyle's silent alarm was about to go off, Bodie let himself in. And stopped, dead in his tracks. The smell was awful, fetid and rank, the burning acidity of chemicals. Wishing he hadn't left his RT in the car, Bodie drew his gun and made a quick recce of the downstairs. Nothing untoward to be seen, but the putrefied smell was coming from upstairs, as were small, faint noises. Someone tied up, unable to move fully, perhaps? Doyle making the noise, maybe, or whoever was responsible for the chemical spill moving around looking for something—another bloody American 180? Too risky to call out for Ray then, and hang proper procedure—he wasn't going outside for his RT, not after the last time he'd come, unannounced, to Ray's flat.

Ugly, that had been, and uglier every time he thought about it. And that had been the result of a

clean shot—this hellish stench stank of acid, of Phantoms of the Opera and ancient bottles of vitriol. Careful to make not so much as a whisper of sound, Bodie crept slowly up the stairs, gun gripped reassuringly heavy in his hand. As he ascended, the noises were expanding, identifying themselves with their familiarity: water running, the squeak of a tap being turned off, the shuffle of footsteps, the rattle of the towel rack.

In the bathroom, then, either answering a call of nature, or washing off some splash of the corrosive. One or two other possibilities didn't even bear thinking about. The last step now, the narrow runner carpet giving way to the wall-to-wall type, Bodie observing all the details automatically, although none of it registered on a conscious level right now. Nothing but blank wall to his right, but to his left, two doors hung limply open. The smell was worse up here, far worse, until Bodie had to fight the urge to sneeze or clear his throat of the irritation. Must be much worse in there, he thought, nearing the first open door. Must be much worse for Doyle.

The open door was nothing more exciting than a hall cupboard, Hoover chucked in with a motley pile of other household necessities, a set of shelves serving as an airing cupboard of sorts. Mouth set in a grim line, Bodie carefully approached the open door from which spilled light and fumes in equal measure.

One last step, and then Bodie whirled into action, kicking the door all the way open, bursting in, immediately lunging into ready stance. "Hold it!" he shouted. Then stopped, looking. The looking took quite a while, which was hardly surprising. It can be just the teensiest bit odd to come racing upstairs to rescue your partner from this week's mad scientist only to discover said partner clad in nothing but his dignity and hair curlers. "You..." Bodie spluttered again, choking. "You—"

"Yeh?" Doyle demanded, all aggro and bluff, as if sheer bull-dogged viciousness would make up for the fact that the average drag queen had nothing on him. For that matter, Doyle himself didn't exactly have much on himself, a fact of which Doyle was uncomfortably aware. He didn't much mind Bodie seeing him in the buff; what bothered him was the way the sight had Bodie writhing around in complete hysterics. Although Doyle was willing to concede that might have less to do with his hairy legs and chilled-into-minutiæ genitals

than the awful fact that Bodie had caught him with his curlers in. Pulling himself together—and resisting the urge either to pull his hands over his poor shrivelled cock or to pull the rollers from his hair—Doyle stuck his hands on his hips, thrust his chin and his petted lower lip forward and snarled: "So what about me then?"

"You..." Bodie managed again, then collapsed, boneless, against the door jamb, sliding slowly down to the floor as he descended rapidly into absolute hysteria. "You..."

"What, is that the only tree you know?" Doyle muttered, and mere bravado proving seriously unequal to the task, he snatched the towel up from where he'd dropped it a couple of minutes before, and just happened to find a damp patch of skin that he could rub so that the towel draped down nicely—not that he was covering himself up or anything, of course. "Or were you planning on saying something meaningful?"

"It's just..." Bodie dissolved into another spasm of giggles, one hand coming up to point, helpless with hilarity, at Doyle's current state. What with the natural giddiness that comes part and parcel with relief, the state Doyle was in, the truth of the whole thing and best of all, the blackmail potential of the situation, Bodie was in seventh heaven. Or would be, if he could stop laughing long enough. "I never thought—"

"I'd never've guessed," Doyle told him sourly.

Bodie was too delighted to bother with such a routine slur to his intellect. "Well, what'd you expect? I mean, you..."

"You back on those bloody trees?" Doyle asked dismissively, the sanguine effect completely ruined by the expression on his face.

"But Ray, you..." Manfully, Bodie pulled himself together before Doyle decided to stitch him up. "Sorry," he said, sounding like he almost meant it. "It's just, well, I never realised you had a perm before..."

Discretion being the better part of valour, Doyle decided that he really did have to bend over the sink to wash something off his face—preferably the humiliating blush. Of course, he wouldn't half mind if he could hide his entire head—curlers, perm papers and all—while he was at it. Having already decided to dump him up to his armpits in all the rotten, lousy stinking luck a man could have in one day, Lady Luck decided to really get him back for all those bullets that had just missed him,

and all those times Bodie, Cowley and/or the entire active complement of CI5 had come over the ridge to rescue Ray: the timer went off.

Bodie, still hiccoughing with suppressed giggles, agreed that the bloody buzzing noise was horrible, but he didn't think it warranted the very pained expression on Doyle's face. "What's that for?" he asked, all innocence and anticipatory glee, the blackmail book rapidly filling up.

"Nothing," Doyle muttered, slamming his hand down on the timer, knocking the defenceless little thing onto the linoleum floor where it lay, silenced forever. Which was pretty much what Ray would like to do to Bodie.

"Has to be something," Bodie said reasonably, although breathlessly, the hooting laughter barely restrained by Bodie's survival instinct.

Doyle gave Bodie a look that would have had a lesser mortal running, screaming for Mummy. Bodie, of course, just slouched there, grinning.

"Come on, Ray," he wheedled, "it had to be for something. A man doesn't put his timer on for just nothing, does he?"

Glacial stares had nothing on Doyle. Unfortunately, they also had no effect on Bodie, and although the clock had stopped ticking, time was still passing. Which meant if the didn't get on with it, he'd be giving poodles a run for their money. "Open your mouth once, just once," he snapped, throwing his towel (in lieu of a sharp, pointed object or bullet) at Bodie for emphasis, "and I'll ram your fucking tonsils out your arse."

Doyle turned his back on his partner, started fiddling with a bottle and rubber gloves he'd taken from the medicine chest. Bodie sat staring at him happily, counting the seconds off. Timing perfect, he announced, "But I don't have any tonsils, Ray."

"Then I'll cut your balls off," Ray replied, smiling sweetly, the threat of that maniac's nice smile completely undermined by the big yellow rubber gloves and curlers adorning his otherwise naked self. "Or are you going to admit you don't have any of those either, eh?" Triumphantly, he turned his back to Bodie again and set about saving himself from doing a Shirley Temple.

Given the circumstances, Bodie didn't think Ray really ought to be bent over the sink like that. The damp towel positively itched in his hand, but, being of a kind, gentle, and sweet disposition, Bodie refrained from slapping Doyle in the most painful of manners. Of course, it could also have

been because Bodie had a better idea. Scrambling to his feet, he edged round his stooped partner, crouched down on his knees and made a point of examining Doyle's genitals, much to Ray's very loud outrage, and much more intriguingly than Bodie was about to admit, especially to himself. "Not only do I have some, I've got more balls than you," he said, seraphically.

"Oh, you've got three marbles in your pocket then, not two? Poor lad."

Further such lofty repartee was prevented not only by the coarseness of the conversationalists, but also by Bodie's ever-delicate hooter. "Christ, Doyle!" he exclaimed, backing off as quickly as the smallness of the room would allow. "What the hell are you pouring on there?"

"What d'you think I'm putting on now?" Doyle demanded, peeved. "And why can't you just bugger off and leave me and my perm in peace?"

"Oh, that's nice, that is," Bodie said in his best Hamlet, "I come back from a week *sur le Continent*, and what do I get from my best mate? Do I get a 'hello'? Do I get a 'nice to see you, mate'? No, I get a 'bugger off—'"

"Yeh, well, you shouldn't just walk in on a person, should you? Coming in here like the poor man's James bloody Bond..."

"As opposed to skulking in here like the poor man's Barbara Cartland," Bodie told him, practising some of the new digs he'd be able to get in for the next decade and another idea springing, full-bloom, into his mind..

Doyle took the wicked grin to be pleasure at the Cartland crack, which was all for the best, or would be, in the end. "Skulking? In my own bloody bathroom? Listen, mate, in case you'd forgotten, you're back in England now, where a man's home is his castle, an' I can do whatever the fuck I want to in my own bloody bathroom, all right?"

"Upset are we, dear?" Bodie enquired with all the fruitiness of an orchard. "What is it, petal? That time of the month again?"

"The only time it is is for you to sling your hook and bugger off, Bodie." Of course, it would all have been far more effective if he hadn't had his head stuck in the sink while he dealt with the perm neutraliser, and it would have been even more effective if one of his curlers hadn't picked that moment to get itself stuck in the hot tap. Muttering crudely under his breath, Doyle set about disentangling himself, all fingers and thumbs and curlers.

"Having a bit of bother there, eh?" Bodie asked cheerfully, wishing this was Doyle's old flat, because then he'd know precisely where the camera was, thus enabling him to record this for posterity and the VIP Lounge notice board.

"Oh, no," Doyle sneered, tugging his thumb free from the cold tap, "I'm just having a bit of fun, that's all."

"Well, in that case, I won't lend you a hand then."

"I wish you'd lend me your brains, butch," Doyle camped, so unexpectedly pleasant that Bodie did a double-take.

"Need some help then?" he asked Doyle, naturally suspicious, given both the circumstances and Doyle's ever-challenging nature.

"Nah," Doyle replied, eyes watering and scalp smarting as he pulled himself free, a few hairs and a wisp of paper floating gently down into the sink, "I just need something for my silver platter."

"Silver? For me? Oh you shouldn't have!"

"Only the best for my Bodie," Doyle said as he carefully unscrolled one of the small curlers, peeled off the paper and squinted up to see if the curl were right. "And it's the only silver I'd buy you, ducks."

All right, so Ray was obviously setting him up: that didn't mean Bodie wouldn't want to hear the punch-line. "Not gonna buy me a silver spoon then, eh?"

His back to the room, Doyle gazed at Bodie via the mirror, deft hands unrolling the gathering mountain of used curlers and discarded paper. "It's a bit late for a silver spoon for you, mate. Thought about getting you a silver bullet, once or twice. Until," and he batted his eyelashes and blew the most outrageous kiss Bodie's direction, "I saw you with your shirt off. Not even a full moon could help you there, could it, mate?"

Bodie drew him a dirty look for that: he'd always been a bit on the sensitive side about his unmacho hairless chest, and Doyle bloody knew it, flaunting his own, suitably, butchly masculine upper torso every chance he got. "Yeh, I don't turn into a hairy, slobbering beast when the girls come out—unlike some urban gorillas I could name."

Doyle's lovely reply dropped right off the tip of his tongue even as tears sprang to his eyes: one of the curlers had mated with his hair, his scalp pulled unmercifully tight.

"Oh, here, let me," Bodie said, temporarily losing interest in today's game of get-Doyle, the

familiar, more-or-less affectionate backbiting giving way, as it always did, when Doyle actually needed a bit of a hand. Coming to stand immediately behind his partner, he shooed away Doyle's gingerly probing fingers, his own hands reaching confidently for the tangled mess. "Should've asked me five minutes ago," he grumbled, separating the painful knot a few strands at a time, tutting sympathetically. "Saved yourself no end of grief."

"What d'you think this is, the bloody BAFTA awards? No need to chew the scenery like that, Bodie, it's only a bit of hair."

"Oh, well, in that case..." Bodie murmured, shrugging before giving an almighty tug that freed the hair from both curler and scalp with ferocious equality, not to mention a satisfyingly blood-curdling scream. "Oh, I'm sorry, did that sting a little?" came the polite enquiry.

"Fucking hell!" Doyle erupted, tears erupting just as dramatically. "Should've mentioned you were half Apache."

"Are you implying I scalped you?" Bodie sniffed, managing to look and sound seriously insulted. "Even if I would—I couldn't."

This was one of Bodie's pointed little comments that were always best left dangling like a benighted particle. Still, it was politic to prove the boss right once in a while, and Cowley was fond of saying that Doyle had more hair than sense. "All right," Doyle asked, going willingly, "you would if you could, but you can't, so why can't you?"

Bodie tried ruffling the infamous curls but encountered a handful of prickly curlers instead. "These—bloody rug's too well nailed down!"

"Oh, ha, ha," Doyle muttered, that last remark pathetic even by Bodie's Billy Bunter standards. "In fact, you're just too witty for me, so why don't you pop downstairs and put the kettle on while I get this lot finished, eh?"

"And miss the caterpillar emerging as a butterfly?" Bodie declaimed, regretting the paucity of esses in the sentences: he had his limp wrist and lisp down pat. "Come on, you don't expect me to leave before the entire process is done, do you? I mean, it's bizarre enough finding out you perm your hair, but *look* at how you have to do it! It's amazing—"

"Hang about," Doyle interrupted before Bodie could stick his other foot in his mouth to join the first clodhopper. "Are you telling me," he asked carefully, "that you really didn't know I did this?"

Bodie was busy fingering one of the curlers, poking at it industriously. "Already told you that."

"Yeh, but I didn't believe you, did I? But you're serious?" he demanded, not sure whether to be pleased that his hair looked natural, or furious that his partner obviously needed a new pair of glasses and his head examined while they were at it. "You really weren't having me on when you were rabbiting on earlier on?"

"Oh, no, Ray, I think all my mates run around with their hair in curlers."

"Don't you start—"

"I'm not starting, so shut up, Ray. Anyway," he had discovered that under the hair and paper the plastic was shaped more like a bone instead of the curls they produced, "you're in good company, aren't you?"

"Oh yeh?" Doyle said sarcastically, expecting the litany of Queen, Queen Mum and a few other queens thrown in for good measure.

"Yeh, 'course you are." Bodie twitched the clean towel from the rack, used it to mop up the trails of water dripping down Doyle's face and cheeks.

"There's Kevin Keegan, Brian May, Marc Bolan, Leo Sayer..."

All right, so it wasn't the butchest of lists, but it wasn't the expected fairy tale either.

"Not to mention," Bodie said, smiling sweetly as he mopped one errant drip from the tip of Doyle's nose, "Kojak."

"Kojak?" Doyle said, not getting it. "But he's bald—"

"Exactly."

Doyle got it. "Only way I'll end up bald from this is if you 'help' me again. An' if you won't make me a cuppa, you can shift your carcass and let me get on."

"All right, all right," Bodie snickered, insufferably good humoured. "Keep your hair on."

Doyle ignored that as being not worth even hearing.

"Good, that, wasn't it?"

Doyle ignored that too, perhaps in the fond and foolish hope that if ignored long enough, even Bodie would take the hint and leave.

"You know," Bodie repeated, not because he had thought it that funny, but because getting a rise out of Doyle was always good for a laugh, "keep your hair on." Still no reaction, and a calm, unresponsive Doyle was no fun at all. "Course," Bodie added, taking a good long look at Doyle's nudity,

more overtly appreciative than he ought to have been as he was not in the Guards or working in Buck House itself, "it'd be nice if you had kept *anything* on. Be frightening the horses in that get up."

"Yeh, well," Doyle stood upright, giving Bodie an odd look, "I'd be worried, if there were any horses round here."

Bodie simply raised one eyebrow and glanced, meaningfully, down at his own groin. "But you've got a stallion in here."

Doyle took his own glance at Bodie's groin, making sure he didn't linger too long. "Stallion? Nah, not you, mate," Doyle said in the tone of one about to pay a rich compliment. "A gelding, that's you."

"A what?"

"Gelding," Doyle replied in all innocence. "That's the one they cut—"

"I know what they fucking cut," Bodie told him, crossing his legs involuntarily, appalled that Doyle could even joke about such things. But then again, Doyle probably didn't share his rather pathological reactions to such things, Doyle's father not having converted to Judaism late in life and bang smack in the middle of his sons' adolescence. Just thinking about it brought a wince to Bodie's face, not to mention a shudder to his spine. "Gives me the willies just to think about it..."

Doyle, needless to say, collapsed into hysterics at that. "Now that," he said into Bodie's aggrieved face, "really was good. Gives you the willies..." he sniggered to himself as he went back to unravelling his hair.

Bodie crossed his arms and stood on his dignity, although his bum insisted on reminding him that he was sitting on the bathtub, and with the way the rim was cutting into him, his nether regions were about to either fall off or go numb. Conveniently ignoring the minor detail that he could easily have moved without having to either lean on the small of Doyle's back or rub his hip against Doyle's rump as he went past, Bodie settled himself on the toilet seat itself, shoving Doyle's eldritch and unpleasant collection of bottles and fumes and steel tail comb on to the floor out of the way. "Oh," he thought to ask, "you don't need any of that lot, do you?"

Peering over the edge of the sink at the mess on the floor, Doyle just shook his head. It really wasn't worth the endless, deliberately convoluted and no doubt excruciatingly pun-filled discussion Bodie would indulge himself in to complain about it.

“Good,” Bodie said, then sat there, obviously trying to think of something to say, annoyed because Ray wasn’t saying anything, seemingly too uneasy to wonder why he should even be feeling the need to fill the small silences between them with chatter. “So, did you have the new barmaid you fancied over at the Swan?” he finally said, staring at the subtle play of muscles under the skin of Doyle’s back, at the curve of his buttocks and especially, at the shadows revealed by Doyle’s bent-over position: shadows, hints, dark lure, hiding the opening, the most private part of Doyle’s body, and there, framed by the strong, richly-haired thighs, the dark sway of genitals. Catching Doyle catching him twisting round to get a better look, Bodie veered his eyes immediately to the floor and the conversation immediately away from balls, pricks and the prick he worked with. “I had this great bird in Paris. Tits to here, legs to there—”

Doyle let the words wash over him, paying less attention to Bodie’s amoral amorous exploits than he usually did. Methodically, he took the last of the curlers out, dropping them messily into the basin propped so precariously on the vanity shelf. Bodie’s voice was hurried, harried, words tripping over themselves as he went on and on about how much and what types of sex he’d had. Oh, shit, Doyle thought, suspicions rising and heart sinking, it can’t be. He can’t do that to me...

“...even let me in through her back door, if you get my drift,” as if someone as filthy minded as Doyle wouldn’t, “so it’s hardly surprising I’m knackered—and even Cowley was jealous, although what an old prune like him would do with someone as ripe and luscious as Monique I’ll never know, unless he wants to be invalidated out after his heart-attack. Tits out to here—”

“Cowley?” Doyle enquired politely. “I’ve never noticed.”

“Not Cowley, Monique—” and it registered that there’d been half a dozen such openings already, and Doyle hadn’t taken him up on a single one of them. “And you haven’t been listening to me, have you?”

Not enough recently, Doyle thought morosely, and not half hard enough. Oh, Bodie, I hope to hell I’m wrong. “I hang onto your every word and engrave it in my heart.”

Bodie drew him a dirty look, annoyed because Doyle had missed his catalogue of Monique’s multiple charms, quietly pretending that his heart

was beating faster and his breath coming more shallowly because he was pissed off with Doyle, not because he was distracted by Doyle standing there naked in front of him, close enough to touch.

“Anyway—”

Doyle broke in before he could hear any more about ‘tits to here’ and a bird who kept both doors open, before Bodie could even think about sex again. “Give us the towel before I flood the place.”

“Parting of the water, eh?” Bodie teased, handing Doyle the clean towel from the top of the cistern. “You’ll be back in nappies again if you don’t apply yourself to your potty training, Christopher Robin.”

Doyle hid under the towel, slowly squeezing the dripping of water into the thick towel, quickly trying to strangle his nascent suspicions. “Oh, shit,” he muttered, at both where his thoughts were insisting on running, and on that last bloody curler he always seemed to miss.

Bodie, watching him emerge from the enveloping blue cloth, didn’t bother to wait for Doyle to get himself tied in a knot this time, reaching out immediately to tug the curler free. “Did that smart a little?” he asked, just as politely as the first time he’d nearly scalped his partner.

“Smart?” Doyle demanded, tears once more springing to his eyes, vying with the lethal glower therein. “You wouldn’t know smart if it jumped up and bit you on the arse.”

Perhaps he *had* been a bit excessive with the enthusiasm, Bodie conceded, as the loosened strands of hair drifted to the floor in a positive cloud of chestnut. “Sorry,” he muttered, not quite loudly enough to be heard over Doyle’s inventive invective. “Here,” he almost shouted in the hope that he would be heard over the dissection of his heritage, family background and the marital and familial status of his parents.

Doyle relinquished his towel and his wet hair to Bodie’s ministrations without pausing a beat in his run-down of Bodie’s entire personal history.

“...cousins—nah, it’d have to be twins, identical fucking twins, to produce offspring as stupid and twisted as you—”

Bodie decided that this was not the moment to mention that identical twins would have a matching set of genitals to go with their matching faces, thus making the production of any offspring a major miracle whether they were fucking twins or not. “Whatever you say, Ray,” he murmured,

plying the towel with as much enthusiasm as finesse, although Doyle, if asked, just might declare that the enthusiasm was winning hands down. Doyle, in fact, was inclined to say such a thing, asked or not.

"If this is a taste of how you handle your girls," Doyle muttered from under the now-soggy folds of rippling terry, "then small wonder you're always pinching mine." A flurry of memories of Bodie pinching his bum glutted his suspicions, and brain reacting quicker than his mouth, he bit off the rest of his comments, this novelty explaining why he bit his tongue as well.

"You all right down there?" Bodie enquired with a solicitousness that sounded feigned but was as honest as the day was long—and not at the North Pole in winter, either.

"Course I'm fucking all right," Doyle snapped back, sunny as that winter's day at the North Pole. "Why the fuck shouldn't I be?" Apart from the fact that I've just said something that reminded me of what I was trying not to think about, he thought, trying not to think about that either, and definitely trying not to think about Bodie 'helping' him up the stairs, or Bodie grabbing him, and as for the way Bodie had been looking at him a minute ago—Christ, Doyle thought, panicking, that really didn't bear thinking about at all. Defensiveness always made him nastier than anything other than facing the day without benefit of caffeine, so he demanded again, viciously. "Well? Why the fuck shouldn't I be all fucking right, eh, you stupid fucking moron?"

"No reason," Bodie told him mildly, more or less unruffled by yet another of Doyle's mood swings, the sort that made going through menopause seem such a placid, desirable state of being.

No reason, Doyle repeated to himself, and wished he could snort elegantly instead of sounding like a pig when he tried it. No reason at all—hah! We should be so bloody lucky... Not that they were going to be, he thought gloomily, noticing the way the rough towelling was no longer towelling roughly, but was smoothing over him like the finest Turkish terry—which could be taken in any number of ways, although Doyle could only think of two, both of which were rude, which was hardly surprising, given the combination of Doyle's filthy mind and the ever-more compromising condition he found himself in. In fact, if Bodie didn't pack this in, it would be Bodie who found him in a

compromising position. Which upon mature—oh, all right, then: upon salacious, libidinous, and lecherous—consideration, might not be such a bad thing.

But then again, Doyle reminded himself, wishing he was conveniently straight and not bi and wishing most of all that he had a nice pair of baggy trousers and a chastity belt on, this wasn't some anonymous encounter with some willing bloke or a discreet holiday abroad cruising—in every sense of the word—the Greek Islands or the beaches of Spain. This was England, and CI5, and Cowley. This was poor Bodie, who started rabbiting on about birds the second it dawned on the poor sod that he'd noticed that his partner was naked and bent over like a dog waiting to be mounted, and not by a taxidermist.

Cursed by hearing as good as his eyesight, Doyle couldn't help—no matter how prodigiously he tried—but make out what Bodie was saying to him. Oh, no, he thought, we really don't need this...

"...amazing hair. Should've known it came out a bottle, shouldn't I?"

"Yeh, you bloody should. Cowley'd have your guts for garters for not noticing..."

"Oh, so now he pays us to be fashion critics, eh?"

"It's all in the small print," Doyle sniped back, but his heart wasn't in it, and he couldn't be bothered coming up with anything flash to say. He couldn't even *think* anything flash, going round and round in circles over what Bodie, poor, macho Bodie, was going to do when it finally dawned on the thick bugger that he just might be a bugger in the literal sense of the word. All hell'll probably break loose, Doyle decided morosely, with him on the receiving end of all of it. He could just picture it too, Bodie shouting at him, posturing like an ape, and being Bodie, he'd do a King Kong, all the usual fuss and bother and aggro before Bodie would even half-cope with it. All those brooding silences and sarky little comments, all the female conquests to rub Doyle's nose in and to prove that Bodie really was still a man. No, Doyle didn't need any of it.

"Oi, you awake down there?"

"Eh? What?"

"Never thought you'd go in for maidenly modesty, mate," Bodie said heartily, "especially not knelt on the toilet floor starkers."

He was, wasn't he? On his knees at Bodie's feet,

while Bodie gently rubbed his hair dry, probably straightening out the perm instead of just loosening it a bit. “Emm, what was it you were asking?”

“D’you get the colour from a bottle as well?”

“Nah, get that from Mum—you’ve seen her, exact same colour.”

Which was why Bodie was suspicious in the first place, having seen Mrs. Doyle when her roots were growing out. Still, Ray’s vanity didn’t seem worth getting into a fight, not when it was so...peaceful to sit here like this. “It’s nice, this,” he murmured, not meaning to mention it at all, the comment slipping out.

Doyle groaned, and not because Bodie’s grip had tightened, although the flex of Bodie’s thigh muscles just might have had something to do with it. He was wearing some new pair of trousers, light gabardine of an even lighter grey, and they were even more revealing than those bloody bone coloured cords Bodie wore, much to Doyle’s distraction. And yes, there was definitely evidence there that Bodie was just about to start the King Kong act—and if shadows were anything to go by, it wasn’t just the ape-man posturings that were going to be gargantuan. Which was a bit of a problem, Doyle always having had a thing about bigger being better...

“Ray?” Bodie asked softly, confusion evident in his voice, and other parts of him growing more evident by the second.

Decision time, Doyle told himself. Time to make up his mind whether or not he was willing to take Bodie on that voyage of self-discovery, or if he was going to run like a craven coward and let Bodie cope all by himself. Or with some other bloke. Like Murphy. He bet Murphy would jump at the chance to show Bodie a thing or two.

“Ray?” Sounding worried now, the towel dropped to the floor, Bodie’s hands smoothing over the tangled, nearly dry mess he’d made of Doyle’s hair.

“It’s all right,” Doyle told him, busy trying to work out if he were lying through his teeth or if it really could be all right between them. In fact, he admitted to himself, it’d probably be more than all right or even a bit of all right between them. They liked each other—oh, all right, they were fond of each other. Okay, so they were really fond of each other.

Oh, all right, he told his conscience and inconvenient streak of honesty, I’m half-way to falling in

love with him—

Only half way?”

Half is all you’re getting, he snapped at that stupid part of his brain that actually thought honesty was the best policy in affairs of the heart, so shut up and make do like the rest of us...

Bodie, hands stilling uncertainly, made to withdraw, moving as if to stand up.

“Don’t—” Doyle said, strong hands gripping Bodie’s stronger thighs, the ripple of muscle delectable. “I told you, it’s all right,” and he looked up, smiled at the commingling of embarrassment, confusion, and hazy lust on Bodie’s face. “It’s gonna happen sooner or later,” he murmured, caressing Bodie’s thighs, not yet daring going higher, “so we might as well be honest and let it happen now, hadn’t we?”

“I—” Bodie swallowed, hard, and his cock pulsed, hard, because Ray chose that precise moment to touch him, precisely, there. “I—” he was stammering now, and there was even the hint of a blush rising up his neck like the flush of passion.

“Told you, it’ll be all right,” Doyle repeated, his hand doing some repeating of its own, rubbing back and forth across Bodie’s trapped cock. “Trust me, Bodie, just you relax and let it happen.” He undid the button on Bodie’s waistband, grasped the tongue of the zip, pulled down slowly, Bodie’s eyes scrunching shut and a moan escaping him. “Relax,” Doyle murmured, “just relax...”

“Lie back and think of England?”

“Something like that, but I’m not going to rape you—” at least not until he found out if Bodie liked to play games like that, “—and you’ll enjoy it.”

The zip was now pulled down, and with a bit of encouragement, Bodie squirmed around enough to let his trousers be pulled down and out of the way. Doyle licked a swathe through the black hair pointing down to the hidden treasure, Y marking the spot, Doyle’s nimble hands quickly uncovering his favourite candle-stick. Y-fronts suitably lowered, Bodie’s flag-pole stuck out in all its glory, and Doyle sat back on his heels and licked his lips. He could, as Wilde had said, resist everything but temptation, especially a temptation as big as this. Now he knew why Bodie called himself a stallion, and he certainly hadn’t been gelded. Leaning forward, Doyle took a mouthful of Bodie, swirling his tongue around him as if tasting a wine, deciding that he liked the bouquet, and judging by the moaning and groaning going on above and the

writhing and throbbing going on below, Bodie was going to be a positively fruity vintage.

“Ray,” Bodie was murmuring, “you don’t have to, honest, you don’t have to...”

“Shh,” Doyle mumbled, his diction ruined by the dick in his mouth, “like doing this...”

Head bobbing, cock throbbing, Doyle sucked hard, pulling back far enough to pay special attention to Bodie’s foreskin, teasing the sensitive skin, grinning when Bodie reacted with a suitably desperate thrust back into Doyle’s mouth. His own hand blurring on his own cock—thank Christ he hadn’t had to get himself out of his usual jeans or he’d’ve done himself a serious mischief—Doyle was having himself a lovely time, and for all Bodie was moaning his head off, Doyle didn’t think his partner was exactly complaining. One hand firmly wrapped around his own cock, the other having a good grip of Bodie’s balls, the situation equally in hand, Doyle stopped what he was doing. “Want me to stop?” he asked saucily, milking Bodie.

“Not quite yet, if it’s all the same to you,” Bodie gasped, voice quivering almost, but not quite, as much as his thighs, and certainly not as much as his hands which were positively a-tremble with the desire to grab Doyle by his brand-new curls and ram him back down where he belonged. “Come on, Ray,” he muttered, hoping that the verb used would give Doyle the right idea, “come on...”

It wasn’t just Doyle’s ears that pricked up at the sound of Bodie’s voice. Taking himself firmly in hand, metaphorically as well as physically, he once more applied himself to his task, sucking hard, taking Bodie so far inside him his Adam’s apple was in danger of being cored. Bodie was lifting his hips up, thrusting as best he could considering that he was sprawled awkwardly on the smooth toilet seat and had Doyle pressing him down, out of self-preservation if nothing else: he didn’t think Cowley would be too pleased to have Bodie’s cock listed as his cause of death. Course, next time Bodie threatened to strangle someone, Doyle would be the first in line. Coming up for air and to give his jaw a rest, Doyle whispered as seductively as he could: “Like this, do you?” once again proving that in this partnership, Bodie was the smooth talker.

Sweating, flushed, tie and shirt askew, trousers and y-fronts pooled round his knees, his cock red and hard and surrounded by the pale tan of Doyle’s hand, Bodie looked down at his friend. “Off and on,” he said pointedly.

Doyle, never thick unless you measured round his cock, took the hint, going back to the job in hand, making sure that Bodie would be too busy feeling wonderful to think about anything, let alone the fact that a man—his partner at that—was giving him head. They’d think about it later—over a good wank, if Bodie should ultimately prove yellow—and deal with any breast-beating and hand-wringing then. For now, the pleasure was all that mattered, and the feel and taste of Bodie inside him. He gave it his all, pouring himself into it in the sure and certain knowledge that Bodie would eventually return the compliment and pour himself into Doyle. Shifting to ease the pressure of the linoleum floor on his poor, abused knees, Doyle shifted to increase the pressure on his poor, abused cock. One more thrust into his throat, one more pulse of his hand, and Doyle was coming, semen shooting from him. Bodie, unfortunately, didn’t take Doyle up on that particular hint, his cock staying rock hard in Doyle’s mouth. Either Bodie had incredible control, Doyle thought somewhat fuzzily, or the poor bastard was having a bit of trouble because it was a bloke sucking him. Time, then, for a few refinements, enough to distract Bodie from the problematical awareness of having his first homosexual experience.

Doyle put his hands to work, fingering Bodie’s balls, making a tunnel for Bodie to fuck for the few seconds he wasn’t fucking Doyle’s mouth, but he was careful not to let his hand so much as hint at wandering in the general direction of Bodie’s arsehole: no need to shock Bodie into punching him into next week. If Doyle put as much effort into buttering up the right people as he put into getting at Bodie’s cream, then Ray Doyle would’ve had George Cowley’s job in a month. It paid off handsomely here, Bodie pumping frantically, Doyle swallowing even faster, taking Bodie in.

“See?” Doyle said, propping his elbows on Bodie’s knees, glad that Bodie had been sitting down else he’d probably have fallen down, which would be another difficult thing to explain to the boss. “Told you it would be all right, didn’t I?”

“It wasn’t all right,” Bodie told him with wonder in his voice and a quite unnerving spark of lust in his eyes already. “It was fantastic.” Tentatively, he stroked Ray’s hair, fingers toying with the curls, letting the hair coil around his fingers. “You’ve done that before, haven’t you?” he said, not really

asking a question, more offering an invite for Doyle to talk.

“You could say that I’ve done it once or twice.” Depending on whether we’re talking in the dozens or the hundreds, he added to himself, quite sure that his partner wasn’t ready for that sort of knowledge just yet.

Bodie looked away then, swallowing visibly, unable to look at Doyle as he sat up now and began to slowly tidy his clothing. “What do we do next, Ray?” he asked softly.

Here it comes, Doyle thought as he got up off his knees and managed to brush off a particularly clingy bit of perm tissue, this is where the King Kong routine starts, and I swear I’ll murder him if he calls me Fay Ray! “Next,” he said out loud, giving Bodie a hand up and then beginning to unbutton the shirt Bodie had just tidied up, “depends on what you want to do. We can go downstairs and have a cuppa—” Bodie’s stomach, ever alert especially after a trip on the Hovercraft and several hours since his last meal, piped up with a few gurgling suggestions of its own. “Or we can have something to eat. Or we can go to bed right now and I’ll show you a few more of the things I’m good at.”

As a seduction, it was just as well his partner was willing to meet him more than half-way. Almost shy, the expression enough to make Doyle not only melt but come over all queer, Bodie said, very quietly, “I think I need something to eat. And a bit of time to get used to all this...”

Gorillas in the Mist in the kitchen, Doyle thought resignedly. Oh, well, it could have been a lot worse: could have been caveman tactics in the bathroom. “Fair enough,” he replied, surreptitiously wiping his sticky hand and belly on that damp, abandoned towel, “we’ll have something to eat first.”

It was a measure of how far gone the pair of them were that neither one of them made a single crack about Doyle having already eaten. All the better for Bodie to get a good ogle at his bum and remind him of some of the more esoteric pleasures that were on offer, Monique fresher in Doyle’s mind than she was in Bodie’s, Doyle led the way downstairs, a smile lifting the corners of his mouth when he felt Bodie’s hand cup his nether cheek familiarly.

“Sausage and eggs do you?” he asked as if Bodie feeling his bum was a daily event, which it nearly

was, only the absence of jeans making a difference—and what a difference, Doyle thought, barely able to control his squirm of pleasure. “And there should be a couple of tomatoes in there as well.”

Bodie, greatly daring, briefly pressed his fingertip to the opening to Doyle’s body. “Tomatoes? Amazing what you can fit up there, is it?”

Doyle could have kissed him for that, but decided not to, on the grounds that kissing, the final bastion of queerdom between two men, just might bring on the macho stud from hell routine. Instead of kissing Bodie, he leaned back against him, just for a moment, then moved away, behaving as if this were absolutely normal for them. Apart, of course, from the fact that he was still completely starkers and was proposing to fry sausages. Dish-towels were too small to tie around his waist, and he didn’t possess a pinny, floral or otherwise. No two ways about it: he was going to have to put some clothes on, and just keep his fingers crossed that Bodie wouldn’t turn straight while he was off in the bedroom getting dressed. “Here,” he said, shoving the frying pan into Bodie’s hands, “stick that on the heat, and get the plates and everything out, and I’ll get some clothes on.”

Still, he hesitated before leaving: Bodie’d coped remarkably well for a man who’d always been straight before, but there was no guarantee that reaction wasn’t going to set in. “I’ll only be a minute,” he said.

Bodie smiled at him, although he was a bit diffident, the tiniest bit awkward. “My turn this time, eh?” he asked with a quirk of his eyebrow and a courage that made Doyle proud. “It’ll be all right, Ray,” he said, still smiling. “I’ll be all right.”

Not much Doyle could say to that. Well, there was, but it all involved inquiries into what Bodie was going to be *all right* doing, and would Doyle like it as much as Bodie had liked what Doyle had done to him. Thinking better of opening his mouth and letting his belly rumble—twice in one day, a new record, surely—Doyle simply nodded and went upstairs to get his tightest jeans, the ones that wanted a patch on the bum pocket.

Downstairs, wielding the frying pan with the practised skill of an ex-armed forces man, Bodie smiled to himself, until he started whistling quietly. Not the way he’d expected his day to end up, not even close. In fact, he’d thought it would have been a good three months before he’d manage to persuade Ray to throw caution to the winds and have

sex with him, and as for getting Ray to feel even half of the unspeakably robust emotions Bodie harboured for his partner—well, sufficeth to say, he had been expecting Doyle to do a perfect impersonation of rough trade for the first month at least. At this rate, he might even end up with a Ray Doyle who would end up loving him the way Bodie was too embarrassed to admit he loved Ray.

And to top it all off, just think, he thought, thinking about all those plans and plots, all that slow build-up, all those careful little comments, all those little touches that had been part of his well-planned campaign to seduce Ray Doyle, and all it had taken was batting his eyelashes shyly and lying back to let Doyle do all the work—for once. Who knew, perhaps batting his eyelashes might work the next time there was luggage to be carried. No, he thought, being realistic, Ray might have shocked him with his willingness and

his wonderful, welcome and exhilarating affection, not to mention his incredible mouth, but there were only so many miracles in heaven, and Ray Doyle fetching and carrying wasn't one of them.

But it really was amazing, he thought, what a show of innocence and a DIY perm could do for a man. Now he could hardly wait to see if that idea about Ray, the KY and a naive “the gay bloke in the chemist's sussed me and said we'd need this...” would do.

Making himself look suitably helpless in the kitchen as Doyle's less than elfin feet thundered down the stairs sounding more like an entire team of rugby players than a single fairy, and practising his expression of uneasy self-discovery, Bodie thought to himself that good old P.T. Barnum was right: there was definitely one born every minute.

And at that moment, grinning happily, Bodie's sucker walked in.

SUBJECT TO CHANGE

For those who were wondering where our Christmas stories might have disappeared to, may we offer this little piece. It's all about despair and doubts, fear of finding love and fear of losing it. Will Bodie and Doyle take the risk? Note: a version of this story has appeared on the Circuit. It varies only in a minor way.

“**BLOODY** typical,” Doyle muttered for the fourteenth time.

Bodie didn't reply, as he hadn't the last eight times. His lips tightened, his hands flexed, carefully, on the steering wheel, his gaze never left the bright splashing of sleet on the windscreen.

“I mean,” Doyle went on, “if I'd known the Cow was going to do *this* to me, I'd've gone to visit our Joan with my parents.”

This referred to with such loathing, was time off. Paid. Over Christmas. That rarest of gifts, and Doyle was moaning about it. Bloody typical, Bodie thought, for the thirteenth time.

Doyle, not giving a damn that it drove Bodie bonkers, tapped his foot on the dashboard, each irritating little thump punctuating the tight complaining of Doyle's voice. “Every year, every bloody year, I end up working, because I'm not married. Every year, without bloody fail, so do I make plans? Of course not.”

Bodie murmured absently, only half paying attention. He was watching the traffic, keeping his eyes open for the treachery of black ice and the stupidity of drinking drivers. He was also, somewhere in the back of his mind, quietly treading a path never yet quite dared.

“Cheryl wanted me to spend Christmas with her in Gloucester. But did I say yes? Not with Cowley breathing down my flipping neck I didn't. Turned down the chance of a cosy holiday for two with a willing—and able—bird, and for what? I ask you...”

But of course, he wasn't asking Bodie anything. In fact, Bodie decided, Doyle was probably barely consciously aware that Bodie was the one doing the driving. Typical, that, as well. They lived in each other's pocket so much that the other person was more of a natural appendage than a separate person, sometimes. Times like now, he thought to himself, content in an odd sort of way. He'd be humming a carol, if he were the musical sort, but instead, there was a small, growing warmth inside him, a Christmassy sort of feeling, something he hadn't felt for years. He glanced sideways, to where his partner was still moaning away, Doyle's face white in the early dark of winter's afternoon, hair a nondescript brown. Give it a few months, though, Bodie knew, and it would have the chestnut sheen back to it—be longer, too, once Doyle didn't have to battle the winter frizzies and the perm had grown out a bit.

Doyle, by now, had got back round to his parents. “Christ on a crutch, Mum and Dad even offered to pay my fare down to see our Joan in Australia. I could've been lying on Bondi Beach, watching birds in bikinis—*topless* birds in half a bloody bikini—and what do I get? Stuck at home, on my own with not a bloody thing to do.”

Bodie's mind was sneaking along that wayward path, but still quietly, tiptoeing past conscious thought, bypassing intellect and creeping towards his mouth.

“I mean, this close to Christmas, Cowley finally

decides to mention that Doctor Bloody Hennessy won't clear us for duty. Residual damage to the lungs my left foot!"

"Yeh," Bodie said mildly, not half as put out by Doyle's whingeing as he had been a moment ago, that treacherous idea infiltrating even his mood, dissolving his own bad temper, "but you've got to admit we did get a lungful of that gas before we got those hostages out."

"And I bet those bloody hostages aren't being kept home from work," Doyle said nastily, kicking the dashboard with controlled viciousness. "Or if they are, I bet they got more bloody notice than we did. Christ, stuck on my own for Christmas..."

Bodie opened his mouth, and words tumbled out before he knew he had thought them. "You could always come and stay with me..."

"You?" Doyle exclaimed, looking askance at his partner. "What the hell'd I want to spend Christmas with you for?"

The wayward thoughts retreated in disarray, routed by Doyle's unsubtle disinclination. Without having to turn his head to see it, Bodie could feel Doyle's scathing stare, could almost hear the sharp tongue honing words to serrated perfection. As if all this were nothing more than a radio play, Bodie tuned it out, focussing on the wish-wipe of the windscreen wipers, the on/off of the passing street lights, the flickering of branches caught by the wind.

"Compared to Cheryl, you fall a bit short, mate," was all Doyle said, but the complete dismissal in his voice stung sharply enough that not even Bodie could pretend that it didn't matter, hurt sharpening his own tongue.

"Is that all any of this means to you?" he snapped, overtaking an L-plated car weaving its way through the murk. "Tits and arse on a beach, getting your leg over with whatever bird you've got on a string this week?"

"And when did you see the light, eh?" Doyle, acid, leaping into the argument with both feet, Bodie the perfect whipping boy. "Had a sudden conversion? Be going in for the haircut in the morning?"

"I'm not pretending I'm a monk, Doyle, I'm just saying that you're the one who's always going on about the meaning of life and all that crap, and the only meaning you're taking from all this is bloody sex."

"Stop the car."

Automatically, Bodie obeyed the order, instincts prickling awake, eyes searching the sheeting rain. "Trouble?" he asked, lips barely moving, hand moving so quickly it blurred in the dimness of the car.

"Serious trouble," Doyle said casually. "You've gone right round the twist."

"You—" Tight-mouthed, Bodie holstered his gun, turned the key viciously in the ignition, swerved the car out into a minute gap in traffic, blaring horns complaining loudly in his wake. "Ever heard of the boy who cried wolf?" he asked quite conversationally, only the perfect impassivity of his expression betraying him.

"Ever heard of the leopard changing its spots?" Doyle asked right back, the dig neither subtle nor particularly friendly, Doyle not the sweetest natured of souls this night.

"All I'm saying," Bodie replied, voice as clenched as his hands on the steering wheel, "is that you're the one who's always telling me there's more to life than sex and what're you doing? Acting like a spoiled brat because you're not going to get your greens. It's Christmas, for Christ's sake, not fucking Valentine's Day."

Raymond Doyle had the most speaking silences of anyone Bodie had ever known.

"All right, all right," Bodie finally said, inching the car along behind a No. 9 bus whose windows were hazed with condensation, the passengers within as unclear to Bodie as Doyle was right now, "so your plans are fucked. Fine. It's right there in the small print—everything's subject to change."

Doyle's expression was sourer than his snide remark. "Apart from our George's infallibility, of course."

"Didn't you know God's immutable? But we all know nothing's written in stone in our job, so what's the point of having a fit and ending up in a right tizz just because surprise, surprise, you're gonna have to change your plans."

A huge puddle had gathered at the kerb, aquaplaning up under their tyres, the water mottled by the light spilling from the big shops crowding that side of the street. Bodie caught a glimpse of Doyle in the reflected light, and the mulish set of that mouth and the mulish tilt of that jaw made Bodie homesick for a time too long dead.

"I really appreciate a good mate," Doyle was saying. "Pity I'ven't got one, isn't it?"

Had he not been driving, Bodie would have

closed his eyes and then turned and walked away. But he was trapped behind the steering wheel, imprisoned with a cantankerous, cancerous Ray Doyle, so instead of running, he made his face bland, uninterested, unfeeling. Only the slight shiver of the skin round his eyes showed that he was feeling anything, and not even Bodie was willing to look closely enough to find out what, precisely, those emotions were.

"Anyone," Bodie finally replied, "would think I'd just suggested pulling your toenails out for fun. All I did was say you could come round my place seeing as how you've got nothing better on offer." Something of how he was feeling began creeping into his voice, shades of meaning slithering around, always trying to push something else to the fore so that they wouldn't be heard or recognised themselves. But Bodie could hear them, every skittering shadow, and he knew, hating himself, that Doyle could hear them too. "I mean," he began, protecting himself too loudly, too vehemently, his heartiness a beacon for Doyle's suspicion, "you're sitting there moaning your head off, whingeing like there's no tomorrow, and for what? Because I did the unforgivable and was bloody decent."

"I'm not a fucking charity case, Bodie," Doyle snapped at him, that foot once more tapping endlessly against the dashboard. "I don't want your fucking pity."

"It's all you're going to get," Bodie muttered, and could have died, hearing how feeble the lie sounded, watching it crawl, guttering, between them, a poor dying thing. He said it again, louder, trying to make it true. "Pity's all you're going to get from me."

"Know that for a fact, do you?" Doyle's voice came through the darkness at him, seductive as the kiss of black velvet against white skin—or the way tight denim cradled a virile groin or cupped a lush arse. "Positive, even?"

Bodie swallowed, and drove past his last chance to take them to Doyle's place first.

"So you're inviting me to spend a couple of days, a few nights," Doyle paused precisely, and moved his leg, just the barest fraction, but far enough that the brief flutters of shop lights flared against the runnels of his jeans, faded blue covering what both men knew Bodie wanted with such bleak desperation. "And you're offering me nothing but pity. Not a bite to eat, not a drop to drink." Another pause, when nothing needed to be said,

both of them remembering other nights, and things done in the dark and never, ever spoken of. "Not even a bed to sleep on, is that it, Bodie?"

And Bodie would have sold his soul to the devil if it meant that he and Ray had never done it: had never tasted the illicit, illegal thrill of each other's bodies. Anything, he would have promised anything if he could wipe the slate clean and have nothing to remember: not the taste of Ray's mouth nor the touch of his skin, nor Ray looking at him as orgasm plundered him. He would give everything and anything at all if it meant that he had never said those words to Ray, their very sweetness poisonous.

"All right, be like that," Bodie muttered, swallowing hard, hoarding the misery inside where it wouldn't become yet another weapon in Ray's emotional arsenal. "I don't give a flying fuck what you do." He should have stopped there, should have left the acrimony hanging smokily in the air between them, but the demon still crowded his back, sharp claws digging ever more deeply into him. Bodie bit the inside of his mouth, signalled carefully before beginning the slow circumnavigation of the roundabout, methodically scanning the innocuous cars around them in the endless habit of CI5 agents who were always targets, always on edge. Always injured. Beside him, Doyle coughed again, right hand restlessly rubbing at hairy chest, a muttered imprecation revealing just how much pain Doyle still suffered.

"Just didn't want you to be on your own," Bodie murmured, swearing under his breath at himself when he realised the words had slipped out. Oh, harmless in and of themselves, but still, they harked back to a night best forgotten, when it had all begun to go wrong between them. When he had discovered just how much he meant to Ray Doyle, and knew that it would never be enough.

Doyle said nothing, but slanted a glance over at Bodie, taking in the tightness round Bodie's mouth and eyes, the knotted tension in otherwise beautiful hands, the way Bodie was concentrating on everything but what was happening in the car.

They were outside Bodie's flat now, the rain paused, the air and the city still now, the dampness deadening the fading sounds of traffic. Neither man made a move, both of them sitting there with the knowledge festering between them. Bodie preferred not to look at Doyle who was sitting there staring, communicative as the Sphinx. Resisting the

urge to stare back, Bodie turned the engine off, leaving the radio on, tuning it to one of the pirate stations, Lennon's ode to Christmas meshing perfectly with his own state of mind.

Twice this year he'd almost lost Doyle, once because of things he himself had said, and once because of that bloody hostage situation. And now he was sitting here, alone in the dark with the walled-off silence of his partner. The former had been like this too, and keeping silent that night had been beyond Bodie, some perverse need to unburden himself speaking out of turn, ruining everything they'd had.

It was only the barest caress of his eyes, but it was all the touching Bodie dared these days with Doyle. A momentary image, to be gone over and over again until all the details were clear in his mind, not that it helped very much. There wasn't much to be read from Ray's expression, Doyle never one for giving anything away, always making the world pay for every little snippet of the man. Of course, Bodie had always been the exception. Until he'd opened his big mouth that night, and now, he thought, cursing himself for stupidity and incredible pollyanna-ism, he'd gone and opened his big mouth all over again. Come and spend Christmas with me, he mocked himself viciously in the privacy of his own mind, free to be cruel because Doyle would be doing no less. In fact, it was a sign of how much Bodie had mattered that Doyle was sitting there quiet as a church mouse instead of ripping Bodie's throat out with a few well placed and better sharpened words.

Another of Bodie's brief glances, and nothing to add to the picture he held of his partner. The radio was sliding into haze, music fizzling and crackling, Doyle's abrupt movement startling after all the stillness. The quiet was all the more unsettling, for this was not how it had been between them. Everything from endless backbiting to comfortable silences, those they had had, but Bodie had not known this waiting silence since his days in Africa, and those carrion memories were not to be conjured here.

Bodie counted, slowly, in his mind, adding fractions and decimal places as the numbers grew bigger.

"Ten," he said aloud, Doyle tensing at the staccato burst of voice. Proud of the way he kept his hand steady, Bodie put the key back in the ignition.

"We going somewhere?" Doyle asked, eyes and voice and even skin cool, everything about him distanced, removed from the churning emotions burning Bodie.

"Yeh, well, I know I'm a bit dim about all this," Bodie replied, bitterness mouldering on every quoted word, Doyle's own inflection haunting them both, "but even I've got the message. I'll take you back to your own place."

Doyle shifted, the muscles on his face losing some of their tension as if he were about to speak, but then he subsided again, sitting this one out, waiting for Bodie to say the words that were clinging to the tip of his tongue.

"Look," Bodie finally said, hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel, "I can't help it, all right? And it's nothing you did, so you don't have to worry you're going to start prancing round like Larry Grayson. It's just me..."

The truth of that made him want to weep, acrid tears battling his will, desperate to spill over, Bodie himself more desperate still to bottle it all inside. Blokes didn't cry. Real men didn't cry and beg another man to give him another chance.

A nasty little voice whispered in the back of his mind, a voice he recognised too well as his partner's: yeh, and real men don't tell other blokes they love them, do they?

But he had, hadn't he? Bodie wished the ground would open up and swallow him, but only people in the Bible had that sort of good luck. All he had was sitting here in the dark with the man to whom he had said the unthinkable.

"Christ!" Bodie shouted, for it was either that or be defeated by the bitterest humiliation of tears. "Bugger this for a game! You can sit here all fucking night if you want," he was hurrying over the words, stumbling on them as his fingers fumbled with the keyring, sorting them out as he couldn't sort out his life. "Here," Bodie shoved the car keys into Doyle's cold hand, closing the fingers over the hard metal with a pang of loneliness that came close to bringing him to his knees: he could still see those hands closing over his own hardness, could still feel Ray wrapped around him, pumping him with the surest skill and sweetest pleasure. "You can drive yourself home whenever you're ready," Bodie said, not even caring now that his voice was neither steady nor unmoved. All he was interested in was getting the carrier bag of booze from the back seat and then getting out of that car,

of being far, far away from Doyle's impassive silence. "I'm going upstairs."

He went then, running through the rain to the lobby door, dropping his keys in his feverish haste, not bothering to shut the outside door to keep the elements at bay. All Bodie could think of was what he had said, the horrible moment that night, Ray warm and sated in his arms, their semen cooling on his belly and on his fingers, another knot of tension untangled, another nicely matey mutual wank ending in a surreptitious cuddle.

Bodie was at the front door now, unlatching and unbolting, kicking the door shut behind himself, into the living room, no lights switched on, no music, nothing but the sound of increasing rain and muted hiss of the heating. And then the grating crunch of the seal being twisted apart, the metal cap being unscrewed, the click of bottle against teeth, the gulp and swallow of beckoned oblivion.

It's only me, he had said in the car to Ray, and that was the serest anguish he had ever known. It was 'only him', Doyle untouched by the abyss of love that had swallowed Bodie whole. Only him. Bodie looked around his living room, a place for everything and everything in its place, what little clutter his grandmother's adages hadn't taken care of more than made up for by the knife-creased tidiness of army life. He wanted, suddenly and fiercely, to go on a rampage through this endlessly tidy room, rip the curtains down, toss the cushions off the sofa, leave dishes lying to gather mould and dust. But of course, he didn't do that, wouldn't do that. Vandal rampages were Doyle's domain, not Bodie's. Instead of rioting, Bodie seated himself on the settee, propped his feet on the coffee table beside this morning's folded newspaper, and sat back to begin the serious search for liquid oblivion.

That, and wonder when Doyle's explosion was going to come, clearing the air between them like a summer storm defusing this electric tension that wound them both too tightly. And wonder what he himself would do if the explosion destroyed the poor frayed remnants of their partnership.

Head like thunder, brain like soggy cotton wool, Bodie was in no mood for whoever was ringing his doorbell this bloody early in the morning on Christmas Eve.

"All right, all right, I'm coming, I'm coming," Bodie mumbled round a fur-coated tongue, his cold feet stumbling around on a none too steady floor.

"Keep your shirt on, I'll be there in a minute." If this weren't a CI5 emergency or the end of the world, he was going to flail the idiot standing on his doorstep. Even if it were Ray Doyle come to pick another argument.

It was Ray Doyle, and judging by the glitter in those eyes, Bodie would be lucky if it were just another argument and not the end of the world after all.

"Plannin' on keeping me here on the doorstep all bloody morning, are you?" Doyle started, shoving past the unkempt, shuffling bemusement of his partner. "Thought you were expecting me for Christmas?"

"Thought you'd turned down the invite," Bodie all but snarled, heading for the kitchen and the Disprin, paracetamol or, if he could find them, the white tablets left over from that knife wound he'd had last time.

Doyle's reply was faint, shouted through from the sitting room. "Didn't say one way or the other."

No, he never did, Bodie thought to himself, leaning against the freezing edge of the sink as the tablets stuck themselves half way down, the tap water too cold, making his head ache even more. He went back through to where his partner was prowling, trouble too quick on the uptake to sit still and wait for it to come to him. Bodie allowed himself one look at the compact, self-contained man he worked with, saw instead the dishevelled whore of the bedroom, and the unneeding man he had fallen in love with. "Christ," he said with feeling, "I need a shower." What he really needed was a miracle, and those were in short supply these days. A shower would have to do, and he stood under the water until it ran cold, and even then, he was tempted to stay where he was, the chill of the water a merely physical unpleasantness. Better than anything he could expect from that bundle of blunted energy pacing the living room.

With extreme care, determined to look his best, one poor, pathetic remnant of pride, Bodie dressed himself, slowing his breathing, making himself look cool, calm and collected, everything that he, in fact, wasn't. One last check in the wardrobe mirror, one last adjustment to make sure that his trousers were just right, and then Bodie went in to face Doyle.

His partner was on a short fuse, evidenced by his restlessness and the too quick movements of his hands.

"You shouldn't've gone all out like this," Doyle

said sarcastically, his gesture taking in the spartan room with its complete lack of Christmas decorations and only a handful of cards and the cover of the *Radio Times* to mark the season.

Bodie stood very still, plenty of clear space around him. "Didn't think you'd show up."

"And if I'd said yes? Planning on going out and getting all the frills and fancies between last night and this morning?"

"If you want a fight, Doyle, why don't you just say what you have to say and skip all these pleasantries, eh? Go on," Bodie snapped, circling round his partner, careful to stay beyond the reach of hands that had touched him in passion not a fortnight before and which were now primed to be used as weapons against him. "Say what you have to say, and then you can just bugger off."

Doyle gave him an odd look, a speaking look, but in a language Bodie couldn't understand.

"Well, don't just stand there," Bodie shouted. "For fuck's sake, say something! Get it over and done with, I've had it with you stewing over this."

"Who says I came here for a fight?" Doyle asked him, instantly contrary, walking lightly past Bodie, going to sit on the sofa in the exact spot he'd been in the night the whole thing started, side by side watching a confiscated porno video, each of them glancing at the other, and then, casually, meaning nothing, ribald comments tossed at the screen, egging each other on, daring, double daring like kids, but a very adult game, until each of them was wanking. Separate figures, separate orgasms, but incredibly aware of each other, their solitude all too obviously a temporary thing. Doyle stretched his legs out, propping his feet on the coffee table, making it all look so very casual and so very normal. "Might just've come here to spend Christmas," he said, even his voice mellowing, softening. "Save myself the bother of cooking."

"And pigs'll fly," Bodie muttered, made tenser still by Doyle's uncommon attitude. For all his calculated nonchalance, the other man's mood was unsettled, and unsettling, putting Bodie very much on edge, the unease of a man with his head on the block just waiting for the axe to fall and worrying that the executioner hadn't sharpened the blade first. "But for the sake of peace, we'll pretend that's all you're here for. Fancy some breakfast?" he asked with heavy handed politeness.

"Wouldn't say no," Doyle replied, the subtext of the conversation hovering between them, saying

nothing more as he followed Bodie into the kitchen.

"So you wouldn't say no," Bodie said thoughtfully, binging the frying pan on the cooker, digging in the fridge for all the glories of a good fry-up. "Would that be to bacon for breakfast or..." He didn't finish, his wayward mouth having bugged things up too much already.

Doyle slipped in front of Bodie, automatically taking over the cooking, the heat a guise for the flush in his cheeks, the cooking an excuse for something to do with his hands. "I wouldn't say no to the bacon or..." He stopped, pricked the sausages, dumped them into the pan, cast a very penetrating stare at his partner, "a bit of mutual sex, the way we had been."

"But none of the sappy stuff," Bodie said quite calmly while his heart began to beat with a heavy, throbbing pain. "So you're willing to us going back to wanking each other, but I'll have to keep my mouth shut."

"That's about it," Doyle replied, adding bacon to the pan, opening a tin of beans, Bodie moving with him, fetching the eggs from the cupboard and the loaf from the bread bin: the casual observer would see nothing different from a scene they had played a thousand times, but anyone who knew them would sense something badly amiss, the off-note in the usual harmony of their actions, some threat lingering under the mature discussion.

Bodie got the plates out, and the tomato sauce and Branston pickle for Doyle. Even as he filled the kettle and plugged it in, he looked for all the world as if today were no different from any other morning, his stiffness accounted for by the edge of hangover clouding him.

Of course, the truth of the matter was that he had never been so miserable in his life, and was struggling, damning himself for the unruly words that crowded his mouth. He pressed his lips more firmly shut: he'd got himself into more than enough trouble already. Just keep quiet, just play along, and at least he'd be able to salvage something from this mess. It wouldn't be much, but it would be enough to bandage his pride and give him something to walk away from. Cool, he reminded himself. Got to stay cool. "Fair enough," Bodie said when he had his tongue under control. He shrugged, eminently casual. "And it's not as if it's anything serious, is it?" he went on, engrossing himself in putting milk and sugar into the mugs and tea bags into the pot. "After you fucking up on

that oppo and almost getting yourself killed, I suppose it's only natural I'd be a bit infatuated." Bodie always had been a consummate liar, this morning one of his best performances ever.

Doyle, across the table from him, knife dripping egg yolk, eyes dripping disbelief, simply looked at his partner until Bodie, shamed, looked away. "You're asking a hell of a lot, you know that, don't you?" Doyle asked.

"I'm asking a lot? Christ, Doyle—" Bodie bit off the rest of it, took another tack, one that wouldn't have him spilling his soul all over Doyle's breakfast. "What am I asking you do to, eh? Forget something I said in the heat of the moment, that's all."

But it hadn't been in the heat of the moment, and they both knew that. It had been afterwards, in that dangerous moment before sleep when too many barriers were lowered, when Bodie had edged them beyond the casual sex that was little more than borrowing someone else to give their right hand a rest. With his thoughtless, artless words murmured pressed tight against Doyle's skin, Bodie had pushed them towards love.

"Don't you lie to me," Doyle snapped, temper flaring. "It's more than that and you fucking well know it. And I don't," he threw his cutlery down, was up and away from the table in an instant, "think I can do it."

"Do what? Ignore what I said? Come on, Ray, you do that every day anyway."

"Not that," Doyle said very quietly from the safety of having his back turned to Bodie. "It's you. Looking at me the way you do—Christ, Bodie, I probably knew you were in love with me before you did."

"You bastard! You thought that and you—"

But Doyle wasn't listening to Bodie, his own demons shrieking too loudly to hear anyone else's. "I'm hanging on by the skin of my teeth, mate," Doyle said, talking over Bodie's outrage, an edge of quiet despair silencing Bodie, the other man listening, intently, to the odd tone of his partner. "I'm *this* fucking close," Doyle muttered furiously, "this fucking close, and then you just had to go and say what you said. And now you want me here for Christmas, pretending you never said a dickie bird, and going on as if nothing's fucking changed. And I don't know if I can." A deep breath, shaken, sodden with temper. "But I know I can't just walk away."

What the hell was Doyle talking about? A dark, frightening knowledge was threatening Bodie, something too new and too unpredictable to acknowledge easily. But it was there, hammering at him, punctuated by everything Ray had said and highlighted by everything Ray had not said. Look at him, Bodie told himself, and did. Nothing escaped him, his scrutiny as intense as Doyle's had been the night before.

"Ray," he said softly, and watched as the gentleness of his voice and the implication of his tone cut through the other man with all the subtlety of a machete. "What did you come here to tell me?"

"I..." It wasn't often that Ray Doyle was at a loss for words, but there was nothing he dared say, for the only safety lay in lies and Bodie would know them for what they were and know Doyle, also, for what he was. A coward. A snivelling, craven coward.

Bodie rose to his feet, coming to stand close behind his partner. The knowledge was less frightening now, but his heart was still beating too fast and adrenalin was hurling through him. "Come on, Ray," he cajoled, his hands resting lightly, so lightly, on Doyle's shoulders. "What d'you need to say?"

Nothing; that was what Doyle needed to say. He needed to keep his mouth shut, to not tell Bodie; he'd said too much already, almost enough to fill Bodie's big mouth. "What'd you have to go and say it for?" Doyle shouted suddenly. "Why couldn't you've just kept quiet?"

"Funnily enough, I've been asking myself the same thing," Bodie replied lightly, hiding the confusion of his own emotions. "Wish I hadn't said anything, now."

"Why did you?"

Bodie shrugged, no closer to that answer now than he had been two weeks before. "Fuck knows. Tell you something for nothing though. I was as surprised as you."

"But I wasn't surprised," Doyle told him, turning round at last to face him. "Told you. I already knew."

And then, in that one small moment, Bodie knew it too. Knew what Doyle was so afraid of, knew why Doyle had known Bodie's feelings before Bodie had. Knew why Doyle couldn't let it go, worrying at it like a bad tooth when he should simply walk away.

Strange, how terrifying love could be. Especially

if you were Ray Doyle, prone to romantic flings and declarations, all of them designed to disguise how carefully Doyle guarded himself, how carefully he chose only people who would never, ever last. Witness Anne Holly. Witness any number of women, and one or two men, for that matter.

“Oh, Ray,” Bodie whispered, fingering one single curl. “The poor man’s Elba, and then I come along with my dinghy.”

In spite of himself, Doyle gave a snort of laughter. “That’s one way of putting it, I s’pose,” he said, then stopped, stepped away, folding in on himself as he realised that he had all but admitted it.

“Tell you what,” Bodie said, the words spilling out again before he had time to censor them, “why don’t you pretend I never said what I said, and I’ll pretend you never said what you didn’t just say. How’s that sound?”

Doyle gave him one of his more suspicion-laden stares. “And we go back to the way we were before?”

No-one knew better than Bodie that you can never go back, so he smiled, and nodded, and put on his most matey expression. “By George, I think he’s got it!” he announced, sweeping an imaginary cape in an exaggerated bow. “Yeh, why not? You’ve got to admit,” Bodie went on, bustling round pouring fresh cups of what was admittedly stewed tea, “a friendly wank among mates is better than doing it on your own, or spending a fortune wining and dining someone and then getting nothing but a kiss on the doorstep.”

“Poor soul,” Doyle said, trying to enter into the spirit of the thing, gathering delusion round him like a cloak. “At least mine usually kiss me on the lips. Or the cheek.”

“Ah,” Bodie said lasciviously, hastening his partner out into the living room, “but the question is—which cheek?”

Doyle was still muttering comments on that as he sat himself on the settee, watching with absent curiosity as Bodie rummaged through a video collection the size of which only those with friends in Customs ever acquire. “What’re you looking for this time?” Doyle asked, sprawling comfortably, making sure that he looked as if things really were back to the all-mates-together routine that had existed until a fortnight ago. “Some new treasure fresh from Amsterdam to pique our jaded palates?”

“Nah,” Bodie muttered, untangling the remote cord so that he could park himself on the sofa

beside Doyle. “Thought that, in the spirit of the day, we could go back to an old favourite.”

The screen flickered, the title one that Doyle remembered vividly. They’d watched this the first time, months ago, when they’d masturbated in front of each other, each one showing off just a little, each one staring a lot. The very beginning, and Bodie was offering him the chance to go back, to pretend that this was all simply sex, and nothing, absolutely nothing more. “Yeh, this one’s not bad,” he said casually, barely waiting for Bodie to settle himself before reaching for the other man’s zip.

Bodie spread his legs, giving Ray easier access, reached for Ray himself. With the television covered with the images of strangers having sex, he fondled Ray, groaned in pleasure as Ray caressed him. Waited, patiently, only a few minutes, until Ray was aroused, and ardent, and pressing against him.

And then Bodie did it. He leaned forward, pulled Ray tightly against him, and then kissed him.

For a moment, the world stopped, and destruction threatened from green eyes wild with fear and fury. And then Bodie kissed him again, denying the lies they had so recently planted between them, silently promising Ray that this time, this was someone worth risking pain for. This was someone it was better to love and perhaps lose than to abandon as nothing but meaningless sex. Tenderly, his own fears neither small nor quiet, Bodie kissed Ray again, demanding that the other man be at least as brave as he.

Doyle pulled away, looked steadily at Bodie, looked away, trying to find some way out that wouldn’t leave him and his life utterly empty.

“All or nothing?” Doyle whispered, everything in abeyance until he had the answer.

“Got it in one,” Bodie replied, nuzzling along the sensitive edge of Ray’s neck, kissing and laving the skin there. “We’ve never done anything by halves, so why start now?”

There were a million reasons why they should start now, as far as Ray was concerned, but the main one was the vulnerability, the panicking risk of needing someone as much as he could need Bodie.

“Come on, Ray,” Bodie whispered, hugging Doyle all the closer, their bodies meshing together perfectly, their clothing an irritation he was intent

on removing. "There's nothing to be scared of. Well, nothing much, anyroads. You already trust me with everything else, why not give this a try?"

Trust. Never an easy thing to do. But as Bodie said, they already trusted each other with their lives anyway. Why not trust each other with living as well?

"Just for a while?" Doyle asked, helping Bodie get rid of their clothes, knowing that neither one of them could say no at this point if Cowley himself walked in.

"Absolutely," Bodie told him, filling his hands

with Doyle's warm nakedness, fingers arrowing in towards the tight hole that he didn't dare—not quite yet—to touch. "Trial run, same's the way Cowley partnered us in the first place."

And look how well that had turned out.

"Just a trial?" Doyle demanded, staring tautly at Bodie.

Bodie met Doyle's eyes, saw the real question hiding behind the false demand for transience.

"Just a trial," Bodie replied, very softly, his finger stroking gently across delicate flesh. "For as long as you want..."

for Snow White

ROOM SERVICE

Room Service is a classic example of M. Fae's 'cozy' pieces where almost the entire story takes place in one confined space. Here, as part of their jobs, Bodie and Doyle are forced to spend long hours in each other's company. With their partnership recovering from a disastrous last mission, this new assignment could be interminable. Instead, an unexpected catalyst sparks an interesting reaction...

DANTE'S Inferno had nothing on this place.

Bodie looked around himself once more, checking to make sure the room really was as bad as first glance had implied, and then groaned, dismayed. "You really should've kept your stupid fucking mouth shut."

"Yeh?" Doyle inquired, making a point of giving all his attention to exploring the cracked and stained sink, so ancient the draining board was the same slightly slimy wood his gran had had in her old place. "Course, if you had any balls, you'd've stuck up for yourself and then I wouldn't've had to say anything in the first place, would I?"

Bodie gave him an old-fashioned look, cheesed off with Doyle landing the blame on him again: there had been enough of that since he'd bungled the Craine job. "And if you had any brains above your belt buckle you'd know you don't answer back when the boss is giving you a bollocksing for fucking up on the job—"

"He was over the top—"

"He had nothing on you, mate! Christ, half London heard you start on me, so what gives you the right—"

"What gives me the right? Christ, that's rich! In case you'd forgotten, that was my back you forgot about out there, *mate*."

Bodie looked away, the truth worse than anything Cowley—or even Doyle—had hurled at him. "Look, I'm sorry." He raised his hand, forestalling

the words blistering the tip of Doyle's tongue. "Yeh, I know, saying sorry's about as much good as kissing it better."

Doyle gave him a look, started unpacking the food they'd brought to see them through. "So," he finally said, his calmness enough to make Bodie wonder when the storm was going to come, "what the fuck were you thinking about when we went in there then?"

Bodie made a great to-do about sorting through the pile of bags he had hauled up the stairs, taking his time to organise the piles, going through quite a production. "I dunno," he finally admitted very quietly. "Thought I heard something, let myself get distracted..."

"Christ on a crutch," Doyle hissed between clenched teeth, aware that even this early in the game, they had to be careful. "You let your mind wander—"

"All right, all right, all right, that's enough, you hear me, Doyle?"

Slowly, eyes narrowing dangerously, Doyle turned to look at the partner who had almost got him killed not forty-eight hours before. "Are you trying to tell me," he said so mildly it would unnerve anyone other than Bodie, "that you can almost get me killed, and I'm not allowed to utter a mutter about it?"

"What I'm saying," and Bodie had to stop, rein his temper in, tension thinning his lips and engorging his veins, pulse throbbing, trip, trip, trip in his

temple. "All I'm saying is I didn't mean to fuck up like that. I thought I heard something, was sure I'd heard something—"

Doyle didn't, quite, sneer.

"Don't even think about saying it," Bodie whispered, his own self-anger putting him on a short fuse before Doyle and Cowley had even started in on him. "But I tell you what, I'll say something to you, give you something to think about to keep you busy in that fucking glass tower of yours."

A shrug met that comment, tacit agreement that even Doyle had fallen down on the job once or twice in his life, tacit permission for Bodie to state his case, offer some defence for the indefensible.

"Right, now I thought I heard someone moving behind you."

"All right," Doyle said, still not so sympathetic that he could drop the acidic sarcasm, "we'll play make-believe for a bit."

Bodie let that slide past him unhindered: too vivid in his memory was Doyle, *that* close to being killed, *that* close to his head being blown off. "So suppose I did hear something: what would you and Cowley've done if I'd just ignored it, eh? And what about the other times me hearing something has kept your skin in one piece, eh, Ray?"

"Yeh," Doyle said tiredly, running his hand through his hair, the lifted curls revealing the strong, broad forehead and the lines of worry gouged there. "I know, I know. It's just—"

"Just what?" Bodie demanded, biting his tongue to stop himself from saying anything else. Keep cool, that was his credo, and he'd sounded suspiciously close to begging for his own taste.

"Well what the fuck d'you think it is?" Doyle would have shouted if they hadn't needed to keep such a low profile. "You're always there, always keeping me safe and yesterday—"

"I let you down."

"Yeh. You let me down." He looked up suddenly, and the honesty in his eyes was too much for either man to endure. "And I'm not used to not depending on you."

"You can still trust me, Ray," Bodie told him quietly, and this time, he couldn't care less about keeping cool; didn't care that the begging was raw in his voice. "Yeh, I made a mistake, but Christ, not even I'm perfect. It was just the once, that's all. I promise you, Ray, never again..."

Unexpectedly, Doyle smiled at him. "Unless you

hear something behind me again, eh?"

"Well, next time I'll make sure I'm right first, all right?"

For several moments, Doyle simply stood there, staring at Bodie, going over the whole thing yet again, kicking and punching the incident until he could fit it into the sort of perspective that would allow the partnership to continue. "Fair enough," he eventually said, noting the sigh of relief from Bodie, seeing clearly the weight he'd taken from his partner's shoulders. "I suppose you're hungry already?" he added, easing them back into the familiar rituals of their friendship, rites to bury the doubt that had soured between them.

"Hearing you talk, people'd think I wasn't possessed of a tiny, delicate appetite."

"Tiny and delicate is your brain, mate. I'd describe your appetite as birdlike—you eat three times your weight every day."

"Rubbish!" Bodie retorted, jumping in with both feet, grabbing at the familiar patterns of Doyle's acceptance with the greed of a starved child.

Their badinage over the appetites of birds, feathered, soon slid smoothly into the discussion of the appetites of birds, fancied, the flurry of words a canopy to hide any underlying disquietudes.

The observation equipment was set up, camera on tripod at the window, field glasses to hand on what, by the looks of the motheaten and mottled cushion, had once been a cosy window seat. A camp table was against the right hand wall, the tape recorder on top, the brown of the twin tape spools glinting dimly in the uncertain light. Sensitive microphones, tested but not yet needed, lay safely in their padded cases, and the notepads with their small pencils attached were placed neatly alongside their RTs. The myriad other, tiny details were taken care of, the work divided easily and without any need for discussion, the two working as smoothly together as they always did.

"So that's it, then," Bodie decided, standing in the middle of the tiny room, arms akimbo, his head almost touching the bare bulb that hung down from the chipped plaster medallion in the center of the ceiling.

"Yeh, that's it," Doyle agreed, coming up behind Bodie and grabbing him by the shoulders, turning him towards Bodie's now neatly-separated-but-still-sitting-on-the-floor piles of provisions and supplies just inside the front door. "If you're planning on eating nothing and lying on the bare

floor, which I'm not, even if you are, you bloody toerag, so come on. Get on with it."

"Do we have to?" Bodie moaned, although it sounded nothing more than his usual complaining, unrevealing of the tiredness hollowing his bones after the rollercoaster ride of yesterday and today. "All right, so we have to put the sleeping bags out, but the rest of it can wait till tomorrow, can't it? And anyway, what's the point of dragging all that out of the bags when we're just going to have to put it all back again when we leave?"

"Because," Doyle told him, unmoved, "as of tomorrow morning, we're going to make Anne Frank and her lot sound like a herd of bloody elephants, remember?"

And Bodie groaned: he remembered. Cowley's revenge for Doyle protecting his partner so vociferously, not to mention so rudely. Stuck in the attic flat—room, really—to 'observe' the bloke who lived downstairs, a bloke suspected of being a member of the IRA cell responsible for a bomb left in a café, with only a lucky malfunction stopping the device from going off in the middle of a Saturday afternoon's weary shoppers. Moving in the night before MacGuire came back from his holiday—genuine or otherwise—in America, unable to betray themselves by so much as a sound or their bird would fly the coop.

"Come on, Bodie, just cause you look like something out of C&A you don't have to stand there like a bloody shop dummy."

"I'll have you know I was thinking," Bodie said in his most superior voice, "not that I would expect a scruff like you to know that."

"Just put the stuff out," Doyle told him, shoving a perilously stretched carrier bag into Bodie's arms. "You can bung that lot in the kitchen."

"Yes, sahib."

Doyle unrolled the thick mats that would muffle their footsteps, laying one from the window and the equipment to the less than salubrious mattress abandoned in the middle of the dusty floor, another mat leading into the scullery, two more to take them into the bathroom.

"Don't know what you did that for," Bodie said. "Won't be taking any baths while our chum's at home."

"You can piss in a bottle if you want to, but I'm not, and I'm bugged if I'll let you use the sink."

"Ooh, ducky," Bodie camped, pinching Doyle's derrière and skipping out of reach quickly, "I

didn't know you were that sort of girl."

"Shut up, Bodie," Doyle said, laughing as he shoved his partner back into the other room. "And you can sort the curtains for that."

"Oh, you're too, too kind," Bodie muttered, going, nonetheless, to 'sort' the curtains, thumbtacking net panels up to hide them enough that they could look out the window without being immediately seen, pulling the extant curtains, old-fashioned and heavy with dust, closed until there was just enough room for the camera lens to peer through. Another couple of minutes fiddling and everything was as it should be. Behind him, he could hear Doyle moving around and the slither of nylon as sleeping bags were spread and the rasp of a zip as Doyle's new hold-all was opened.

"Here," Doyle called, and Bodie turned round in time to be catch one of the things Doyle had tossed at him.

"Slippers?" Bodie said, bemused. "Oh, you shouldn't have, Ray. But as you did, where's my pipe then?"

"Up your arse with your brains," Doyle replied sweetly. "Cowley's idea, thought it would stop you clumping round here like a cart horse."

"Be supplying us with cardies and deaf aids next."

"As long as it's not marital aids, you've got nothing to worry about, sweetie." Doyle got to his feet, had a look round the pathetic room. "Right, suppose that's about it."

"And since you've been such a good boy, Christopher Robin, I shall take you out for tea," Bodie told him, bundling him into a jacket, trying to get him out the door before common sense and Cowley's threats stopped him.

"Don't be stupid, Bodie. We're supposed to be lying low, not traipsing off round Leytonstone."

"Oh, come on, Ray," Bodie wheedled. "Christ knows how long we'll be stuck in here. It's our last night of freedom—"

"And after the strip Cowley tore off me—"

"How's he going to know? Anyway, all he said was we had to be in place before MacGuire came back tomorrow, and his flight's not even due in till nearly seven. So where's the harm in us going out for one drink, eh?"

"One drink?" Doyle asked suspiciously.

"Just one. Not even a pint, just a half. Go on, be daring."

"Yeh, but if anyone sees us—"

“We’ll be less suspicious than we were hauling all this stuff upstairs.”

Doyle, actually chastened, if not by his boss’ recent fury, then certainly by his own near miss, still hesitated.

“It’s the only chance we’ll have of a drink for my birthday,” Bodie added, playing the ace kept up his sleeve for just such occasions.

“Thought your birthday was in November?”

“Who told you that? Nah, my birthday’s on Thursday, and we’ll still be in here unless there’s a miracle. So what do you say? It’ll only be for half an hour. One measly little drink...”

Several drinks and a really good Indian meal later, they finally made it back to the single, rather chilly room.

“Shh!”

“Teach your sister to suck eggs,” Bodie muttered, the esses more sibilant than real sobriety would require.

“Grandmother, Bodie,” Doyle told him, steering him more or less successfully through the door and onto bare, creaking floorboards.

Bodie frowned, puzzled over something for a few minutes, then muttered: “Nah, I’m not a grandmother. Might be a daddy, mind you...”

“Oh yeh?” Doyle asked quickly, intrigued, immediately digging now that Bodie’s bastions were a bit washed out by too much liquid cheer. “So there’re a few little Bodies running around, are there?”

“Prob’bly. Mebbe. Dunno, really. Oh, this room’s spinnin’. Put the light on, Ray, go on, be a pal...”

“Don’t be daft, Bodie, this place is supposed to be empty. Come on, round this way, into the loo with you. We can put a light on in there. Watch it, watch it,” as Bodie tripped over the edge of one of the mats, his lack of balance proving catching, Doyle stumbling noisily before he managed to hold them both up.

“Shhh-shhh!” Bodie hissed, then giggled, too loudly, hushing himself immediately. “Better shh, or Mr. Cowley won’t love us anymore. But you’n me, we’ll still love each other. Love each other f’rever an’ ever,” he announced in a theatrical whisper, archer than any proscenium.

“Yeh, Bodie, whatever you say, Bodie,” Doyle told him, well-used to Bodie’s brand of drunken affection.

“Better’n brother, tha’s you,” Bodie told him,

trying to ruffle his hair and succeeding in clouting him round the ear instead.

“Pack that in! An’ stand up, will you? I’m trying to find the light...”

“’s an old, old, old house,” Bodie sang to some tune only he knew, “so mebbe the lightswitch’s on the inside. My old house was like that. My old house ’ad a toilet out the back, till the council put one inside. Didn’t like goin’ out at night, ’ad a chamber pot under the bed.” He snickered, clinging onto the door jamb while Doyle fumbled in the dark for the switch. “Peepee pot, tha’s wha’ we called it, me an’ me mam. You’d’ve liked ’er, me mam.”

“Bet I would. Oh, here it is. Stupid bloody place to put a switch, hanging from a bloody string like that. Right, there’s your light on.”

Bodie stood there in the low wattage light, swaying slightly with the swaying of the bulb, steadying only when Doyle reached out and took a good grip of him again. “Don’t think that was a good idea, Ray,” he whispered in the soft voice of the very, very drunk, the one they used usually immediately prior to either passing out, throwing up, or both.

“You’ll feel better when you’ve had a wash. An’ if you don’t, tough cheddar, mate—you asked for it,” Doyle told him harshly, even though he was quite gentle as he helped Bodie over to the sink, making sure his partner was well able to take care of himself before leaving him to it.

Eventually, the clanging pipes and splashings of water ceased, and the small sounds of the city drew in again, cosy to the ears of someone who had lived his life in the confines of cement and tarmac, with sparrows and pigeons for wildlife. Then, drowning it out, Bodie’s stumblings and mumblings, feet shuffling, clothes falling, the clunk of a belt buckle hitting the floor, the clatter of coins tumbling from a pocket. Just as well MacGuire was on a plane somewhere over the Atlantic, Doyle thought to himself, but didn’t bother to mention: Bodie was too far gone to make much sense of anything approaching common sense, which meant he was probably ripe for a private little inquisition.

A foot, bare, high-arched, toenails neatly cut, all the details far clearer and far nearer than Doyle would have liked, Bodie trampling on his pillow in his search for bed.

“Where’s it gone?”

"Your bed's on the floor, Bodie. The sleeping bag."

Bodie shuffled about a bit, his big toe coming perilously close to Doyle's left eye.

"Here," Doyle said, pushing Bodie in the right direction, "beside me."

"Oh. Right, thanks."

Much huffing and puffing, pushing and pulling, muttering and groaning, and Bodie was finally in his sleeping bag. His head touched the pillow, and then he was sitting up again, so quickly Doyle's head spun in sympathy.

"Oi!" This accompanied by a very sharp jab to Doyle's nearest shoulder. "You 'aven't had a wash yet, 'ave you, you mucky pig?"

"Not yet," Doyle told him patiently, knowing it was a waste of time to point out that Bodie had only just got out of the bathroom and that Doyle himself wasn't even actually inside his own sleeping bag yet, just lying there in lieu of any other available furniture. "I'll go now, shall I?" he asked, the sarcasm completely wasted.

"Should bloodywell think so. 'm not going to bed with someone who 'asn't even brushed his teeth yet." A pause, not entirely due to Doyle getting to his feet. "But I'm not goin' to bed with you, not like that, just like that." Another sodden giggle, and Doyle groaned, fairly sure of what was coming next. Sure enough, Bodie did it. "Just like that," he said in what, even sober, he imagined was a brilliant impersonation of Tommy Cooper, "just like that."

Sad thing was, he was better drunk than sober. "That's terrific," Doyle told him, patting him on the shoulder. "Now, why don't you just lie there quietly for a minute till you fall asleep? Shh!" he whispered, trying to stave off the next stage, the one where Bodie started singing—badly—at the top of his lungs. "That's right, you just lie there—"

"'m not goin' to sleep," Bodie murmured, ending on a huge yawn.

"Then you just lie there till I come back, all right?" Chance'd be a fine thing, Doyle thought as he hurried through the nightly ablutions and used the toilet. Typical: Bodie mentioning his mother *and* the possibility that he might be a father, and then being too drunk to go into details. Insane to argue with Bodie when he was this tipsy, and by the time he finished having the wash Bodie insisted on, that worthy was going to be snoring soundly.

"Tha' you?" came the sleepy question as

Doyle tiptoed across the floor.

"No, it's Princess bloody Anne," Doyle told him, crawling into his sleeping bag, trying to shove Bodie over onto his side of the mattress. "I'm surprised you're still awake."

"Told you I wasn't goin' to sleep by myself. Lonely, like tha'." Already, the slurring was fading, proof, had anyone been bothered by such details, that quite a bit of Bodie's drunkenness was nothing more than tipsiness, nothing more than an excuse to relax the usual constrictions that so minimised male friendship.

Staring up at a ceiling he couldn't see in the faint light creeping in through the gap in the curtains, Doyle lay very still beside Bodie, his voice soothing and welcoming. "Lonely because you miss your mum, or lonely because you miss the kids you might have?"

Slurred by sleepiness and booze, Bodie was hard to make out. "Just don' like being in the dark by myself."

Not something Doyle had ever expected to hear Bodie say, not in a million years. "Don't much like it myself," he said, keeping his voice low.

"Always hated it. Mam used to leave a light on for me till I fell asleep an' then my Da would put it out when he came home from the late shift."

"So your Da wasn't good to you?" Doyle asked, carefully unravelling the tangled skein of lies Bodie had woven for years, with his tall tales and changing names and faces and places.

"Da? Oh, he was brilliant, was my Da. Best in the whole street. Took me to the park, an' the Boys Brigade."

Unseen by Bodie's usually sharp eyes, Doyle frowned. "So your Mam and Da were good to you?"

"Mmm. Sunday's were best, 'specially when Da'd had a bit of overtime. Always had a roast then, an' all the trimmings."

"If it was all so great, what'd you leave home for then?"

"Got bored. An' it wasn't as if I was goin' to get anywhere in school, was it? Be the same as my Da: leave school early, go to work in the factory or the docks, getting up early or working mad shifts, scrimping an' scraping..."

It was so wonderfully normal Doyle could have laughed. "I always thought you ran away to sea to escape a cruel and vicious family."

"You're mad, absolutely bonkers, you. Nah, I

just did what half the blokes my age did. Ran off to see the world an' make my fortune." A muffled snort, Bodie laughing into the silky softness of his sleeping bag. "An' look where it got me. Lyin' on the floor in a squat an' come the morning, I won't even be able to go to the bog in MacGuire's home."

"Join the Navy, travel to interesting lands, meet interesting people—"

"An' kill 'em. I'm good at killing," Bodie said easily, steadily, making no more of it than someone else might make of being a good driver or a good cook. "Nice an' clean, never let them suffer."

Doyle wasn't quite sure what to say to that, didn't know what Bodie needed to hear to keep him talking like this. "You're a decent bloke."

A rough hand chucked under Doyle's chin, clumsy in its affection. "Thanks. 's quite a compliment, coming from you, innit? But it's true. Not that I don't want them suffering from the goodness of my heart, mind you," Bodie said very seriously, so seriously that Doyle knew he had to be lying, covering up another soft spot. There was a longish pause, until Doyle thought Bodie must have fallen asleep and put paid to any more interesting little revelations. "Don't want any of 'em coming back to haunt me, you see. 've never liked ghosts, don't want any hanging round me..."

"If they did, I'd get rid of them for you."

A giggle, colouring Bodie's words. "Can just picture you in your cassock swinging your censer and incense."

"Makes me sound as if I should be earning a living down Soho."

"You'd make a fortune if you did. Have a queue outside the Hussar right round the Square..."

"I think I'll take that as a compliment," Doyle said, amused.

"You do that. Was meant as one."

Somewhere, not too far away, there was a dog barking suddenly, then the shallower, blunter sound of a human voice, and the dog was quiet, the entire street silent. Quiet as that other night spent in such similar circumstances, preparing for the Parsali conference or announcement or whatever it had been. All he really remembered was lying there talking to Bodie, the intimacy of it, the loneliness and the fear going away as long as he could hear Bodie's strong voice attuned to him. Lying here in the dark, talking like this, was even more precious than that night had been, sweeter somehow, like champagne. There was the barest breath of air

coming through the window, old putty loosened by weather, the outside coming inside far enough to stir the curtains, shadows moving briefly, gracefully, along the wall. "Bodie..."

"Mhmm?"

"You said something earlier..."

"Mmm?"

"About being a father..."

The warmth of the dark was gone, replaced by all the cold nights of frightened children. Absurd, Doyle told himself, he was a grown man, and it was Bodie who didn't like the dark. But of course, it wasn't the dark that was unnerving: it was Bodie lying so still and quiet and cold beside him, as communicative as a corpse.

"Sorry," Doyle said, not wanting to get into an argument, not tonight, and not when they were going to be essentially imprisoned with each other for god knew how long. "Didn't mean to pry."

"No, no, don't worry, it's not you. It's just..." A swallow, audible in the night-time's peace. "Forgot I even said that to you. Yeh, there might be a Bodie or two running around out there. Might even be one up in Liverpool. Wouldn't be surprised if there was one or two in Africa."

"Bit young to start, weren't you?"

"Didn't leave home till I was almost fifteen, an' who thinks about condoms when it's your first time, eh?" A chuckle, reminiscing, fond memories stirred. "Had one in my back pocket, but I didn't even remember it until after I'd done it. Too anxious to get it in her—"

"Too anxious to know what it'd feel like, shit scared you'd come before you could even get in her..." Smiling, his own memories stirring, girls he hadn't thought of in years, the old embarrassment of being young warming him with affection for the boy he'd been.

"Then worrying yourself sick in case you'd caught anything..."

"Spending hours in the loo trying to see if it looked different now that you'd done 'it'..."

"You too? I thought I was the only one that did that."

Doyle shrugged, the nylon sleeping bag susurrating against him. "Think we all did that. Just not something you usually admit to though, is it?"

"Like wondering if you've broken it the first time stuff actually comes out of it?"

A surprised laugh, Doyle turning onto his side

so that he was facing Bodie, invisible but for the gleam of tooth caught in a glimmer of light, or the faint sheen of skin. "I even went and asked my dad about it."

"What'd he say?"

"Told me to talk to Father Henderson!" Then quickly, before Bodie could say anything else, before Bodie could get them farther away from the subject: "But you haven't any proof one way or the other, about those little Bodies you've left behind..."

So close together, each could feel the other, knew as one shrugged and the other lay perfectly, uncommonly motionless. "It's the usual: you get in, get off and get out and leave the worrying to her. I was too young then, too young and too desperate and too—scared, really. Got slagged something awful by the other blokes when I came down with a dose, I can tell you." Aware of the tension in his partner, he hurried on, trying to erase that slate. "But I'd do it different now."

"Oh, getting into the kinky stuff, are we?"

"No such thing as kinky," Bodie said through a yawn. "'s all natural, 's all just people doin' what they like..."

And on which intriguing confession, Bodie fell soundly asleep.

"Bodie?" Doyle whispered. "Bodie!" A little fiercer, with a dunt from his elbow as emphasis. "Trust you," he muttered, tugging Bodie's sleeping bag up high enough to cover the pale skin of his shoulder. "Getting into the really interesting bits, and then you flake out on me. Bastard," he said affectionately, settling himself down, soothing himself into the warmth of his own snug sleeping bag.

All the distant, familiar noises surrounded him, comforting to a man city born and bred, and from beside him, Bodie's breathing souged against Doyle's ears, and against his back there was the easeful pressure of Bodie's solid weight, diluting the last fright of Bodie not being there, of Bodie letting him down. Slowly, in no hurry to give up the tangible sense of complete security and the soft strength of being safe, Doyle slid into sleep.

To be woken, the first cluster of sparrows raucous outside the window, the first blood-orange of the sky crawling across the floor.

Bodie writhed, trapped by the narrowness of his sleeping bag, legs trying to thrash, confined instead, arms tangling in padded fabric, mouth open,

teeth drawn back in a grimace, head flailing, small moans, wordless horrors rising from his throat. Taking shape, forming almost recognisable sounds, the whimperings ululating and painfilled.

Lying beside him, there was nothing to be done: it was madness and an invitation to a black eye to wake Bodie from a nightmare. Doyle watched, and waited, biting his lip in his frustration. Almost, he reached out; almost, he banished the nightmare, but common sense governed him, and he rolled onto his stomach, pummeling his pillow to keep his hands from invading Bodie.

A surge, high-tide cresting, then ebbing movements, finally still, but only for the barest second. "Ray?" Small as a child, bitter as a broken man.

"'s all right, I'm still here."

"Saw you," Bodie whispered.

"'s all right, I told you, everything's okay..."

"No, no, it's not, I saw you. The bastard got you and I looked up and it was everywhere, all over me, in my eyes and in my mouth, could even taste it. Blood and bone and brains, covering me and I couldn't get out—"

"It's all right," Doyle said fiercely, grabbing hold of Bodie, hands slithering on the nylon: furious motion, fabric hauled out of the way, cold hands clutching hot skin, touching, life to life, taking away the sting of death. "I'm still here, was only a dream. And it didn't happen, and it won't happen. Told you before, when we go, we're going together."

"But yesterday, I almost..."

"A miss is as good as a mile, and don't you forget that, Bodie." Softer now, gentling him, taming the nightmare. "Told you, I'm still here. Can't get rid of my ugly mug that easy, can you?"

Bodie stared up at him, saw him shadowed by the encroaching light, saw the darkness with so little brightness to change the dream. The air was tinged with red, Doyle's hair darkly colourless in this low light, all of it too unreal, too like the dream. Hands still trembling, he stretched up one hand, touched hair, dry; ran fingertips over the contours of bone, still whole. Touched, finally, the face, tracing the unbroken planes, following the curves and concavities, dappling over the stubble of beard, finding and remembering the old, damaged cheekbone that was never quite as warm as the rest of Doyle's face.

"Still here," he murmured, finally reassured, "not dead. Didn't kill you..."

For an absurd moment, Doyle thought Bodie, made mellow by earlier booze and later relief from the nightmare, was going to kiss him: would have hugged him if either one of them had been anything but English. Instead, Bodie stared at him, inchoate longing in his eyes, the simple need for comfort and reassurance.

“Oh, sod this for a game,” Doyle muttered, casting King and Country into the rank past where it belonged. He drew Bodie close, innocent as a baby, held him tight against his chest, the edge of the zip digging into him. Concentrating on making Bodie feel better, he didn’t bother with the discomfort of the zip, rather was glad of it, for it meant that there was something between him and Bodie: one thing to hug his best friend, different, somehow, to clasp a half-naked man to his own bare chest.

“Thanks,” Bodie mumbled in his ear, relinquishing his own hold on Doyle, pulling back, separating them far enough that embarrassment danced in gleefully.

“Yeh, well, don’t mention it,” Doyle said automatically, wishing immediately that he’d said ‘any time’ instead. “Suppose we’d better start now if we want a wash and breakfast before our friend MacGuire gets home. I’ll go first.” Trying not to look as if he was running away, Doyle headed, rather quickly, for the bathroom, leaving Bodie to lie in the dawning, thinking, one hand absently stroking his left nipple, where the faint impression of smooth chest hair still lingered.

By the time Doyle was washed and shaved, the camp stove was hissing under the kettle and Weetabix were in bowls awaiting the luxury of the last fresh milk for who knew how many days.

“Wrap yourself round that,” Bodie said casually, apparently unfazed by their recent Continental display. “I’ll grab a quick bath—there’s still a good hour before he could get home.”

“I’ll see to the tea,” Doyle mumbled, awkward, made more so by incomprehension. It wasn’t as if he’d done anything to be embarrassed about, was it? Still, he watched out of the corner of his eye as Bodie, sturdy, pale, unconcernedly naked, padded into the bathroom.

Later, Customs, traffic and holiday delays obviously all having played their part, MacGuire finally arrived downstairs, the descent from the taxi meticulously observed, the presence of feminine companionship dutifully reported in before

MacGuire and company made their way indoors and thus imposed a rule of silence on the two men holed in above them.

The rest of the day established their pattern: one on, one off duty, one crouched at the window, ear phones on his head like some bizarre science-fiction hair-do; the other lounging on the ‘bed’, dozing or reading as the mood took him, Bodie working his way through his book of cryptic crossword puzzles, Doyle sketching in his notebook. The silence was comforting, on the whole, but the waiting, the inactivity, commingled to form the too-familiar churn of tension and enervation. This, rather than revenge for Bodie’s mistake and Doyle’s slack mouth, was why Cowley had exiled these two to this place: by now, the urge to move would be unbearable in less-experienced agents, or even in less self-controlled men. There would be the crackle of tension, the snapping temper that couldn’t be expressed, growing until there was the real risk of someone slipping up and being heard by their mark downstairs. But Bodie and Doyle had been through this all before, had proved that their uncommon rapport survived even this, bringing them through all this unscathed, the dangers of secret obbo duty different from action, for it wasn’t the physical integrity that was pressured, but the intangible, the unmeasurable that made a partnership work.

The squeaking floorboards marked long before MacGuire took up residence downstairs, Doyle crossed the room silently, debunking Bodie from his shift, resettling into the routine as they had done on more of this type of job than either one of them ever wanted to count. Still, as they moved in silent partnership, Bodie looked at Doyle sharply, the other man’s reactions just slightly off, the set of the mouth too mulish for this soon into an operation like this. Later, if MacGuire and his friend went out, they’d sort this out, nip whatever problem it was in the bud.

A flurry of motion, and Bodie was at the window beside Doyle, stifling a groan of frustration as MacGuire kissed his girlfriend goodbye and waved her off in a taxi: one down, one to go, but that didn’t help them at all. Bodie rolled his eyes in mimed disgust, and Doyle fumed silently, fidgeting edgily.

Definitely need to sort Doyle out later, Bodie told himself, concerned by the bad-tempered way he had been shrugged off when all he’d tried to do

was pat Doyle consolingly on the arm.

Later wasn't any better: the girlfriend came home laden with Marks & Spencer's carrier bags, and the headphones told them that the pair downstairs were having a cozy evening at home, while Bodie and Doyle were stuck with sandwiches from the last of their prepared food trove, a packet of biscuits drunk with fizzy drinks and nothing to listen to but the distorted bass and wail of music drifting up through the floorboards.

Getting late, and it was Doyle's turn on the headphones again, Bodie snuggling into the pleasantness of his sleeping bag, eyes drifting shut over his book. Glancing over to mouth a goodnight to his partner, he was struck by the expression on Doyle's face.

What? he mimed, his expression questioning.

Doyle shrugged: *nothing*.

Bodie left it for a minute, then looked back, Doyle's face even more interesting. *What?* he demanded, knowing that his partner could read him perfectly well.

Doyle shrugged, made a face: *nothing much*.

Bodie gave him an incredulous stare.

Reluctantly, Doyle told him, arm and hand gesture more than expressive.

So that was it, Bodie thought to himself, trying not to laugh. They were going at it like rabbits downstairs, and Doyle was having to listen to it. A quick, very rude glance at his partner's infamous trousers, and sure enough, Bodie noticed with sympathy, the poor bugger was getting all worked up about it. Well, that was something Bodie had no intention of intruding on at all, so with one last knowing, wickedly teasing look, he turned his back to Doyle with every intention of going to sleep.

Easier said than done, when he knew there were two people bonking their brains out downstairs, and poor Doyle was sitting over there, balls tying themselves in knots. Against all his better judgment, Bodie felt the beginnings of arousal: time for a quick visit to the loo, then, while those downstairs were too preoccupied to do anything that might require Bodie's immediate attention. Silently, he made off for the bathroom, as innocently as if he were going in for a last leak before bed.

Watching Bodie beat a hasty retreat, Doyle gave him a sour look: he knew what Bodie was up to, rotten bastard. Leaving him here like this, the only celibate in a world of sighs and moans and everyone else having a lovely time. Shortly, Bodie

emerged from the bathroom, and Doyle looked, pointedly and mockingly, at his watch. Bodie just grinned and slid back into his sleeping bag, an expression of relaxed smugness on his face. He blew a cheeky kiss at Doyle, and then, his own tensions happily relieved, he dropped off to sleep.

Doyle wasn't dropping off anything, stuck there listening to MacGuire who had more stamina than most men even pretended to. It wasn't even as if he could have a quiet wank. Get caught pulling his pud like that and he'd never live it down. Cursing the world in general and MacGuire, the job, Cowley, and Bodie in particular, Doyle sat in the dark, alone, listening.

The next day, well into the afternoon, MacGuire and girlfriend having gone out together, the pall of silence lifted from Bodie and Doyle. "Right," Bodie said, watching the two figures depart down the street, "that's them off then."

Doyle was already reporting into his RT, face so cheerful anyone would think he had a terminal illness.

That done, Doyle clattered into the kitchen, muttering under his breath, heating tinned food up, making as much noise as one man and a few cans possibly could.

"See you're your usual charming self," Bodie said, making Doyle jump.

"Christ, you trying to give me a heart attack?" Doyle snapped, uncomfortably aware of just how near Bodie was standing. The body heat so close to his back was doing funny things to him, his breath too shallow, his heart thumping uncomfortably as Bodie leaned in over his shoulder to see what Doyle was up to, long arms reaching round to poke at the various things going into the tin ration cans. Nothing that hadn't happened a million times before, but then, Doyle had never been so sexually frustrated before, had he? He used that as bastion against the unnerving stirring of his sex as he stood there, to all intents and purposes, wrapped in Bodie's arms. "Gerroff," he muttered, disgruntled, not daring to actually shrug Bodie off, for if he moved so much as an inch, he'd be touching his partner, his back plastered to Bodie's front, and that mere thought released a frightening flood of heat in him. "I said get off me," he snarled, stirring furiously at the tinned stew, splashing himself and the camp stove with brown gravy and fragments of carrot.

“God, you’ve really got your knickers in a twist,” Bodie said, not unkindly. “Come on, let me see to this and you can pop into the bathroom.”

Ridiculous to feel embarrassed, absurd to feel the blush staining his cheeks, but Doyle couldn’t help himself—couldn’t understand himself, either. He and Bodie had always been, able to talk—well perhaps not always truthfully, exaggeration being a favourite game of theirs—but at least they had always been open about matters sexual. Reacting like a teenager caught with his dad’s *Playboy* was pathetic.

“Go on!” Bodie cajoled, half-laughing, taking Doyle by the shoulders and shoving him in the general direction of the bathroom. “And don’t forget to lock the door and clean up behind yourself, you mucky bugger,” said teasingly, Bodie sanguine about these things, years at sea and in the Services reducing all of it to nothing more routine than eating or sleeping.

“I’m fine,” Doyle said stubbornly, completely ignoring the discomfort and tension in his own body. “Just ‘cause you’ve got a dirty mind—”

“Look, Ray,” Bodie said, a bit put out by Doyle’s odd behaviour, “you’re being stupid. No, shut up and hear me out. You’re wound so tight you’re a risk to both of us, mate, and we both know what the problem is.”

A nod towards the tight crotch of Doyle’s jeans stopped Doyle from claiming ignorance. He was being stupid, he knew, behaving like some blushing virgin, especially since it was only Bodie, and just think of some of the things that had gone on during some of their double dates, and the conversations after.

Bodie was still talking at him, nagging him like a mother going on about washing behind his ears. “You’re going to end up hurting, and then who bears the brunt, eh? Me, that’s who, you biting my head off every two minutes. And it’s not healthy bottling it up like that—for that matter, it’s not as if it’s any different from what I did last night either, is it?”

“Nah, you’re right,” Doyle said, a bit hang-dog. “Daft to be embarrassed, innit?”

“Outright stupid, if you ask me. So take five minutes and sort yourself out, all right?”

“Five minutes?” Doyle demanded, nose in air, the joke covering the embarrassment he simply could not shake off. “Long enough for the under-privileged like you, I suppose, but us real men need a bit longer than *five* minutes.”

“Right,” Bodie smiled indulgently although he was a bit put out by Doyle’s peculiar reaction to him, “you take an hour or two, mate, and don’t you worry your head about the job, I’ll do it for you.”

Doyle looked down at his fly, grinned up at Bodie, unaware of the odd expression in his eyes. “I can do it myself, thanks all the same, flower.”

“Get on with you, or MacGuire’ll be back before you’re done.”

Doyle nipped into the toilet, snibbing the door securely behind him: he wouldn’t put it past Bodie to come in, and he didn’t trust the bugger with a camera around. Closing the lid of the toilet, the porcelain chipped, cold and a real passion-killer, Doyle pulled his trousers down and his t-shirt up. His cock was hot in his hand, balls craving attention, erection sudden and too quick for real pleasure, the need burning him. His foreskin was already withdrawn, his exposed glans moist and almost too sensitive. Doyle spat on his hand, wishing for some gliding oil or a hot, wet body to sink into. Or a mouth: he loved being sucked. There were times he’d rather lie back and be sucked than bother with intercourse.

He stretched his legs out in front of himself, let his mind wander to the women he’d known, the few who had been really good at giving head, reliving their caresses, his hand blurring on his cock. Too rough, making him wince, hand too dry for the sensitivity of his overwrought cock. Wetting his palm again, trying to slow down, letting his imagination run full rein. There had been that time when he’d been undercover on the Drug Squad, that bloke who’d offered to suck him for just one small white-powder packet. Letting him do it, there in the rancid squat, done worse to maintain his cover, letting that wide mouth suck him in, wet, strong throat, dark hair bobbing back and forth, back and forth, like his hand now, like Bodie’s dark hair—

He snapped the thought in two, threw it away, denied it had ever existed. His cock throbbed, begging him for attention, and he stroked it, thumb dallying at the slit, the way that man’s tongue had...Bodie’s tongue would feel like that, Bodie’s mouth larger than a woman’s, able to take all of him inside, sucking on him—

He tried to stop thinking about it, the irrational worry that his partner, not ten feet away, would know what he was thinking, would know what he was doing.

But Bodie did know what he was doing, had sat here last night doing the same thing, Bodie's arse warming the same wooden seat, Bodie's hand racing in the same rhythm, Bodie's cock straining, erupting—

He came, to the images of his partner, and to the sounds of new voices in the other room, strangers' voices familiarising themselves into Graves and Mitchell as the dissolution of orgasm left him.

Fingers fumbling, he managed to put his clothes back together, wished he could do the same for his self-control. Leaving the sanctuary of the bathroom, having to face Bodie's twinkling, knowing eyes, Doyle was fit to be tied. "Why don't you just hang a sign out the window announcing we're here," he snapped at the two younger agents. "Just because you were only activated two months ago, there's no need for you to behave like stupid schoolboys on a spree. Making enough noise to raise the dead..."

"And a good morning to you," Bodie said, his cheerfulness a warning Doyle didn't even hear. "The lads've come to pick up the film of MacGuire's little friend and best of all, they've brought us some decent grub."

"Well, isn't that just fan-fucking-tastic," Doyle grumbled, too mortified to meet Bodie's eyes, too off-balance to stop glancing at Bodie's mouth, his groin, his hands.

"Yeh, it is, actually," Bodie said coldly. "They even brought us fresh bread, milk and today's papers. You can pay them, right?"

"Why should I?"

"Because, Raymondo my sweet," Bodie said nastily, "you are being a right sod to these two and a foul-tempered little shit and none of us have to put up with it. Give the lads their money, Ray."

Ungraciously, still not looking at Bodie, Doyle snatched his jacket from where he'd dumped it on top of his sports bag, dug in the pockets until he found his wallet, grabbed a couple of notes, stuffed them into an outstretched hand. He walked away, gluing the field-glasses to his eyes, ignoring the rest of the room and the people in it. Behind him, he could hear Bodie chatting pleasantly to their two fellow agents, no doubt smoothing the feathers Doyle had ruffled. Doyle couldn't care less, not right now. All he could think of was what he'd done in that bathroom, what he'd been thinking about while Bodie was out here, innocent for once, talking to what amounted to complete strangers.

The sound of a door closing, the tiny whisper of Bodie's stocking-soled feet crossing the floor.

"Bit over the top there, weren't you?" Bodie inquired, far more mildly than anyone else would have expected.

Doyle didn't trust his voice to speak normally to Bodie. Bodie, whom he'd imagined on his knees, sucking him...

"Not like you to be embarrassed over a thing like that."

No? Doyle thought incredulously. Oh, yeh, I fantasise about my partner every day of the week.

"Just because I knew what you were doing in there—"

"No, you fucking don't!" Doyle broke in, the words bursting from him before he could stop them.

"Get off it, Ray, there are only so many variations a bloke can do."

A deep breath didn't calm him, but it steadied him a little, gave him a second to clutch his self-control: Bodie didn't know, Bodie couldn't know. A friendly elbow in his ribs, a bag of chips redolent of vinegar and pickled onion stuck into his hand.

"So what were you up to in there, then?" Bodie asked round a too-hot chip.

"Thought you said you knew what I was up to?" Doyle asked unpleasantly, nervous about Bodie prying, more nervous about Bodie finding out. He still couldn't believe it himself—to think he'd done that, thinking about Bodie...

"You were the one that said I didn't. Go on, tell us—" Another friendly nudge, Bodie's good humour very evident, his carnal curiosity, never quiescent, fully roused. "Kinky stuff, was it?"

"Last night you said there wasn't such an animal."

"Can't be that," Bodie responded, filching one of Doyle's pickled onions. "I'd've seen if you'd brought your menagerie in with you." Took a look at Doyle's expression, his own softening in sympathy. "I said a lot of things last night, and some of them were even true."

"Were they?" Cold, unyielding, everything about him screaming 'go away'.

But Bodie was his partner, and Bodie was the man who had let him down not too long ago. "Told you, there's nothing kinky under the sun. Doesn't matter what you did, it's all all right with me. Anyway, Ray my old china, anything you've done, I've already done—twice."

"Listen to you, Don bloody Juan and Casanova all rolled into one."

"Ah, the benefits of natural charm, good looks and—"

"And a modest disposition, yeh, I know, I know," Doyle muttered, relaxing in spite of himself. "Look, I just don't like people coming in like that when I'm..."

"When you're wanking your little heart out," Bodie said into Doyle's discreet silence. "Down to the short strokes when you heard them, were you?"

"Has anyone ever told you what a nosy bugger you are?"

"Thousands, Doyle, and all of them better than you." He made it light, friendly, even while he was wondering why the hell his partner was lying through his teeth to him.

"Change the record," Doyle said, balling his chip papers up, using that as an excuse to walk away from Bodie, throwing the rubbish into the bin under the sink. "Did the Boys Wonder have anything for us from Cowley?"

"Only his best wishes and fondest regards—and a warning to stay put, keep our noses clean and our heads down. Our beloved Führer is threatening to have our guts for garters if MacGuire catches so much as a whiff of us."

"Back to the grindstone then," Doyle said, relieved to be able to retreat into work and best of all, into Bodie's enforced silence. "I'll take the first watch. Never know when our chum downstairs'll come home."

"Fair enough." Bodie went over to the bed readily enough, picking up pen and crosswords, engrossing himself immediately. But his mind wasn't on the words in front of him; rather, it was on a far more complicated cipher: his partner, Ray Doyle.

Time crawled along somewhere between a snail and a watched pot and still, MacGuire didn't so much as have a suspicious phone call. Boredom and discouragement set in, festering along nicely beside Doyle's tense hostility and Bodie's silent watching.

Night time again, several days later and many, many hours into this, the crosswords finished, the books discarded, the card-games palling. This day's only excitement had been MacGuire and Sylvia having a rip-roaring argument, followed by a making-up the likes of which even Bodie admitted

made him envious. Bodie listened to the sighs and the groans, the sensitive bugs planted by the bedside picking up even the small sounds of mouths moving on flesh and the slide of skin on skin. All of it was having the predictable effect on him, his body responding as readily as his imagination. A movement from the bed caught his attention: Doyle, restless again, still fretting over whatever it was that had upset him so the other day. It had been listening to MacGuire's athletics that had started Doyle off the first time, Bodie reminded himself, mind going nineteen to the dozen, coming up with nothing so laid-out as a plan, but a vague, amorphous intention, the need to sort all this out.

It was, genuinely, Doyle's turn, not that Bodie would usually give up listening to a floor show like this. He attracted his partner's attention, tapped his watch as a reminder, waited while Doyle gathered himself and came over to take his place.

Not letting on, Bodie mutely handed over the headphones, missing nothing as Doyle had his first earful of what was going on downstairs: didn't miss the eyes widening in surprise, certainly didn't miss the involuntary, guilt-edged glance at Bodie's groin. Now there was something worth thinking about...

Silent as ever, Bodie lay on top of his sleeping bag, arms folded behind his head, his body carefully positioned so that he could keep a surreptitious eye on Doyle whilst looking as if he were simply dozing.

Perched on the camp stool, Doyle listened, wide-eyed, the sounds thumping through him, a steady pulse of desire. His mind automatically provided the pictures to go with the sounds and his body supplied the empathetic sensations. Every minute noise struck a cord in him, until his body was singing with suppressed desire, cock hard inside his trousers, making him wish he hadn't forgotten to pack enough underwear. Under cover of his lashes, he sneaked a look at Bodie, saw him apparently asleep, knew he had to be lying there thinking about what he'd heard over the headphones. Uncomfortable, Doyle shifted, his cock rubbing sweetly against his inner seam, a tiny groan escaping him. Panicked, he looked up, but Bodie gave no sign of having heard. Just as well, really, Doyle thought, unable to concentrate on anything but the evocative sounds lush in his ears and the aching response of his body.

He closed his eyes, helpless, forcing his hands

not to rub his nipples, refusing his body's pleading to touch it. Knowing it was impossible, he swore he could hear Bodie's breathing, could hear the tiny sounds the man made as he changed position on the make-shift bed. Remembered standing in the scullery, Bodie so close behind him, reaching round him. Heard MacGuire talking, saying dirty words, telling his girlfriend how good she was, how talented, what her mouth was doing to him—couldn't keep the image out of his head, Bodie doing that for him, Bodie giving him that, keeping Doyle safe within his mouth, binding them closer together.

His cock pulsed, strangled by too-tight trousers, irritated by the harshness of double-stitched seams, the head weeping. Probably be a stain there, he thought disjointedly, aware of the incipient humiliation of that if Bodie were to see it. Aware, immediately, crystalline memory of double-dates, of how dark Bodie's eyes were when he was aroused, hand down his date's blouse, heavy lidded eyes meeting Doyle's in shared pleasure. Wanted that for himself, Bodie's hands on him, Bodie's body hot and hard and aching for him the way he himself was—

Christ, he thought, scared half out his wits, what the fuck was wrong? Sitting here, hard as a rock, thinking about his partner, thinking about a man. He wasn't supposed to think about blokes that way, had given it up when he was fourteen, didn't go in for that sort of thing...

Oh no? his cock asked him, twitching, the heavy beat of his pulse measuring his desire.

Oh, yes, he admitted to himself, stifling a groan, holding the misery within. Oh, god, yes...

And startled, opened his eyes as a hand touched his jeans, the zip parting as if by magic, his cock lifted out and freed by delicate, sensitive strength, a wet mouth engulfing him immediately and wholly, the pleasure burning his nerves with a sweet, sweet fire. He stared down, transfixed as he watched Bodie transfixed upon his cock, the generous mouth stretched wide, the black hair gleaming, the head moving exactly as he had imagined it, but better, oh, so much better than any gossamer imaginings. Moved by the tenderness of Bodie's mouth on him, he threaded his fingers through the short hair, caress becoming clutching, great handfuls of hair as Bodie brought him closer and closer, sucking him deep and hard, until Doyle thought he couldn't contain it, a scream of purest pleasure lodging in his throat.

Fist stuffed into his mouth, teeth sharp on his knuckles, the taste of blood metallic and bitter on his tongue, he stifled his cries, on the verge of weeping or murder when Bodie withdrew from him, a mere hand taking the place of that incredible mouth. But then Bodie's fist was moving, and Doyle's fist was moved from his mouth, Bodie's tongue filling him, the taste of his own pre-cum mingling with the taste of his own blood and Bodie's mouth. The tongue in his mouth fucked him, the fist fucked his cock, Bodie all around him, suffocating him with lust, encompassing him as he dissolved into orgasm, collapsing into arms strong enough to hold him up.

Arms strong enough to take one of Doyle's limp hands and shove it, roughly, against Bodie's own groin, soft fabric dethroned by the hard thrust of cock and the coarse prickle of pubic hair. Bodie was still on his knees beside Doyle, kissing him, awash in the pleasure of sex, pushing himself into Doyle's hand, his own fist wrapped around Doyle's fingers, holding them tightly enough for his cock's pleasure. "Oh, that's it," he murmured, the headphones slipped back far enough that he could pour words into Doyle's ear, plunge his tongue in there. He kissed Doyle hungrily, sucking on his tongue as he had sucked on his cock, his own hardness gripped exquisitely, his own orgasm chasing him into Doyle's arms. He came, shuddering, semen spilling over Doyle's hand, splashing onto his jeans, Bodie's words spilling into Doyle's mouth as the last tremors shivered through him.

Spent, Bodie rested where he was for a minute, then pulled himself together. He grinned as he tucked Doyle away tidily, kissed him lightly at the side of the mouth as he tugged the headphones back into position. Patted him on the thigh in farewell, and then wandered, silent-footed, back to bed, one giant yawn escaping him before he smiled so sweetly at Doyle and then, all of a sudden, fell asleep, as quickly and as surely as a light going out.

In the dark, Doyle listened to MacGuire and Sylvia settling down for the night, sleepy murmurs muting into silence, everything shutting down for the night.

The headphones were pulled off, put aside. Time for him to get some sleep, Bodie's turn to be up early so that one of them would be on duty long before MacGuire was up and about. Time for him to get into his sleeping bag beside Bodie. To sleep beside the man he'd just had sex

with. To lie there, to lie with a man...

He ran his palm down the leg of his jeans, where Bodie's semen had wet him, felt it drying, one patch still damp. Lifted his hand to his mouth, licked his palm, couldn't decide if he were relieved or disappointed that all he could taste was fabric and the remnants of chips and pickled onions. Sat there, his back to the window, his eyes fixed wide and shocked, on the man who had sucked his cock. The man whose cum had flowed into his palm. The man he had kissed.

He was still sitting there, thinking, when the sun rose, and MacGuire made a fatal phone call.

Clearing up, no need now to be silent, but Doyle wasn't speaking to Bodie, wasn't looking at him. Was flinching away every time Bodie came within spitting distance. Flickering glances, desperate glances, at the door, and the outside world. Escape, Bodie knew. The chance to run away from what had happened in this room in the dark conspiracy of night.

"Ray," he said to his partner's resolutely turned back. "Ray, you have to listen to me."

"Who died and made you Cowley?" Doyle muttered, a toss-up whether he were more ashamed of his behaviour last night or his cowardice this morning. But he was entitled, wasn't he? he told himself. Wasn't every day a bloke finds himself having sex with his best friend...

"Ray, what're you getting yourself so worked up about?"

That did it. Doyle whirled round, off-balanced to find just how close Bodie was. "What am I getting so worked up about? You sucked my cock last night," he whispered fiercely, even now keeping his voice down about such a thing, lest anyone hear them. "And I had my fucking hand on you, letting you come all over me..."

The disgust in that voice hurt, more than Bodie had thought it would. "Let's not forget the vile and perverse kissing while you're listing all the horrible things I did last night."

"Don't," was all Doyle said, hearing the anger, seeing the pain.

"Don't what? Argue? Or even imagine for a second that you'd ever let me do that to you again? And don't bother getting on your fucking pedestal, Mr. High-and-Mighty bloody Doyle. In case you'd forgotten, you enjoyed it too!"

"You think I don't know that? You think that's

not what I'm so fucking worried about?"

The truth, heavy footed, landed between them.

It was Bodie's turn to look away, discomfited, needing a second to recapture some semblance of composure. "Are you telling me you'd never done it with a bloke before?" he asked, only half surprised by Doyle's evident shock, now that he'd started to put two and two together.

"Course I've never done it with a bloke before." Paused, remembering the way Bodie's mouth had been on him, the skill, the ease with which he'd been swallowed all the way into Bodie's throat. "But you've done it a few times, haven't you?"

"One or two." Looked up, couldn't help himself, hell-bent sense of humour kicking up the traces at this absurd situation. "One or two dozen, give or take."

"And did you...take?" Doyle asked delicately, needing to know, no time yet to think about why he needed to know so much.

"When I've felt like it and when I've been able to trust the bloke with my arse."

Nothing said, one, two minutes passing.

"I'd trust you with my arse," Bodie said very quietly, giving more to this man than he'd ever given to anyone before, including Marikka. "Trust you with everything else already."

"Yeh. I know you do." Unrevealing, uncommunicative, the voice flat, the eyes blank as Doyle's mind thought.

"It was only sex, Ray," Bodie said, wishing he could still ruffle the thick hair or give him a playful punch, but he no longer had that liberty, wasn't sure when he would again. "I thought you'd done it all before, thought you were getting antsy because you were randy and there was a warm body nearby..."

"You're my partner." Not quite a statement, not quite a question.

"Sometimes makes it better—both the sex and the partnership. Look, I didn't know, thought it was just a bit of harmless fun..."

"Suppose it was, if you're used to fucking blokes. And yeh, I know, you thought I was. But Christ, Bodie—" Breaking off, the voice shaken, the hand shaking as Doyle rubbed at gritty eyes.

"If I'd known..."

"If you'd known," Doyle said bleakly, "I'd still've wanted you to do it."

"It doesn't have to be a problem."

"Doesn't it?" Doyle gave a bark of laughter, an

ugly sound, all his occasional beauty fled under the frown of confusion and the tension of chaos. “Easy enough for you to say. But I’m well past 30, Bodie, I should’ve known by now. And to have it just come up out of nowhere and hit me like that—”

“It’ll be all right,” Bodie told him quietly, almost repeating the words Doyle had said the night Bodie had come so close to kissing him, the night he’d held off simply because he hadn’t been sure that Doyle wanted to get that involved with him.

“Because you’ve got me? Because you’ve had me?”

So much bitterness, so much self-doubt, echoes for Bodie of his own teen years, when he hadn’t known who he was, only that he was different, too different for his family to ever know. “It’ll be all right in the end.”

“And I suppose that’s an invitation, is it—or a proposal?”

“I wasn’t talking about sex, Doyle.”

“Yeh, well, I can’t stop thinking about it. What we did...”

“What we did,” Bodie took a deep breath, discovering depths of feeling he had, obviously, kept very carefully hidden from himself, a bitter secret all his own, “doesn’t ever have to happen again.” The pain blossomed somewhere deep inside him, and he could have laughed at himself for being so self-sacrificing, especially for someone who wouldn’t exactly appreciate his feelings. “We can even pretend it never happened in the first place.”

“Can we?” Doyle shot back, startling Bodie. “Maybe you can just lump me in with your few dozen other blokes, but me—” He shook his head, finally met Bodie’s eyes. “I don’t think I’ll be able to forget it at all.”

“Then,” Bodie said slowly, thinking this through as he went along, trying to gauge Ray’s reactions, the underlying emotions, “we can see how it goes, you know, take it one day at a time...”

“Like fucking alcoholics.”

“Well, I could get addicted to you...” Leaving it open like that, an offer if Doyle wanted it, a joke if it were too much too soon.

“Some people say addiction’s a sickness.”

“Some people say the world’s flat, so who’re you going to listen to?”

There were footsteps clattering up the stairs, at least three people by the sound of it.

For a second, Bodie and Doyle simply looked at

each other. “Best finish this lot,” Doyle said, moving away both from Bodie and the issue of what they’d done the night before.

If he let Doyle slip through his fingers like that, then they’d never get this set to rights, and Bodie wasn’t going to allow this to become a problem between them; was willing to give Doyle up if it were for the best, but he’d be damned if he were going to lose all this promise just for lack of time and an overdose of awkwardness. One hand, large on Doyle’s upper arm, the muscle under his palm spasming, either from nerves or from Doyle trying not to pull away, sparing Bodie’s feelings perhaps. “Come round my place tonight,” he said hurriedly. “Come round and we’ll sort this out.”

“What is there to sort?” Doyle asked distantly, obviously listening to the conversation wafting up from one landing down.

“You, for one. Me, for another.”

“Us, for a third?”

“Maybe. If we’re lucky.”

“If we’re lucky?” Abruptly, Doyle gave Bodie every ounce of his attention, the intensity of his eyes disconcerting. “Yeh, suppose that’s how you’d look at it, if you were used to this whole thing...”

Bodie didn’t say a word, standing there, holding his breath, crossing his fingers and praying to any passing divinity that Doyle should prove willing to at least try, or even think about it.

“Lucky?” Doyle said pensively, expression and voice both sharpening, demanding, throwing the words quickly before the approaching voices got to them. “D’you think you’d be lucky if we did this?”

“Yes.” Unequivocal, no doubts allowed, the down-side something to be dealt with later, when there was a later.

“Yes...”

“Hello, Rapunzel,” McCabe said as he came in through the door, “you ready to be rescued by your knight in shining armour?”

“Yeh, so where is he?” Doyle retorted, fed up with McCabe’s jokes about his hair, far more put-out than he ought to be by the intrusion of the outside world.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” this from Murphy, strolling in, as calm as ever.

“Keep your sex life to yourself,” Bodie said, “and you lot can finish this lot, seeing as how we were working our fingers to the bone—”

“Thought you didn’t want to talk about sex?”

Murphy shot back, already stacking the electronics equipment.

"You two can stand here yakking all day if you want," Doyle said before anyone else could put his tuppenceworth in. "I'm off home for a bath."

"Yeh, thought it ponged a bit in here."

"You try using the bath without making any noise and without MacGuire coming back when the water's making a racket going down the drain. Anyway, I'm off. You plebs can do the cleaning up here."

Making himself busy in the kitchenette, Bodie didn't look up, couldn't trust himself not to give himself away, not when there were three of Cowley's finest watching him watch Ray Doyle leave, quite possibly taking their partnership with him. He could kick himself for giving in to impulse and doing Ray last night—wanted to kick himself even harder for not realising how fond he was of his partner, and how terribly easy it would be to love him, given half a chance.

"Who's going to give me the keys to their car then?" Doyle demanded, playing the usual game, everyone knowing that standard procedure would have had one of the other agents drive a car over for them.

"Suppose it'll have to be me sacrificing my all for my country again," Lucas said from the window, digging into his pockets. "Here, catch!"

"Ta," Doyle said, his own keys slapping into his hand. "Cowley say anything about expecting us back at HQ?"

"Not till the day after tomorrow," Murphy told him. "Jammy sods."

"That's what you think—we're due a week off at least. Still, at least it's something."

Bodie was aware of Doyle looking at him, could feel the steady gaze upon him. Stupid to let himself wallow like this, Bodie told himself, pulling himself up by metaphoric bootstraps. Doyle just needed

time, so even if he did do his ostrich impersonation for a while, they'd sort it out eventually, wouldn't they? And downright unfair to pull a weeping willow routine on Doyle, who was going through a few discoveries of his own. "Right," he said bracingly, a shade too brightly, "so I'll see you Wednesday, shall I?"

"Unless Cowley gives us the time off we're due, I should think so."

"Right," he said, and then didn't really know what else to say. Knew what he wanted to say, knew that he couldn't say any of that with the other agents here. Patience, then, was a virtue he was about to acquire. "Wednesday."

"Yeh," Doyle said, heading for the door. "Here, Bodie..."

"Yeh?" Too quick, he chastised himself, too bloody keen by half, don't put him off—

"Don't you need a lift home?"

The smile that spread across Bodie's face was positively beatific. "Funny you should mention that," he said, "but I could do with a lift."

"Well, come on then, I'm not hanging round here with this lot waiting for you."

"Running all the way, sir," he replied, pleased that he had just the right touch of sarcasm, the very right edge of complaint.

"Did you remember my bag?" Doyle demanded as they started down the stairs, everything about the conversation as normal as it had ever been between them.

"And your stuff from the bathroom and the pencils you left by the window."

Opening the car door, Doyle stopped, looked at Bodie with that same speculation, that same uncertainty he'd shown upstairs, and all the tension and doubts were back between them. "Don't know how I'd manage without you."

And climbing into the car beside his partner, Bodie hoped to hell that was true.

PULLING THE OTHER ONE

Here is story number 6 in the ongoing Sports series—that is if you can consider the activity referred to a ‘sport.’ Doyle, very ‘sportingly’ lets Bodie in on Cowley’s plans in advance, and although Bodie comes close to being ejected for ‘unsportsmanlike’ behavior, he carries on only to return ‘sporting’ a most serious injury...

“**YOUR** reward, my son,” Ray Doyle intoned solemnly as Bodie came into the rumpiled rest room, himself and Bodie the last of the agents to finally be done with the aftermath of this latest sweeping the nation clean, “will be in Heaven.”

Bodie dumped the dimpled bags on the table, the unmistakable aroma of bacon sandwiches filling the air. “Yeh, well, as long as my reward covers the two quid you owe me—”

“I’ll give it you on payday,” Doyle said cheerfully and absolutely mendaciously, payday being three weeks away and Doyle’s memory for money he owed never able to stretch more than ten minutes. “Anyway, you won’t be needing money where you’re going.”

“Oh, yeh?” Bodie said as he helped himself to the tea Doyle had already mashed for them. “That because we can pinch bits off the pearly gates and all the harps are made of gold then?”

“There is always that,” Doyle said through a mouth overflowing with the joys of cholesterol, “but with any luck, all this muck,” he waved his third sandwich briefly before cramming another huge bite in, “won’t catch up with either one of us for a while. No, I was talking about something a bit more immediate.”

That gleeful expression on Doyle’s face was enough to make even Bodie pause in the middle of a hard-earned breakfast. “Oh, God,” he moaned, every muscle loudly remembering every minute of

this past week in hell, “what’s the old bastard come up with for us this time?”

Doyle chose this moment to slowly savour his bacon sarnie, such activity being also conducive to savouring Bodie’s dismay.

“Come on, Ray, what’d he say while I was out scouring half of London trying to get you breakfast?”

Once upon a time, that mournful, puppy-eyed, put-upon whingeing pout would have had Doyle eating out of Bodie’s hand, but Bodie wasn’t the only one who had learned to see right through his partner. Doyle took one look at Bodie doing his wounded hero routine, and took another bite of his sandwich, closing his eyes in an expression of ecstasy the likes of which hadn’t been seen since *Deep Throat*.

“Oh, come on, Ray,” Bodie tried again, even going so far as to pour, unasked, another cup of tea for the camel-thirsted Doyle.

Doyle simply impersonated said camel, slurping up enough tea to float the Titanic.

“Should’ve known,” Bodie muttered, attacking his own sandwich, his tongue chasing a drop of brown sauce as it escaped down his chin. “You’d do anything to wind me up after—”

Doyle would prefer not to think about Bodie’s last little trick, thanks all the same. The mere mention of it was enough to bring a blush to his cheek, although he always claimed that was just a flush of temper. Doyle spoke too quickly, his words

and bits of decimated sandwich interrupting Bodie's too, too humiliating reminiscing. "Betty was careless for once."

"Congratulations," Bodie said sweetly. "So when's the happy event? And if it's a boy, are you going to call him Dixon so he'll follow in your footsteps?"

"Christ, if you were any funnier, you could be a politician." Doyle burrowed through the pile of bags and debris on the table, smiling smugly as he simultaneously came up with both an apple and something to wipe the grin off Bodie's face. "Saw your file—and you'll never guess where *you're* being sent, as of first thing tomorrow morning."

Bodie swallowed, hard, at least partly because he had just stuffed half a Crunchie into his mouth. "Just me?"

"I," Doyle replied, quite unable to keep the smirk from his face, "get to babysit some fat Arab at the Savoy. You," he yielded to temptation and grinned from ear to ear, "don't."

Bodie didn't think he wanted to know the answer to this, but then, he reasoned, forewarned is forearmed. Always supposing Doyle was telling him the truth and not just winding him up to get back at him for that lovely little trick with the Nair, the scuba suit and the portable video camera. Still, on the off chance the cheeky bugger honestly was on to something, not that it would do to come over too anxious. "So what's he lumbered me with while you're living it up at the Savoy?"

Doyle shrugged, a flawless artifice of disinterest as he wallowed in the coming joys of getting Bodie back. Bodie, not to be outdone in the stakes of who could care less, made a point of crumpling all the grease-spotted bags and chocolate dotted foil together, making quite a satisfying racket just for good measure. Doyle, however, having had considerable exposure to this man's usual habits of untidiness, wasn't about to be put off such an untoward and unnatural display of domestication. "Ever heard of Thorne?" he said over the din of Bodie playing house.

"Course I have," Bodie said from under the table where he'd gone to pick up the crinkling wrapper from his Crunchie. "He's the leader of the Liberals—even bloody McCabe knows that."

"Not Thorpe, Bodie," Doyle said with the boundless patience of a man who knows that vengeance is about to be his, "Thorne."

"Thorn?" Bodie mumbled round the Kit-Kat

he'd found at the bottom of one of the bags. "As in Crown of?"

Finally full after what felt like weeks of snatched snacks, Doyle neatly dropped his apple core into one of Bodie's unsuspecting pockets and then draped himself the length of the settee. "Thorne, as in town of. Thorne, as in possible site of that drug-smuggling bunch Cowley's after." He stretched, enjoying that nowhere near as much as he did the look on Bodie's face as he continued Thorne's claim to infamy. "Thorne, as in right next door to the Isle of Axholme, home of child abuse and club feet."

"He's sending me up there?" Bodie winced: he hadn't wailed like that since big Jim MacKay next door had nicked his teddy when he was three. Manfully, he thrust thoughts of flat land and flatter brain-waves from his own rather more wildly oscillating thought patterns, and continued in what was intended to be a mature and calm tone but came out, alas, more like the three-year-old with the pinched teddy. "But I haven't even fucked up once in *months!*"

Oh, this was wonderful! Doyle kicked his shoes off, wriggled his toes happily, had himself another stretch. "That's what you think, mate. The Cow obviously doesn't agree with you, does he? Not if he's sending you off to Thorne."

"Christ," Bodie muttered, parking his bum on the arm of the settee nearest Doyle's unkempt curls, "it's the back side of fucking beyond."

"Thorne? Never!" Doyle exclaimed dramatically, positively dripping amazement. "*Your* backside now," he carolled sweetly, "now that's the back of fucking beyond—better watch those sweeties, petal, instead of eating everything in sight."

"It's all right for some," Bodie muttered, thinking of Doyle lapping up the luxury of the Savoy—and not gaining a bloody ounce—when Bodie would be stuck in some midget cottage in some miniature village not even the bloody Yanks would call quaint, and he'd manage to put on half a stone from all the fry-ups—or maybe he'd lose a few stone, thanks to the local fondness for tripe. Nah, he thought to himself, he'd gain half a ton on the fish and chips alone. "Thorne," he said in absolute disgust.

"Could be worse," Doyle said cheerfully, if not entirely truthfully from Bodie's point of view.

Bodie looked down at the smug little face that was so soon going to be luxuriating in the best hotel in London while some people were going to

have to earn their crust. "Oh, do tell."

Beating the Cheshire Cat at his own game, Doyle grinned. "He could've based you to Immingham. Or Crowle, or even—" he paused dramatically, "Fishlake!"

Bodie didn't even honour any of that with so much as a sneer. "Thorne," he repeated morosely, encompassing the entire region, thoughts of trawlers and trays of fish stinking up through the ice and women who would gut a fish as soon as look at it, never a very reassuring thought when you were wandering past all those sharp little knives.

"Course, with all things considered..." Doyle said as he sat up, all the better to see his comment strike home. Proving yet again what a good actor he was and why he was such an asset undercover, Doyle became very, very serious, his concern spilling over, his voice somber, oozing more nurturing caring than Mother Teresa could in a month, "it's not going to be easy, is it?"

Bodie looked at him warily, not liking this almost as much as he wasn't going to like bloody Thorne and the glories of tracking down yet another drug-smuggling ring.

"Yeh," Doyle said, trying desperately to maintain his doom-and-gloom-for-whom-the-bell-tolls delivery, "not with your target having a hobby the likes of his."

The Gothic tone was over the top, and Bodie kicked himself for ever believing the cheeky toad in the first place. "Go on then," he said, all breathless cadet-cop credulity, "tell us!"

Past master at pulling his partner's leg, Doyle wasn't going to let a minor detail like Bodie sussing him to stop a good joke. "You'll never believe it," he said ingenuously.

"Oh, I will, I will," Bodie gushed, laughter threatening.

"I'm telling you, you won't believe me. You'll just think I'm having you on—"

"Would you ever do a thing like that to me, after what I've done for you?" Stretching over to poke Doyle in the stomach, Bodie overbalanced, landing, satisfyingly heavily, on poor Doyle's unprotected abdomen, a gusting whoosh of air proving that Bodie had found himself a nice soft landing, his elbow barely missing one of Doyle's more tender spots.

"Gerroff! Christ, you weigh a ton, mate," Doyle muttered breathlessly aggrieved.

"Nah," Bodie told him, settling himself comfortably on the couch in the space left by his partner suddenly having to sit bolt-upright, "svelte and smooth, that's me. But you were going to tell me all about this bloke I'm supposed to investigate." He cast a kindly eye on Doyle who was still rubbing his belly and trying to catch his breath from where Bodie's misplaced elbow had scattered it. "Tut tut," he said, thumping Doyle on the back, "thought you said you'd given up smoking?"

If Tolstoy had been able to glower like Doyle, he'd never have had to write *War and Peace*. Doyle's expression was, to put it mildly, speaking. "Your mark," he finally said, voice just the teensiest bit on the fragile side, "makes Compo look as smooth as Noel Coward and *Last of the Summer Wine* deeper than bloody Ibsen.."

"That sophisticated, eh?" Bodie replied musingly, with every appearance of being impressed right out of his tree. "I shall have to pack my dinner jacket and pocket Shakespeare then, shan't I?"

"You can joke all you like, it won't stop it from being true." If Bodie hadn't been watching, Doyle would've patted himself on the back for doing such a good job of pretending to such perfect sincerity. "Anyway," he shrugged, every inch the maligned truth-teller, "told you you wouldn't believe it." He sniffed, his expression harking back to other times when he had actually been telling the truth. "Don't know why I bother sometimes. Risking Cowley catching me at it just so I could let you know what the old bastard had you in for this time..."

Inured though he had hoped himself to be to Doyle's little tricks, Bodie still found himself wondering if maybe, just maybe, this time Doyle wasn't having him on. "Oh, go on then," he said ungraciously. "We're all sitting comfortably, so go on, tell us."

Doyle turned absolutely honest, completely trustworthy eyes on Bodie and murmured: "Ferret-legging. His name is Job Goole, and he's the local champion ferret-legger."

Naturally enough, Bodie burst out laughing. "Ferret-legging? Oh, Christ, Doyle, pull the other one." The image that conjured made him laugh all the harder. "Bet that's not what he says though, does he? And what did you say his name was?"

"Knew you'd never believe me," Doyle muttered glumly, keeping up his act, experience having proved that Bodie was susceptible to his wounded routine, despite what Bodie would have the

world—and Bodie himself—believe. “Goole. Job Goole.”

“Oh, god, that’s brilliant, that is! Goole? As in goolies? Surprised he can call himself that after he’s had a few ferrets down the front of his trousers. Ferret-legging?” He shoved Doyle, inviting him to join in the joke, himself weak with laughter.

“Christ, I’m going to wet myself—”

“Dead bloody right you well,” Doyle said darkly, “if you have to get in on the ferret-legging up there.”

“Ooh, I can hardly wait. Can I borrow some string to tie my trouser bottoms with? And a pair of cast-iron knickers?”

“You’ll be laughing on the other side of your face when Cowley hands you the bloody ferrets you’ve to take up there with you.”

“And is that my cover? A fellow ferret-legger, so I can *weasel* my way into old Goolie’s confidence and *ferret* out the drug ring?”

Doyle shrugged with elaborate disinterest, all the better to prove that he really was telling the truth and quite hurt by the way his best friend and partner was reacting. “Suit yourself,” he said with just the right touch of wounded friendship, “but don’t come crying to me after.”

“Oh, you mean you won’t kiss it all better if a ferret has a bit of a nibble? Cruel, Ray, too, too cruel.”

“It’s no skin off my nose—”

“But quite a bit off my prick, eh?” Bodie wiped his eyes, his hilarity gradually easing. “Ferret-legging,” he muttered, almost impressed. “That’s a good one, that.” He glanced over at his partner, told himself that he really wasn’t affected by that droop-mouthed, droop-curved posturing going on at his side. “All right, a joke’s a joke,” Bodie told Doyle, tugging on a handful of curls just to make his point. “Though I must admit,” he tossed a bone at Doyle’s dog-in-the-manger, “you really had me going a bit. But ferret-legging?” The whole thing tickled him again, and he started laughing. “Suppose that’s why Cowley’s not going himself. Be a bit hard ferret-legging in a kilt.” He laughed harder, thumping Doyle’s knee in his own glee at the endless jokes he was going to get out of this one: “But I don’t suppose it’d get hard at all, not with all those little ferret teeth down there—”

“Oh, there you are,” Betty said in her best Headmistress voice. “I should have known you’d be up to no good. Mr. Cowley wants to see both of

you in his office straight away. And for goodness’ sake, Bodie, do see if you can stop behaving like the first form fool.”

“Yes, miss,” Bodie called as they trailed along behind her. “Don’t give us any lines, will you, miss?”

A quick rap on the gleam of Cowley’s door and they were inside, Doyle’s eyes wickedly amused.

“Don’t bother sitting down,” Cowley said abstractedly, not even looking up from the paper on his desk, “you’re not on your holidays. Bodie,” he did look up then, pushing a manilla folder across the desk, “you’ll be taking the late train up, your destination and everything else you need to know is in here. Make sure you read it, this time—I don’t want you going off half-cocked again.”

“Sir.” Manfully, Bodie resisted the urge to comment that half-cocked was the only way he’d be able to get off after a spot of ferret-legging, although he couldn’t quite resist glancing at Doyle, sure that his partner would let the joke drop now that he had his assignment in his hand.

“And you, Doyle,” Cowley pushed another plain folder across the desk, “see to it that you get that mop of yours cut before the hotel staff use you to wash the floor. You’ll be starting on that tomorrow. In the meantime, the pair of you can finally finish the reports that should’ve been on my desk a fortnight ago. That’ll be all, so away with the pair of you.”

“Yes, sir,” Doyle said, smiling smugly as he perused his file with its endless pages of information and the single instruction sheet with its handwritten warning to not be running up a room-service bill equal to the National Debt. He smiled all the more smugly when he saw that Bodie, file open, mouth gaping even more openly, was staring in dawning horror at the words printed on all those pieces of paper.

“Sir...” Bodie began.

The phone rang, Cowley picking it up immediately. “Thanks, Betty, put him through.” Cowley looked up at his two best agents. “Well, what are you two doing standing there making the place look untidy? Get on with it.”

“Yes, but...” Bodie muttered even as Doyle grabbed him by the arm and began hauling him out of the office.

“And don’t you go forgetting to pick up your special equipment, Bodie!”

The door shut on Bodie's horrified face. "He didn't mean..."

"Told you," Doyle said smugly, well pleased with himself.

"Yeh, but it's not the sort of thing you'd expect anyone to believe, especially coming from you. Bloody hell!" he exploded, having just come to the paragraph about Job Goole's known habits, friends and the places he frequented. "Christ, you should see these names—like something out the flipping Ark!"

"Ferrets, you mean?" Doyle asked innocently.

"Not yet," Bodie replied glumly, running through the list of the Worker's Social Club, the old associates from the days when Goole's father had been down the pit, Communist Party membership duly noted. Then there was the model ship club, and the local darts team, and playing for the Church football team when he was a youth, which was when he'd first been associated with Michael Singer from Bolton, the man who'd gone back to Bolton and then on to Colombia and some of the biggest drug dealers in the world. Bodie turned the page, following the meandering path of Goole's contacts with Singer, reading on until he came to the last and most recent report, with its names and pursuits and lists of things Goole did for a living and for fun. "Here," Bodie said, finger pointing, hand thrusting the folder under Doyle's nose, "what d'you think this means?"

Cross-eyed, Doyle grabbed the page away, read the words, a slow smile of profound revenge growing with his satisfaction. "That," Doyle replied, not hiding his delight at all, "refers to his ferret-legging habits, I'll warrant. This when I get to say I told you so?"

"Doesn't actually say that, though, does it? Just something about dubious practices with animals..."

Doyle cackled merrily, not even the thought of catching up on reports damping his great good humour.

"I mean," Bodie went on, riffling through the pages looking for some reassurance, "this could just mean he shags sheep, couldn't it?"

"That's not what Betty was saying on the phone today, is it?"

Bodie knew better than to believe Doyle. But the rotten sod had been spot on about everything else today, hadn't he? "Even if it's not sheep-shagging," he said, not even aware of the irony that he'd be less worried about inveigling himself with a man of

carnal passion for sheep than he would about insinuating himself with a man who put ferrets down his trousers for fun, "it might only be putting the food money on the ponies."

"Or," Doyle replied cheerfully, seating himself in front of the much battered and more maligned typewriter, "it could be what Betty said it was: he could have a thing about ferrets down his trousers. After all, Cowley did say you had to pick up your special equipment..."

"CI5 doesn't run to ferrets—we're not a bloody zoo."

Anson, complete with cigar and scratching absently between his legs, chose that moment to walk in.

"Then again..." Bodie said, trailing off meaningfully.

As Anson was one of the few things that could get either Bodie or Doyle out of the restroom, they decided that discretion was the better part of valour and maybe now really would be a good time to get those reports done.

One way and another, it was an interesting afternoon. One way was Doyle endlessly making his little digs about ferrets and trousers. Another way was every other agent making their little digs about where Bodie was going and what he was going to be doing up there...

By the time they were actually supposed to have lunch, Bodie was positively twitchy.

By the time they were due their official tea-break, Doyle was hiding his smirks and Bodie was crossing his legs.

And by the time they both wandered down to supplies and Bodie was handed a huge pile of things, Doyle was almost choking on laughter and Bodie was going through the various bags, boxes and other oddities with something akin to real trepidation.

It wasn't the horrible clothes that did it, although the hat almost ruptured Doyle. It wasn't the fake I.D. and faker history, although that almost had Doyle on the floor. It wasn't even the psychiatrist's report that listed Bodie's new personality as what people used to call a bit 'simple'—all the better to wander round without anyone paying any attention to him, and who bothered with what they said around the village idiot, Doyle asked between gales of giggles.

What finally did it was the rock-hard protective groin cup.

Bodie took one look at it, face going pale.

Doyle took one look at Bodie looking at it, and his face went scarlet. "See?" he cackled as soon as he could stop laughing long enough. "What did I tell you?"

"That does it," Bodie announced, grabbing the old-fashioned, well-worn leather cup. "I'm going to have words with George bloody Cowley."

"Ah, Bodie," Doyle said, suddenly sober. "Bodie, I don't think—Bodie, come back here! Oh, Christ," he muttered to Heaven, until the memory of the Nair and the full-body scuba suit returned his sense of humour to him. "This I've got to see."

Doyle pelted along the corridor, reaching Mr. Cowley's office just in time to see his partner steam inside.

With superb dramatic flair, Bodie threw the groin guard down on Cowley's desk and announced, loudly, very loudly: "I'm not putting any fucking ferrets down my trousers."

Very deliberately, Mr. Cowley took his glasses off, looked at the groin cup, looked at Bodie. "I'm glad to hear that, Bodie. CI5 does not condone bestiality. Now, why don't you take your cricket gear and practice your bowling before you take your train?"

"Bowling?" Bodie said, very quietly, one might even say querulously. "Cricket bowling?"

"Well, you wouldn't wear that for lawn bowling, would you?" A pen was picked up, used to delicately slide the worn leather nearer Bode. "And stop off to see Betty on your way out—have her make you an appointment with Dr. Ross..."

"Yes, sir," Bodie said stoically, frantically thinking of all the ways he could kill Doyle, slowly and painfully and untraceably. "But I don't think that will be necessary, sir."

"I'm sure you don't, but I'll be the judge of that. Go on, get on with you."

"Yes, sir," Bodie said, all clipped accent and standing at full attention. "I'll just take this with me..." He picked the cup up, pivoted on his heel, left the office just as Doyle showed him a clean set of heels and Cowley muttered under his breath: "Ferrets?"

Fortunately for the safety of the Realm in general and Doyle in great particular, Bodie didn't manage to get his hands on his partner before his train left for points north. And even more fortunately, at least if you were to ask Bodie, his return

took his partner completely by surprise.

"Bodie!" Genuine pleasure there, real delight that Bodie was back, followed swiftly by a very sensible wariness that Bodie, vengeful, wickedly funny, totally daft Bodie was back. And they were alone, the rest room empty, all the active agents being briefed, Doyle the only one currently on stand-by in HQ itself. "Nice to see you, mate," Doyle said, rising to his feet just in case Bodie was simply going to jump him and knock lumps out of him for that last little joke.

"That's what Dr. Ross said to me as well."

Oh, shit, Doyle thought, wincing. Just as well they had to keep their affairs in order and their wills up to date. "It's that manly physique that does it."

"Nah, she's shaved her moustache off now."

Doyle laughed, more from nerves than anything else—not that he was going to let on that he found any joke of Bodie's less than absolutely hysterically funny. At least, not for a day or two, until Bodie had forgiven him for the ferret incident.

"How was the Savoy?"

"Oh, same as always," Doyle said languidly, as if he lived at the Savoy in the lap of luxury. "You know how these places are."

"The Sheik get up to the usual hanky-panky?"

"Yeh," Doyle salaciously, completely slandering a very religious man who'd spent all his free time either praying or having dinner with one of his many brothers, "and a few we'd never have thought of on our own. I hear you managed to crack that drug lot up there."

"Easy enough done," Bodie said, "they were all a bunch of bloody amateurs. Any tea in the pot?" he asked, coming into the room, limping slightly.

"What happened to you then?" Doyle demanded, always worried when his partner was injured.

"Nothing you didn't tell me about."

It took a second for that to sink in. "But I was only having you on—"

"Pity Goole wasn't." He poured himself a cup of sludge masquerading as tea, made his way to the chair, obviously trying to hide the limp, succeeding a bit better at that than concealing his wince and grimace of pain when he sat himself down in the armchair.

"You all right, mate?" Doyle asked, worried—if Bodie really had had to ingratiate himself like that...

“Doctor says I’ll be fine,” Bodie told him, quite convincingly.

Doyle, however, knew when his partner was lying. “Come on, you, out with it. What did Robinson say?”

Bodie shrugged, a small frown marring his smooth forehead. “Claims I’ll make a full recovery.” A short pause, Bodie hesitating before admitting the rest of it. “As long as the infection goes down, of course.”

“Infection? You’ve got an infection on your prick?” Incredulous, sure that Bodie was joking. “Pull the other one, mate.”

“Well, I won’t be pulling my own for a while, that’s for fucking sure. Won’t be fucking anything, either.”

“Are you serious?”

“Would I joke about a thing like that? Christ, Doyle, we’re not all as sick as you.”

Doyle circled round carefully, keeping a close watch on his partner, doing his damndest to work out if Bodie were having him on or not. “Give you a jab, did he?”

“Bite, more like.”

“Not the ferret, Bodie. Doctor Robinson.”

“Still up to date on the tetanus, so at least I don’t have a sore backside to go with the front.”

He really did look serious, didn’t he? Still... “Where did you get bitten?”

“You want the gory details? The nearest measurement?” Bodie demanded, outraged, a blush rising to embarrass him even more than the question. “You want to know how many inches down from the head?”

“Be serious, Bodie, this is you we’re talking about,” Doyle said as he perched his bum on the edge of the table, his legs close enough to touch Bodie’s. “Be more a question of how many millimetres.”

“Ha, bloody, ha. Actually, the way it feels right now, I wouldn’t mind if it were as small as yours.” Trying to be discreet, he shifted in his seat, crossing his legs, flinching, uncrossing them rapidly. Nonchalantly, fooling no-one, he casually spread his legs as widely as he could within the chair.

“You really aren’t kidding, are you?” Doyle asked him, still with that dubious edge.

“Wish to hell I was,” Bodie muttered fervently. “Look, Ray, we’ve been mates a long time, now, haven’t we?”

“Yes,” Doyle said slowly, not trusting a sentimental Bodie.

“And we’ve done all the things blokes usually do around each other, you know, piss, shower, get changed?”

“If you think I’m going to do the traditional to get the poison out—”

“Don’t be stupid! No, I only meant...” He broke off, looked away, discomfort finally forcing him to speak. “Look, I need to, you know, adjust myself. It’s hurting like hell, my underwear—”

“Got your knickers in a twist, eh?” Doyle said with some sympathy and more suspicion. “There’s a bog just down the hall.”

“You think I can walk with it like this? Christ, how did the Inquisition do without you?”

He did have a point: even Doyle had to admit that.

“Keep an eye on the door,” Bodie said, the pathos of the situation obviously getting to him.

“All right.” Draped in his usual ‘for hire’ pose, Doyle leaned himself against the door, watching in what became real sympathy as Bodie levered himself painfully out of his chair.

Holding the front of his trousers out as far as he could, Bodie unzipped himself, pushing his trousers down out of the way, gingerly trying to ease his underwear away from his poor, abused member.

“You all right there?” Doyle asked, wincing a bit just watching Bodie’s expression.

“Bloody bandage’s stuck,” Bodie gasped, clutching at himself. “Christ...”

“Come on, Bodie, just do it!”

“Hark at the man who couldn’t take a bloody elastoplast off his chest.”

“Yeh, but that’s cos it pulled the hair. Oh,” he said, a bulb going off.

“No, not oh,” Bodie said viciously, humiliated into anger. “You think they didn’t fucking shave me?”

Doyle never did have a problem finding something to be guilty about, even if it were an asked-for retaliation gone a bit too far. “Sorry, mate,” he said, really meaning it. Until, that is, curiosity bit him with teeth sharper than anything a mere ferret could muster. “They really shave you down there?”

“What d’you think?” Bodie muttered, still fiddling around with his underwear. He couldn’t, quite, bring himself to give that one tug it really needed.

"You mean they've left you bald?" Ray Doyle's chuckle was filthy at the best of times. On this particular occasion, it was a health hazard.

"Smooth as a baby's bottie?"

"Pack it in, Ray."

"Yeh, but you won't be packing it in anywhere, will you?"

"Not given the current set of circumstances," Bodie replied with as much dignity as he could, considering he was standing there with his trousers round his knees and his hand holding the front of his y-fronts.

"Here," Doyle said, keeping his face straight with extreme difficulty, "let me give you a hand with that."

"No thanks," Bodie said coldly. "You just want to have a look at me then laugh yourself sick."

"Who, me?" Doyle declaimed. "You've mistaken me for some other bastard, Bodie. Right, take a deep breath," he said, kneeling down so he could see what he was doing. "Ready?" He took the waistband of Bodie's underwear in both hands. "Steady?" He flexed his arms. "Go!" He pulled Bodie's underwear down in one fell swoop, revealing Bodie, not an inch from Doyle's nose, all his glory neatly bandaged, complete with bow, and something written in blue biro.

'Gotcha!', it said.

"Bodie..." Doyle said, threateningly.

"For fuck's sake," Stewart said from the door, "can't you two wait until you get home for once?"

"Yeh," McCabe said, shoving by Doyle on his way to the kettle, "just because you haven't seen each other in a week—"

"But it's not like that—" Bodie said.

"Nothing like that!" Doyle shouted.

"Yeh, yeh, right," Stewart muttered, stretching across a frantically redressing Bodie.

"No, honest," Doyle said quickly, getting up off his knees even more quickly, it having dawned on him that the others might be a bit more inclined to believe him if he weren't on his knees at his partner's feet. "It really wasn't what it looked like."

"Pull the other one," McCabe said, snickering at his own joke.

"What's so funny, Mac?" Lucas asked, wandering in for a cuppa to wash away the taste of another dull as ditchwater briefing.

"Bodie and bloody Doyle—worse than dogs on heat. Going at it right here—"

"Fucking hell," Lucas said, snitching McCabe's

tea, "isn't the honeymoon over yet?"

"But we're not—"

"But we haven't—"

Then the rest of the agents started coming in, the tale growing more in its retelling than Bodie's tail was likely to grow for quite a while. Catcalls and guffaws surrounding them, Doyle looked at Bodie.

"They're not going to believe us, you know," he said, and anyone would have been excused for thinking the mild tone was genuine.

Bodie had no such excuse. "It's not my fault..."

Doyle took one step forward, threateningly, then stepped back, hurriedly, as everyone hooted at him plastering himself to his hubby's front. "You know I'm going to kill you, don't you, Bodie."

"Now why would you want to do a thing like that, Ray?"

An exceedingly sweet smile, enough to scare the living daylights out of Cowley. "Because it's going to be a real pleasure, that's why."

"Yeh, but," Bodie muttered, subtly edging his way towards the door, "you did ask for it..."

"Oh, I did, did I? Don't care. I'm still going to kill you."

"I've got a better idea, Ray," Bodie said, grinning as he felt his way along the wall to find a way out.

"Torture you first?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of being hung for a sheep as for a lamb."

Enjoying himself by now, especially since he'd just thought of the perfect revenge for today's little débâcle, Doyle said: "Hanging's too good for the likes of you, mate."

"Couldn't agree more, so let's not, eh?" He had found the doorway now, was sidling through it, backing quickly up the corridor. "I just meant, if our reputations are already ruined, well," he shrugged quite artistically, "we might as well enjoy what we're supposed to have been up to in the first place..."

"Making me an offer I can't refuse, eh, Bodie?"

Doyle demanded, doing a great impersonation of Shotgun Tommy, complete with the caressing of his gun.

"Hope to fuck I am," Bodie replied through a rather fixed smile. All right, so Doyle wasn't going to shoot him, wasn't even going to hurt him—not seriously, anyway—but Doyle's sense of humour could be lethally humiliating. And having it off with each other wasn't exactly a fate worse than

death, was it? “Come on, Ray, it’d be fun!”

“That a promise?”

“Course it is. Just ask Murphy.”

“Already have,” Doyle said, landing himself right in it.

“Oh, yeh? That a fact, is it?” Bodie’s smile was a lot less fixed, widening into a cat got the cream grin.

“Never believe a word Murphy says.”

Bodie backed all the way into the supply room, Doyle shoving him in and locking the door behind them. “All right, to even the score,” he said, loftily

ignoring Bodie’s puerile chuckle, “you prove it’s worth being hung.”

“Oh,” Bodie said, as Doyle lowered his jeans and revealed himself in all his unbandaged glory, “being hung definitely has its plusses.”

Doyle, breath coming a hell of a lot faster than could be explained by a quick walk along the corridor, made a grab for the front of Bodie’s trousers. “It’s time to put up or shut up, Bodie...”

In the end, it was more a case of them both getting it up and Bodie opening Doyle up, boldly going where no ferret had ever gone before...

ROUGH TRADE

Like Pinocchio's nose, this one grew...and grew...and grew! In the beginning M. Fae had an idea for a scene, nothing much just an interesting situation. But then she found it needed an end, and a beginning, and, well, most of its middle. The result: Rough Trade, where the title reflects both the concept and the action in the story.

It's a voyage of discovery. Bodie thinks he is on a voyage of discovery about Doyle, only to discover that the voyager is himself. Here is a man who thinks he's on to a sure thing, only to find that there's nothing sure about anything, including himself.

Warning to the reader: M. Fae says she will not do a sequel. Please feel free to pick up the string and see where it leads.

EYES dancing, Bodie grabbed a handful of tight jeans and Doyle's bum, barely able to suppress a burst of laughter at the way his partner jumped.

"Gotcha!" he muttered as they went through the swing doors into the pub, Doyle's face a picture of fury now, the passing women's giggling reaction fuel to Doyle's fire and absolute joy for Bodie.

"Pack it in, you stupid sod," Doyle hissed, shouldering past Bodie to get to the bar first. "You can buy your own bloody drinks if you keep that up."

"Oh, yeh, moneybags? And when was the last time you got a round in, eh?" Bodie carped with equal measures of good humour and barefaced lying. "On Noah's Ark, was it? Can just see it now," he went on, pantomiming the way his old Granda would talk about the War, "the black clouds gathering overhead, the rain pissing down, the water rising—"

Doyle nodded to the barman when he came over, giving their order as if sublimely unaware of the amateur dramatics emoting all over the place.

"—and there's our little Ray of sunshine in the middle of it all, taking an age to find his wallet, sifting through his pockets to see if there's a copper in there under the lint and the mothballs—"

Doyle handed over a crumpled fiver, waited for the change, a solid slurp of bitter carrying him over until the barman came back with his money and the crisps.

"—Noah's standing there, his sons're standing there, all the neighbours, moaning an' groaning about how come if the Flood's coming, then how come Noah's still stood standing there waiting for little Ray to buy them a drink—"

Doyle stuffed the crisps in his jacket pockets, filled his hands with their pints, started off for the empty table there in the corner. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Bodie's expression, and managed to keep the grin from his own face: little Ray indeed!—wasn't often he was able to keep his own temper in check long enough to outlast Bodie, but by Christ, he thought, he was going to get a rise out of his bloody partner this time. He'd turn the tables for once, and then we'd see which side of his face Bodie was smiling out of. Just to rub a bit more salt in the wound of Bodie's failed fat-arsing around, Doyle began to whistle.

So Bodie grabbed at him again, Doyle turning to come round the table at just the wrong moment, Bodie's cupped hand grabbing him full in the crotch instead of the rump.

"Oi!" Doyle yelled, beer slopping over the rims of their mugs, froth landing wetly on Bodie's hands and Doyle's jeans. "You better watch it, mate, or I'll have you singing soprano."

"Ooh, petal," Bodie cooed, all gooey eyes and batting eyelashes, playing this to the hilt now that he'd finally broken through Doyle's unnatural reserve and won this round too, "and I thought you didn't want me that way."

The OAPs at the next table cackled at the floor show, Bodie completely over the top. "He's funnier than that Benny Hill bloke, in't he?" one of the women choked round her port and lemon.

"No, it's not Benny Hill, it's Danny la Rue what does all that fairy stuff, Peggy," her friend of forty years informed her, relishing a good argument that would see them through the dead part of the day between tea and *Coronation Street* on the telly that night. "Or that Larry Grayson, he's just as funny."

Doyle didn't think Bodie was funny at all, his glower gaining strength as he turned away from the old women to the bastard at his side. "I've already warned you once," he said, none too quietly, "pack it in, you stupid git."

"Why?" Bodie asked, having a good drink of Doyle's pint, switching them back before Doyle had finished fishing the crisps out of his pockets. "It's only a lark—an' you've got to admit," he nodded towards the lively coterie of old women nursing the luxury of their small sherries and ports, "it's good for a bit of a laugh."

"For some it is, but you better watch yourself, mate."

"Tut, tut, Doyle," Bodie stuffed a handful of mangled cheese and onion crisps into his mouth, tongue tip catching a few stray morsels, "such lack of imagination in one so well-read. You're repeating yourself, old son. Anyway, what're you going to do?" His eyes were gleeful again, even as he automatically surveyed the pub for any possible risk or anyone who was too interested in them. "Hit me with your handbag?"

"It's not what I'll do, it's what Cowley'll do, if people start talking about you."

"You what? Oh, come off it. Queers're the last ones to mess about in public, everybody knows that." He leaned in a little bit closer, winking outrageously, pleased as punch to have really wound Doyle up this time. "Course, it's the best camouflage for the likes of us, isn't it, ducky? Hiding in plain sight and all that—" Bodie broke off, his attention caught and the joke deflated by the two women just entering the pub. "Would you take a look at that pair!" he exclaimed, nudging Doyle in the ribs, moved as always by a large pair of breasts. "And her friend's not half bad either, is she? Christ, must be a D at least. Tits like melons—"

"The way you've been going on, I didn't think that was the fruit you fancied." Seriously peeved, a caustic edge to his voice that was entirely lost on

the happily lustful Bodie staring at his idea of heaven on legs. "But I could fancy some of that myself," Doyle went on, entering into the usual banter, dropping the backbiting joking that had become part of their routine, finishing his pint and getting to his feet before Bodie could make a move of his own, (comma) Bodie close enough behind him that it was nigh near a race to see who could reach the women first. A couple of feet still away from the women, Doyle glanced over his shoulder at his partner as he neatly stepped in front of Bodie and claimed the one Bodie had wanted for himself. "Anyway, you always did prefer grapes, didn't you?" He turned his very best smile on the woman Bodie had fancied so much. "Hello there," he said over Bodie's bluster, his arm fitting neatly round the very buxom woman's waist, her hip swelling just so against his groin, "my friend doesn't half fancy your friend," he went on, positively oozing charm as Bodie was left to smile at her flat-chested friend. "So why don't you and me go and have a drink together while those two get to know each other better?"

Days later, that evening nothing more than a vague memory of long hair and longer legs, they neither one of them was in a good mood as they came into the same pub, Doyle snagging the one empty table, Bodie shoving his way up to the bar, rejoining Doyle in silence, the matching set of double whiskies disappearing rapidly.

"Hungry?"

Doyle looked at him, nodded, leaned back against the wall again, his ribs still aching, either from the kick he'd taken or from the thudding of his heart.

Bodie knew better than to fuss, but even so, he didn't much like the colour of Doyle's skin right now. Fish-belly white he was used to, but only when he looked in the mirror or Cowley was using the office shower. Doyle was usually sallower, even showing a bit of a tan if the weather'd been nice, but this off-grey tinge bespoke either pain or the sick fear that sets in when the mind actually has time to think after too close a call and to remember just how mortal we all are. Uncomplaining, unjoking for once, he fetched them some food, his frown deepening when he returned to the table and found Doyle still slumped the way he'd left him. "Get yourself outside this," he said, shoving the

mounding plate in front of his partner, the steam curling amidst the cigarette smoke lurking in the atmosphere.

Doyle didn't even complain about how much he hated steak and kidney pudding and sludgy baked beans, just shovelled it in mechanically, one forkful after the other, too unnerved to bother about the social niceties of table manners.

"That's better," Bodie said eventually, shoving his empty plate aside, meaning the way the colour had returned to Doyle's cheeks now that his partner had some food and booze in him. "Least now you don't look like something the cat threw up."

"Anyone ever told you what a charming dinner companion you are?"

"Nope," cheerfully, but with eyes shadowed still with concern.

"Not surprised. Christ," the word exploded from him, the edge of panic sharpening his voice, "but that was a real balls up. Cowley'll have Murph's guts for garters."

"And I wouldn't be in McCabe's shoes for love nor money." Bodie paused, leaning back until his shoulders brushed reassuringly against his partner's. "Well, maybe if it was for enough money..."

A bare bleat of laughter, Doyle's eyes closed in memory or simple tiredness. "You'd need it for the athlete's foot powder if you'd been in McCabe's shoes. Here," and Doyle squirmed, fishing around in a too-tight pocket, crumpled money finally appearing. "Get us both another, will you?"

"And is there anything else sir will require?"

"Hot bath, warm bed—"

"Willing bird?" Bodie asked, knowing how it could be when the adrenalin high wore off and the chill of mortality set in.

Doyle opened his eyes, looked from Bodie down to his own jeans. "Couldn't get it up with a bloody crane. The only full body I'll be interested in tonight'll come out of a bottle."

"Fair enough." Bodie took the money, started dredging his way through the crowd. After today, if Doyle wanted to drown himself in drink, Bodie wasn't going to gainsay him—what's more, he'd even foot the bill, especially given what he owed Doyle beyond the realm of hard currency. He shifted uncomfortably while he waited for their drinks to be poured, his trousers catching him the

wrong way, his own reaction to the rush of fear and the near brush with disaster having its usual self-preservationist effect on his body. Later, he told himself, absently reaching down to rearrange himself in his trousers, when Doyle's safely blotto and tucked up for the night. You'll have your turn then. Still, his poor cock couldn't help but nudge hopefully whenever an attractive woman caught Bodie's eye.

"Things I give up for you," he murmured, only half intending Doyle to hear him as he fetched their drinks back to the table.

Doyle roused himself with visible effort, his usual lithe vitality not even hinted at by the leaden movements of his body tonight. "Yeh," he said, going through the motions for Bodie's sake, "poor old Bodie, stuck in the boozers when he was all set for a night at the opera."

"Uh, yeh," Bodie answered, all crossed-eyes and single digit IQ, "Lord of the Rings, that was it."

The fact that Doyle let that pass without a single dig about liking fairies warned Bodie that Doyle was a lot worse off than he was letting on.

"Here," Bodie said with a hell of a lot more enthusiasm than he actually felt, Doyle's taste in clubs running to the loud and expensive, "we could go down that club you were going on about the other day?" A suitably lecherous grin, a suggestive nudge. "Never know your luck, eh?"

Doyle gave him one of his patented looks, irritated beyond cause at Bodie's reminding him of something he didn't even want to think about. "Already told you, I'm not up for anything like that tonight, all right? That registered in your thick skull yet?"

Knowing better than to answer when Doyle took one of his nasty turns, Bodie made a placatory gesture with his hand then applied himself to working his way through the river of alcohol Doyle had prescribed for them both. Well, at least he had the consolation of knowing that his rather intimate little problem would soon yield to brewer's droop, which wasn't much help right now, when every lean forward to pick up his drink pressed his cock into his thigh, and every lean backwards stretched his cock, kissingly, down the tender skin of his inner thigh.

"I'll get one in," Doyle said, mind on the next few drops of alcoholic anaesthesia, Bodie's mind still on the way his cock was nudging forlornly at him.

“You what?” he asked, but Doyle was already on his feet, wending his way through the press of people. The place was absolutely mobbed now, the after-work crowd jamming in to erase the stresses of their tidy little nine-to-five jobs, completely oblivious to the fact that there were two men in their midst who had killed today, and might well kill again before this sad lot saw their next pay-packets. The familiar glow of superiority warmed Bodie, took away some of the unpleasant, unexaminable unease of killing, his own pride in himself and his well-honed skills and highly trained body making his gun feel comfortable where it was snuggled in under his arm.

A movement in the corner caught his attention, and he watched, without being obvious, as the well-dressed young man in his three piece suit—someone, Bodie told himself with an upwelling of pride, who’d pee himself if he so much as heard about the sort of blokes Bodie had to defeat—chatted up a bottled-blonde with long legs and pert bust. Cynically amused, Bodie watched as what he’d thought of as a chat-up turned itself into a reconciliation scene, the man proffering apologies and G&Ts in equal profusion. A kiss, then another, even a quick brush of hand against breast, and Bodie’s mouth twisted as he looked away. There was one bloke who was going to be in with a chance tonight, sowing his wild oats, forgetting everything about himself in the pleasures of sex.

And him? He was sitting here waiting for his mate to fight his way back through the crowd and give him another pint that he didn’t even want. For what? he asked himself for the millionth time, this one done as Doyle came back into sight, his ferocious scowl and tacit threat of violence cleaving the horde like magic. I’m sitting here because he’s my mate and he needs to get through tonight without doing himself a mischief, he answered himself, hating the lacklustre patina that dimmed Doyle’s usual vitality, wary of the coiled tension that warred with the too-familiar threat of Doyle’s depressions. I’m here because I owe him this much at least—for fuck’s sake, I’m here because he needs me.

The last thought was stomped on, battered into oblivion, sentimental weakness having no place in Bodie’s scheme of life. Loyalty, the left-over discipline from his Service years, that was one thing: safe, secure, an added survival skill. Anything beyond was blind stupidity, especially in his line of

work. But Doyle, oh, no, Doyle didn’t see it that way, did he? Liked being ‘friends’, liked spending time together, going out with birds together, or having a drink with each other when there wasn’t a bit of crumpet on offer.

Silently, he took his drink from Doyle, gulped from it, set it down, refused to look at his partner. Looked, instead, at the clusters of women, friends come hunting in twos and threes, dolled up to the nines, as ready for a bit of sex as he was. There was plenty on offer tonight, judging by how many mascaraed eyes were gazing his way—staring in Doyle’s direction too. Bodie had a good look around at what was available, paying no heed to the storm sitting beside him just waiting to douse everything in its path. Finally, he cast a reluctant glance at Doyle, noted, unenthusiastically, the set of Doyle’s shoulders and the cast of his mouth, read the emotions behind the fixed mask. He knew Doyle in this mood: it would end up either in misery or violence, and either way, Bodie knew he’d be the one to be on the receiving end.

“Bugger this for a game,” Bodie announced, dunting Doyle in the ribs, his decision made. “You can wait till I’ve snuffed it for a wake.”

Doyle drew him a dirty look, took a pointed slurp of his beer.

“No, I mean it, Ray. All right, so the Cow’s after everyone’s guts for garters, but he’s not here right now, is he?” He was hurrying now, throwing the words like stones, annoyed when they simply bounced off his partner. “We’re here, and we’re fucking alive, made it through another day, right? Not that anyone could tell from looking at you,” he added, his empathy burned off by his own need for sex, his sympathy too impatient to wait out Doyle’s unhealthy moodiness. “And I’m not going to sit here as if we’re at our own fucking funeral. You don’t need any more booze, my lad,” he went on, finishing Doyle’s drink for him, too caught up in his solution of all their problems to notice Doyle’s uncommon passivity, too determined to jolly Doyle out of this latest problem to care whether Doyle wanted to have a good sulk or not, “what you need is a good fuck.”

“I’ve told you—”

“Yeh, yeh, you’ve told me,” Bodie mocked, the same way he had since he’d been five. “And I know you better than that. Look at you, wound up tighter’n a spinster’s cunt, and for what? Because we survived and some right bastard didn’t?”

"It was a bit more complicated than that—"

"D'you think I don't know—"

"I know," Doyle said with quiet contempt, "that you don't want to think about it. Deep as a fucking saucer, that's you, Bodie and—"

With some determination, Bodie held on to his temper: they'd been through this before, and Doyle's ugly mood would turn rapidly into a far uglier situation if Bodie rose to the bait of Doyle's carping. "And you've had enough booze for one night."

"Well, thank you, Lord Longford," Doyle retorted, one long finger tapping the rim of his emptied glass.

"Come on, Ray," Bodie said in his best wheedle, "you're ready to explode, and Cowley'll murder me if I let you get into a fight."

"Since I'm not fit for human company then," Doyle said steadily as he stood on slightly unsteady legs, "that leaves me the choice of goin' 'ome alone, or staying with you." He raked Bodie with a particularly vitriolic stare. "And given the choice, 'ome sounds like fucking heaven. I've 'ad ever such a lovely evenin', mate."

Bodie's voice was very tight with a resentment he didn't usually permit himself. "Don't mention it."

"You're the one who's mentionin' it—" Doyle broke off, turning to look, awkwardly, at Bodie, at the man who'd stepped between Doyle's jammed gun and a very nasty sawn-off shotgun: looked, carefully, at the man he hadn't even bothered to thank for saving his life—hadn't felt he needed to. "No wake," he said, sitting back down, his action as close to an apology or thanks that either one of them would want, "but no birds either, all right?"

"Wasn't thinking about anything so fowl," Bodie replied, rubbing his hands with an entirely mendacious glee, and he was, under the humour, grimly determined that he was going to get Doyle out of this fit of the moodies without anyone being hurt this time, either by Doyle's lethal hands or the sharp edge of his tongue. "Tell you what, why don't we have something to eat to mop up all this booze—wouldn't do to be caught drunk and unable, would it?—and then we'll make a night of it?"

Doyle leaned back against the wall, the tension still there under the posed relaxation, the currency of partnership demanding that he give Bodie what Bodie obviously needed. "Why not?" he said

unenthusiastically. "The booze 'asn't made a blind bit of difference."

"Going blind, my child?" Bodie intoned, piously, then grinning, positively willing Doyle to at least try to defuse the situation, unwilling to confront his own need to have Doyle around to share the rest of the night. "There's a cure for that, you know."

"What? Never!" Doyle squeaked, doing his part, playing Bodie's game because he at least owed him that. "Whatever will they think of next?"

"I can tell you what I'll think of next," Bodie muttered, nodding over at a singularly attractive, and attractively single, woman standing amidst the clutter of people, her dark eyes searching for a table. Bodie waved her over, all the happier when her friend joined her and the two of them started making their slow way over.

"Which one d'you fancy then?" Bodie whispered as *sotto voce* as was possible in a crammed pub with a juke-box blaring the Undertones full blast.

"I already told you—"

"Yeh, I know, but it's like riding a horse, innit?"

"Don't know about you, mate," Doyle said dryly, "but I've never fallen off one yet."

"Didn't mean *that*. Just meant if, you know, you get a bit nervous about bein' able to perform, right, then you've got to just do it, get it over and done with before you get your knickers in a twist over it."

Doyle gave him a very straight look, then shook his head in apparent wonder. "You really take the biscuit. I almost got killed today, two men who didn't have to, died. And the entire thing was such a royal fuck-up, it's a miracle any of us are still hanging around, and you think I don't fancy a quick fuck because I'm worried the old plumbing won't work?"

"Well, what else is it, eh? You said yourself you couldn't get it up with a crane—"

"And I meant it. Bodie, I'm fucking knackered, I ache all over and I don't fucking feel like it!"

"All right, all right, keep your hair on," Bodie muttered, looking anew at Doyle and realising that his partner might just mean it. But still, there was that darkness lurking in Doyle's eyes, and the tightness of his body, a dozen minute signs that Bodie recognised after a year of working with this man under more circumstances than the people in this pub could ever imagine. He knew he wasn't

wrong about the impulse to destroy: that was clear enough in the tone of voice Doyle used to lash him. But he'd've bet a month's pay that Doyle was sexually wound up as well—and there wasn't a snowball's chance, he reminded himself, of him not being able to read Ray Doyle like the proverbial bloody book. All right, he decided, so Ray's convinced he's going have a bit of trouble with his equipment tonight: that didn't alter the fact that what the stupid prat needed was a good fuck.

The two women had finally managed to get through the crowd, were sitting down, smiling at Bodie's charm, making allowances for Doyle's creaking politeness.

"What'll it be for you two lovely ladies?" Bodie asked, making sure he had to lean in very, very close to be heard.

"Aren't you even going to ask them their names first?" Doyle asked, voice dark with contempt and danger. "Planning on—"

"Pardon my bad manners," Bodie said quickly before Doyle could land them right in it. "It's not often we get a chance to meet two such gorgeous women and I..." he paused, smiled the way that always made the birds melt, shrugged with all the ingenuous charm of a schoolboy, every move one he knew would get him exactly what he wanted, "I'm sorry, I just forgot myself. My friend's Ray, and I'm Bodie."

It only took half a breath, long enough for the two women to turn to each other and tacitly agree who was going to do the intros this time. "I'm Heather and this is Christine," the one with the long hair said and Bodie waited, with a sudden stab of unexplained annoyance, for the usual comments on him being 'just Bodie'.

"Pretty names for two very pretty women," Bodie broke in, forestalling a usual part of the chat up that he had no patience for tonight. "G&Ts, is it?"

"Oh, no, thanks all the same, but I'll have a Carlsberg," the blonde—Doyle's, Bodie decided abruptly, his own enthusiasm waning unexpectedly—said, her polished nails such a pale peach against Bodie's navy blue jacket.

"And I'll have a Bacardi and Coke," the one with the long hair said, and Bodie realised he had forgotten their names already. Not that it mattered: as long as they served their purpose, that was all that counted.

"Coming right up," he told them, one hand

grabbing Doyle's upper arm too tightly for comfort. "Come and give me a hand," Bodie said very sweetly, fingers digging into tense muscle.

"Wouldn't dream of doing anything else," Doyle replied just as sweetly, his eyes narrowed unpleasantly as he followed on behind Bodie, shaking himself free as soon as he could.

"What the fuck's the matter with you?" Bodie hissed at him as they squeezed into the bar and waited for one of the harried barmaids to pour their drinks.

"Oh, that's bloody typical. You don't listen, just plough on like a bulldozer, and then you ask me what's the matter? I don't want either one of them, I don't want sex and I don't appreciate you trying to set me up with this week's tart!"

"Come on, Ray, since when've you not been up for it? Those bloody jeans of yours want censoring half the time."

"I told you, Bodie, I'm not interested. But you can buy them their drinks, and I'll be polite, but then I'm for the off. I'm sure," he smiled, very nasty indeed, making his words cuttingly sarcastic, "a big lad like you has enough for the both of them."

A barmaid picked that opportune moment to come up to them, taking their orders, coming back incredibly quickly, neither man speaking, neither of them finding words that wouldn't make the whole situation worse. Bodie fumed quietly, simmering with a volcanic quiet that could unnerve even Cowley. His temper wasn't improved by the nagging knowledge that at least half of this was his fault, and that the other half just might be from a miasma of emotions left over from today, a corrupt, corrosive pile Bodie didn't want to touch with a bargepole.

"Fair enough," he finally said, and actually meant it. "Even though it's beyond me, you're not in the mood. Have your drink then," not commenting that he'd ordered only a half pint for Doyle, wary of the other man's too chancy temper tonight, "and I'll take care of the girls." He plastered on his most infuriatingly smug smile, trying desperately to make this night the same as every other night, trying to pretend that the evening hadn't somehow got away from him. Trying to pretend that Doyle hadn't got somehow away from him too, turned into this uncommunicative, incomprehensible stranger. "Of course, the girls'll be too busy trying to keep up with me to miss you."

"Who wouldn't?" Doyle replied dryly, not

actually quite looking at his partner. He started to turn away from the bar, was shunted, midstep, almost off his feet by a proto-rugby player bellowing for his beer. Stumbled, was caught, but not before he had been pressed, chest to knee, against Bodie. He stood there for a moment, frozen.

Bodie grabbed Doyle, a friendly imprecation on the tip of his tongue, and then he stopped, noticing. Aware, suddenly, that he had been right about Doyle's sexual tension. For a second, he was flooded by the relief that he could still read the man he depended on to watch his back, and then he felt the pulse of arousal surge through Doyle's cock, felt it stir against him like the Serpent in Eden. Unwillingly, he met Doyle's eyes, saw the echo of that passion in the enlarged pupils, saw himself reflected in Doyle's eyes, shock setting in. And on its heels, baying like a pack of hungry dogs, came knowledge.

"Christ, Ray—"

"Don't you dare say a fucking word, d'you hear me, Bodie?" Doyle snarled, teeth bared, words hissed, one finger digging sharply into Bodie's chest. "Not a single fucking word!"

Then he turned, was gone, an eddy of annoyed and complaining punters marking his wake.

Bodie was left to struggle, regain some semblance of normalcy, paying for drinks, easing his way through the crowd, three glasses clutched between his hands, the fourth drink left behind for the greed of strangers. By the time he made it back to the table and the sex he no longer really wanted, the polished surface of Bodie's manner was pinned in place, his smile easy and charming as he chatted to the two women and made excuses for his absented friend.

And all the while he chatted, all the while he smiled and laughed and made flatteringly interested noises, Bodie churned with the remembering, Doyle's groin hot against him, Doyle's cock pressing hard, and worst of all, arrow shot in the dark to pierce him through, Doyle telling him he didn't fancy a woman tonight.

Bodie remembered it all. Added a dozen, a hundred small incidents, from tonight, from last week, from a year ago. Went over it again and again and again. Thinking about Ray Doyle, whom he knew now not at all.

Thinking about Ray Doyle, coiled so tight, sexual need exuding from him like sweat.

Thinking about Ray Doyle needing sex and

not needing women.

Thinking about Ray Doyle pressed against him, his cock leaping in response.

And finally, he could pretend no longer.

Now, he knew.

"...so if MacInnes was on the take, then that would be the connection between Jones taking the snapshots of the research papers and Goldbloom beating our mob to the punch with that micro-chip—"

The fiercely businesslike monologue went on, Doyle keeping up an unceasing flow of words, the job become a defensive barrier between Doyle and Bodie, a flimsy shield against the power of Bodie's knowing.

"...which means that CI5—"

Not *us*, Bodie thought, almost idly, one part of him calmly cataloguing all the signs of Doyle's agitation: the darting glances in his direction from behind dark glasses that couldn't completely conceal the whites of Doyle's eyes; the endless stream of words, the absolute refusal to permit even a second's pause lest Bodie say something; the way Doyle was as relaxed as a mannikin, and his posturings just as genuine.

"...be working with the prats over in MI6, which'll be no picnic—"

Even Doyle had to breathe, didn't he? Bodie waited, quite patiently, thinking about nothing in particular, slipping the car through traffic, letting Doyle run on and on, the words registering but meaning nothing. He turned left to miss the worst of the roadworks, driving them to work as if, as Doyle was trying so desperately to make true, today were no different from any other.

"...Spurs couldn't play their way out of a wet paper bag—"

Doyle took a breath, and Bodie slipped smoothly into the tiny pause. "Went to your flat last night," he remarked quite casually, tension crawling slowly up his spine to tangle in the hairs at the back of his neck. He could feel Doyle's reaction as if it were his own: the indrawn breath, the sudden glance, the convulsive flex of hands, the abrupt swallow. Knew that Doyle would be feeling the beginnings of fear, if the stupid bugger hadn't already seen what a precarious position he had put himself in.

"Oh, yeh?" Doyle replied belatedly, voice not

entirely as steady as it ought.

“Where were you?” Bodie asked him, still in that oh-so-casual tone, this display of serenity unnerving to those of a guilty conscience.

Doyle shrugged, sank lower in his seat, pushed his glasses back into place, the perfect delusion of innocence relaxing. “Out and about. Went to the Black Swan for a drink—and you’ll never believe who I met—”

“Where were you, Ray?” Bodie asked again, even more casually, even as he pulled the car in to the side of the road, Doyle’s side too close to the chained gate of a factory long since fallen victim to recession.

“Told you—”

“Not the truth, you didn’t.” He twisted round in his seat, jacket squeaking against the seat, Doyle immediately becoming engrossed in the rusting padlock outside his window. “C’mon, Ray, you can tell me. Where’d you go last night?”

There was no answer, not that Bodie had really been expecting one. “Pick up a fella, did you?” he said into Doyle’s wariness. Bodie couldn’t help but add, an unacknowledged anger sharpening both his words and the keen stare he turned on the partner who had lied to him for so long, “Seeing as how you didn’t fancy a bird, that is.”

“Don’t be so fucking stupid!” Doyle snapped, clinging to illusion that he might yet get out of this with both the partnership and his job intact, if only he could hang on long enough for Bodie to calm down, this preternatural calm fooling him not at all: no-one could get away with deceiving Bodie, albeit by omission, not without paying the piper a pretty price. “What the fuck makes you think I’d pick up a man, for Christ’s sake,” he hurtled on, base instinct making him lie, covering the truth up with bullshit until only the lies would show. “I’ll leave sodomy and buggery to sailors, thanks all the same.”

Deliberately, Bodie let the insult slide from him like water from a duck’s back, his own merchant navy years a long way away. The words may have missed their mark, but the intent hadn’t, and Doyle’s compounding deceit narrowed Bodie’s eyes. “So all that in the pub last night—”

“All what in the pub?” Doyle demanded, attacking before Bodie could drag his secrets out in the light to watch them squirm like vampires. “Just ‘cause I didn’t fancy fucking my eyes out inside some nameless cunt?” Not so much as a quiver

betraying his nerves, he hammered at Bodie, using the sheer force of his will to conveniently rearrange the night before and his body’s betrayal. “So a bloke has to shag every bint in sight, twenty-four hours a day, or you’re suspecting them of being bent?” A heavy sigh, perfectly balanced, perfectly timed. “You ought to try growing up, Bodie. You might like it.”

“More than you like girls?”

For all it was worded as a question, it was a flat statement and lay there between them, as poisonous as nightshade.

Doyle opened his mouth to reply, to give some suitably cutting retort, closed his mouth tightly, looked away, fist coming up to be pressed against those thinned lips.

Bodie started the car again, moving back into traffic, his movements as smooth as the voice that quietly cut Doyle to shreds. “Thing is,” he began, “if Cowley finds out you’re bent, you’ll be out on your arse. And if he doesn’t find it out from me, I’ll be chipped out with you, won’t I?”

Bodie could feel Doyle stare at him, couldn’t ignore the conflicting emotions bombarding him from without and from within. “See, if I don’t tell Cowley my partner’s bent, and he finds out, then they’ll all think I kept stumm because I’m as queer as you are.”

“Then they’d be wrong then, wouldn’t they?”

“No fucking doubt about that!” Bodie snapped, the first frayings of control erupting like boils through his calm. “Christ, even thinking about doing the things you lot do is enough to make me sick.”

“*You lot?*” Doyle demanded, voice rising. “What the fuck’s that supposed to mean? Oh, yeh, course, it’s obvious, innit? I bump into you, you’re the one that cops a feel, but *I’m* the poof? And you think you’re a CI5 agent?”

“All I was doing, Doyle,” nastiness underlying the jagged calm, face set as he found them a parking space at the kerb, a cloud of pigeons rising in protest, “was standing there. *You* were the one to shove yourself against me. So—”

“Oh, that’s rich. The only time you weren’t the one grabbing me—”

“Christ, Doyle,” Bodie shouted, on the defensive, an ugly guilt gilding thoughts he never wanted to think, “it’s only fucking camping it up a bit, messing about the way mates do—*straight* mates.” He sidled a glance at Doyle, watching out

of the corner of his eyes as his words hit home. "Not that you'd know much about that, though, would you?"

"No, I don't," Doyle agreed with an equanimity that set Bodie's teeth on edge. "Which is hardly surprising, is it?" he went on, getting out of the car, waiting until Bodie was facing him over the top of the Capri. "Not given the company I keep."

And it was the second time in less than twenty four hours that Bodie had been left standing there alone.

Doyle couldn't have cared less that George Cowley would have described his expression as 'truculent': Doyle was in a filthy mood, and why shouldn't the world know it? He straight-armed the door open, slamming it hard against the wall, distantly satisfied at the way the handle gouged into the plaster.

"Full of all the joys of spring, I see," Murphy murmured quietly, rising to his feet to leave free Doyle's usual seat, there on the lumpy old sofa beside Bodie. A flourishing bow, his arm sweeping from Doyle to Bodie, he announced to Doyle: "Your throne awaits, sire."

"Fuck off, you stupid prick."

Murphy, naturally, had better things to do with his hide than risk it under Doyle's temper. He looked from Doyle to Bodie and back again. He thumped Bodie lightly on the shoulder. "Makes me want to get down on my knees and thank Cowley for leaving me solo. He's all yours, and I hope you live happily ever after, petal."

Doyle moved so quickly not even Murphy had time to avoid him, Doyle's strong hand tangling viciously in Murphy's collar. "Next time some mad bastard's shooting dum-dums at us, why don't you live up to the name and step right in front of one of 'em?"

"Now, now, Ray," Bodie moved in smoothly, not a thing about him betraying just how unsure he was of his welcome, not even the faintest glimmer in his eyes revealing how unnerved he was by this sudden dissolving of their mainstay rapport. "You forgotten Lecture No. 398 so soon?" The humour camouflage for him neatly disentangling Doyle from Murphy's throat, he put on an outrageously bad Glasgow accent: "Nae bluid oan mah guid cairpets, laddies—"

It was more than simple reaction to Bodie

spoiling his fight: it carried everything from the night before, and all the reasons for Doyle avoiding him since the car this morning. "If you don't get your hand off my arm, I'll fucking cut it off yours."

Not even Bodie dared argue with Doyle when he was this quiet, this controlled. Doyle stood there for a scant second, until Bodie had stepped back, hands raised in silent surrender, and Murphy had started to make good his escape.

"All his?" Doyle sneered, looking at Murphy whilst all three of them knew all this was intended for Bodie alone. "He should be so lucky—and I should be so fucking insane."

And it was the third time Bodie had been left standing.

Cursing under his breath, Bodie shoved his plate onto the coffee table, cast a last, longing glance at the television where Liverpool were about to thrash the eleven hapless idiots in the Everton squad, and conceded that escapism was obviously not to be his tonight.

It was, he assumed, Doyle hammering on his door like that. Cowardice not normally a habit of his, he still half-hoped it was his fairy godmother come to wave her magic wand and erase the night before, not to mention the morning, afternoon and early evening after.

Bodie hauled the door open as Doyle raised his arm to thump it again.

"Christ, the poor man's Thor, complete with his bloody Hammer. The bell does work, you know," he said, stepping aside to let Doyle come in, but his partner just stood there, glaring down at his own feet. Bodie took one look at the gargoyle poised on his threshold and his sense of humour got the better of both of them. "And here's me thinking it was my fairy godmother come to make it all better. But you can come in anyway."

Doyle, contrary to the end, stayed where he was, firmly planted on the front door mat, hands now shoved deep into his jacket pockets, frown even more deeply engraved on his forehead. "I'm not stopping, and I'm not coming in."

Bodie propped himself up against the doorjamb in a pose he'd just stolen from Doyle. "Going to do the dirty washing on the doorstep, are we? That should please the neighbours no end."

"Don't you start, Bodie. I've had enough—" A glimmer of what might be amusement in Bodie's

dark eyes was enough: Doyle snatched a deep breath, hauled in his temper, and refused to give the stupid berk what he so obviously wanted. They were going to sort this out once and for all, and Bodie wasn't going to distract them into leaving all this unsaid. "Last night wasn't what you think it was," he said, continuing right over Bodie's expression of lofty disbelief. "'Ad nothing to do with you, you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, an' if you'd kept yourself to yourself, you'd never 'ave found out in the first place." He stopped in anticipation of Bodie's explosion of contradiction.

"Oh, don't stop, this is amazing stuff. Anyway, you've started, so why don't you finish?" Bodie said in his best Bamber Gascoine.

Doyle was still hanging on, grimly, to his temper. "What needs to be finished is you goin' on as if I'd made a pass at you," he said, tightly controlled, throwing irrefutable facts at Bodie in the hope they'd camouflage the underlying truth. "For God's sake, Bodie, to hear you, anyone'd think I'd tried to fuck you!"

"And you haven't?"

"Of course I haven't!"

"Which just goes to prove," Bodie said terribly mildly, giving Doyle no time to build a defence, "what a fucking coward you are."

Doyle's face flickered, briefly, with an expression that told far more than Doyle could ever risk Bodie knowing, everything plainly visible from his unspoken desire to his own self-damning for his cowardice.

Before Doyle could recover, before the anger could blot everything else out, Bodie attacked again, his sharp eyes devouring every hint gleaned from Doyle's expressions. "I'm surprised at you, really surprised you never chanced your arm with me," he said as if he were mildly amused and his body language was simply mistranslated. "Didn't you wonder about me? Merchant navy, mercs, the Services—all that male company. All those months when I couldn't get my hands on a woman?"

Doyle swallowed, jumped, startled, at the faint snick of a door-chain being undone. Over behind them, old Mrs. Jenkins was peering out to see what they were doing, listening in, her face alight with speculation as to the meaning of all this. Caught between a rock and a hard place, Doyle opted for the one that hadn't told any tales on him to Cowley. He shoved Bodie aside, went straight through to the living room, pouring and devouring

the large whisky that he'd promised himself he wouldn't have, not tonight, when he needed to be clear headed and steady. But his hands were already shaking as he poured the first drink, forcing the admission that he had already lost at least half his battle and so he started in towards oblivion.

"Planning on keeping the distilleries in business all by yourself, are you?"

Doyle didn't react, his overstretched nerves having listened to every move Bodie had made, had identified everything from the dull thud of the mortise-lock bolting home to the faint hiss of clothing as it slid against the naked skin it hid from view. Not, given the circumstances, something he ought to dwell on.

His third drink turning to acid in his stomach while his brain dulled until all his sharp thoughts no longer cut so painfully, Doyle straightened his spine and started what he'd come here for. "Look," he said to the wall in front of him while he listened to Bodie's stillness behind him, "I just didn't fancy fucking some bird I'd never seen before and wouldn't see again. After yesterday..." he shrugged, focussing on the one aspect of yesterday that he dared reveal and turn to his advantage, "well, it'd've been different if I'd had someone I could go home to, someone who actually knew me..."

"Someone whose name you'd be able to remember in the morning?"

"Yeh, basically. We could've been killed yesterday, Bodie, as easy as that—" he tried to snap his fingers, but they slid silently against each other, his co-ordination suffering from his Dutch courage. "And then to have to have a stranger—Christ, talk about *cold*." He shrugged again, took another hefty swallow of whisky. "Would only've made it worse for me."

"Know what you mean," Bodie said quietly, and Doyle's shoulders rounded marginally as the edge of tension bled from him. "Course," Bodie went on, and it was just as well Doyle couldn't see what was passing for a smile on the handsome face, "you'd have a better chance of me believing you if you'd stayed home last night." He lifted his hands, rested them lightly on Doyle's shoulders, not missing the sudden hiss of intaken breath as Doyle stiffened. "Where did you go last night?" he asked again, very, very softly, and very, very dangerously.

"Out," Doyle said, yielding nothing.

"I'd already worked that bit out myself,

funny enough.”

Doyle would give his right arm to make Bodie see all this as funny, a joke gone awry. But Bodie wasn't laughing, and Doyle had heard that purring tone of voice used as threat before. “I needed to think. Too restless to stop at home...”

“Too restless, Ray?” Bodie murmured, far too close for comfort, his breath stirring Doyle's heavy curls. “Suppose that's one word for it. But I think randy would be a better one.”

Like a fist to the stomach, Doyle could remember that moment, pressed against Bodie, all that heat and strength—he wrenched his mind away from that: too dangerous to think of that now, with Bodie so close and everything on the line. “That was just the adrenalin—”

“Why won't you admit it?” Bodie asked, sounding no more than curious.

“Admit what?”

“Not like you to play for time, Ray, not with me.”

That's what you think, mate, Doyle thought to himself, too aware of all the months he'd lusted after his partner and all the things he'd never said, half because he thought Bodie would thump him on his way to Cowley's office.

“And it's not as if you have to admit anything I don't already know.”

Doyle didn't say anything, reached out instead to pour another drink. Bodie's hand stopped him, fingers closing over his own, until his fist was enclosed in Bodie's, and no-one knew better than Ray Doyle just how much damage could be done to his hand if Bodie decided to force the issue.

“What d'you want?” he asked, conceding finally that Bodie wasn't going to let this lie, wasn't going to let them pretend it was something harmless to be swept under the carpet.

“I want you to come right out and say it, that's all.”

“That's *all*?” Doyle was appalled to hear a faint shrillness of fear in his own voice. He wanted to run away and hide: he wanted desperately to have said ‘say what’ with insouciant confidence. But he had given himself away, betrayed by his own surprise, and the confusion of having Bodie surrounding him, and the chaos of Bodie's odd reaction.

“Say it, Ray.”

Doyle remained silent, sluggishly dredging his mind for something, anything, to say but the words

Bodie seemed so intent on.

“Say it, Ray, go on, just say it.” Bodie's hand tightened round Doyle's, pressuring him.

“You threatening me, Bodie?” Doyle said, and this time his voice was calm and steady, the way it always was in the middle of a disaster, before the aftermath tore him to pieces.

“Say it, Ray.”

Doyle raised his hand, and with it, Bodie's, the knuckles even whiter than the rest of Bodie's skin. “Cowley won't like it if you break my hand.”

“Is that what's bothering you? I bet it is,” Bodie said. He let go of Doyle's hand, stepped away from him, until there was cold air between himself and his partner. “Don't worry, I'm not about to tell Cowley about you.”

“No?” Doyle almost laughed, but he couldn't even pretend that much. “Going to let me be a security risk then, are you?”

“You're not a security risk,” Bodie said flatly, that line of conversation one he didn't want to even start on. “But I'm not going to tell the Cow, so go on, prove you've still got balls. Say it.”

“Prove what?” Doyle asked, turning round to face Bodie this time, his face a perfect picture of sarcasm. “Cause you think I've suddenly gone bent, you think that makes me a fucking fairy? You can think whatever you want to, mate, it doesn't make a blind bit of difference to me—”

“Doesn't it? That's not what your body was saying last night, was it?”

Unfair of Bodie to refuse to drop the subject now, of all times. “That was only sex, Bodie, and since when have you thought sex had anything to do with feelings, eh?”

Bodie smiled slowly, the expression of triumph taking its time to display itself, giving Doyle time enough to realise just what Bodie thought had just been said.

“Don't be such a wally,” Doyle snapped. “Just because my prick fancies you doesn't mean *I* want you.”

“Doesn't it?” Bodie asked smoothly, stepping in front of Doyle as his partner made to walk away.

“Course it fucking doesn't,” Doyle said nastily, lying as fast as he could. “And I've said what you wanted to hear—” He stopped then, all vulnerable belligerence, staring his partner down. “So now I've said it,” he went on, spitting the words out until the hoarseness of his voice sounded like nothing but anger, “I'm leaving.”

“Ray.”

Doyle hesitated, a half-step into the darkened hallway. Slowly, face wondering, he turned round, looking at Bodie.

“You can’t just leave. Not now you’ve admitted it,” Bodie said quietly, staring at Doyle.

All his safe and sane plans for tonight torn to ribbons, Doyle ran one hand wearily through his hair. “For fuck’s sake, Bodie,” he demanded, giving up the fight, “what is it you want?”

One hand dropped to the front of Bodie’s trousers, and the deft fingers slowly dropped the zip of his fly, the action more than enough answer. “Come on, Ray,” Bodie whispered, “you know you want to.”

Doyle swallowed hard, throat gone dry and palms gone damp. Then reason kicked in, dislodging the unthinking reactions of his body. Disbelief and disappointment bred sourly with the whisky in his stomach. “D’you know, it never even crossed my mind that you’d try this on with me?” It wasn’t a question even of Bodie offering himself as rough trade: he’d seen enough, experienced enough to know how common that was, and the only shock in that idea was the explosion of desire through his body. He shook his head, almost angrier at himself for his blinkered faith than at Bodie’s blackmail. “I never thought even *you* would stoop to putting the screws on.”

“I already told you I wouldn’t tell Cowley.” As smooth as silk, Bodie’s voice slid down Doyle’s spine, and Bodie saw the effect of it. He spread his legs a little farther apart and, millimetre by millimetre, eased his hand into the open zip of his trousers, stroking himself, smiling as Doyle couldn’t keep his eyes to himself, the smile growing as he watched Doyle watching him. “Come on,” he murmured, putting two fingers under his cock, making Doyle lick his lips and look away, harried, as Bodie’s cock was outlined under the cloth. “It’s not like you to be shy, Ray. And it’s not as if it’s the first time either one of us has ever done it, is it?”

Doyle’s head jerked up, his gaze flying to Bodie’s face. “Are you telling me—”

“No, I’m not,” Bodie replied, a thin edge of honed steel in his voice. “You’re the only queer here, mate.” He stroked himself again, Doyle’s involuntary reaction more proof for Bodie, a convenient excuse to forget all the times he’d seen Doyle with women: not to be thought of, the unmanning idea that Doyle might be bisexual, for

that would question everything Bodie was doing here tonight. Worse, it would question Bodie himself. Automatic though the rejection was, the thought lurked at the back of his mind, where he couldn’t, quite, hear it. The intangible doubt was enough to erode the friendliness of Bodie’s voice until it sounded like any other anonymous encounter. “But like I said, didn’t you ever wonder how I managed all those nights without women?”

Doyle jammed his hands in his pockets, tried to look away from what Bodie was offering him. Not equality, no. Not an emotional relationship, not even good, old-fashioned fucking for fucking’s sake. The coldness of cynicism clashing with the spreading heat of arousal in his belly, he asked: “Hang about the cottages, did you?”

“Sometimes,” Bodie agreed readily enough, his hand still moving addictively inside his trousers. “But it was better round the back of the barracks, or in one or two pubs I know.”

The cynicism might yet win. “With looks like yours, you probably made a fortune.”

“Only enough to tide me over till payday once in a while—and stop trying to piss me off, ’cause it’s not going to work.” Shifting his stance slightly, his cock stretching long and hard down the inside seam of his black trousers, the engorging pride of seeing Doyle lusting after him was enough to push aside uncomfortable memories that were never so much as looked at, never dusted off, always shut away with the rest of his dead. Bodie grasped himself, drew himself out, until his cock was pale and shockingly naked against the darkness of his clothes. “Suck me,” he said.

Doyle swallowed hard, eyes impaled by the sight of Bodie’s cock revealed for him to see, his own cock rising to meet it. Under attack by Bodie’s voice and the lure of having this much with Bodie when he’d expected rejection at best, betrayal at worst, cynicism was losing rapidly, Doyle’s cock filling and growing hard, pressing against the softness of his underwear, making his hand itch to touch and his mouth water with the longing to do exactly as Bodie had demanded. “So you think you’ve found a convenient mouth, have you?” he managed, fighting against the impulse to go to his knees and take what he could get, refusing to permit himself the lie that this would just be some casual encounter. “Think you’ve found yourself ready sex on tap any time your bird won’t come across or you can’t be bothered going through all

the social motions just to get your end away?"

"Got it in one," Bodie replied, right hand slowly moving the length of his cock, every tiny gesture drawing Doyle's attention. "And I'm right, aren't I, Ray?"

Christ, there was no way he could win this battle, no way he would be able to keep his hands off Bodie, not with the bastard standing there looking like that and talking like that. Doyle turned away, hand on the door jamb, intent on leaving.

Behind him, he heard the faint hiss of Bodie's breath, the sound so sexual, so blatantly aroused, it stabbed him, sliding between his ribs to lodge inside him, closer to his heart than he would ever, ever, admit to his partner. It was impossible not to hear what Bodie was doing, impossible to ignore the murmured comment. "Come on, Ray, give me some mouth action."

"And if I do, what do I get?" Doyle heard himself asking when he should be leaving, running as fast as he could.

The only answer Bodie gave was a command so laden with sex and promise it was a seduction in itself. "Look at me."

Doyle turned, and looked, a jolt of purest lust thudding through his groin.

"You get what you want," Bodie said, staring hard at Doyle's mouth. "You get to suck me, and I'll even fuck you—" he grinned suddenly, squeezed his cock the same way a nice tight arse would, "—but only if you play your cards right."

If he played his cards right? Doyle's self-respect wanted to deny it, but it was true enough, if he looked at it from a particular—from Bodie's particular—point of view. The question wasn't whether or not he could engage in a meaningless fuck: the question was whether or not he could convince Bodie that it was meaningless. More: if he could convince himself that none of it mattered at all. Mesmerised by the movement of Bodie's hand on that long cock, Doyle stood there, clenched fist rubbing against his own cock, the pressure tantalising through the multiple layers of fabric, and with every move Bodie's hand made, his own echoed, and with every pulse of Bodie's cock, his own ached for more. But still, he didn't take that irrevocable step forward. Would not set himself up for this, could not convince himself that he'd be able to get out of this with nothing more permanent than a bit of casual sex.

Bodie lifted his hand away from himself, Doyle's

gaze following it as Bodie raised it to his mouth and spat in the palm, Doyle's eyes following once more as Bodie lowered his hand again, covering his cock, stroking it, the light catching on the dampness left behind on the satin skin as if it had been Doyle's mouth on him. "Come on, Ray," Bodie whispered again, the sound as compulsive as the sight of that hand caressing hard flesh. "Suck me."

He wouldn't, absolutely wouldn't do it. It would be disaster, with Bodie after nothing but a convenient hole, and Doyle bitterly aware that he just might have found the one person he could really love. "No," he said, and wished he had sounded more definite. "No." Harder this time, but the determination in his voice was undermined by the hardness of his cock.

"No?" Bodie murmured gently. "Never took you for a shrinking violet, Ray," he added, stopping to wet his cock again, smiling as Ray couldn't quite control a moan of unwilling desire. "Well, you know what they say. If Mohammed won't come to the mountain," he put his fingers on the underside of his cock, making his erection stand up flat against his belly, the length of his cock impressive, "then the mountain can come to Mohammed." With devastating confidence, Bodie slowly crossed the room, his hand never once pausing in its stroking of his cock, the foreskin sliding back and forth, back and forth with every single step Bodie took.

Doyle knew he should leave, but he couldn't take his eyes off Bodie, couldn't free himself from the mesmerising allure of that gorgeous, erect cock. But if he couldn't leave, he would at least not run: he stood his ground, his heart pounding, palms sweating, arousal bludgeoning his common sense. It's only sex, he told himself, almost believing it. Bodie was in front of him now, that half smile on his face, left hand on his own cock, right hand coming up to cup, disturbingly gentle, the nape of Ray's neck. Stronger then, the grip grew, until Doyle could feel the indentation of each individual finger, knew that there would be a reddened imprint left behind. But still, still he resisted the pressure, even as his cock pounded with his arousal and his gaze met Bodie's, transfixed, his mouth dropping open in some silent demand he didn't want to make. His body was eroding his will, defeating him as Bodie never could.

"Come on, Ray," Bodie whispered, that right hand tugging, not roughly, all that strength reined

in so that even now, it didn't really hurt Ray. "You know this is what you want, so why lie about it, eh? Come on," and the pressure was more now, the pain beginning, Bodie exerting more and more power, the least of it the physical. "Why don't you suck me? It's what we both want, isn't it? You love sucking cock, don't you, Ray? Love the feel of a real man in you..." Now Bodie was pushing, pushing, refusing to take no for an answer, but Doyle was still trying to pretend, still trying to deny that he wanted Bodie, even like this. Inexorable, the grip on his neck tightened, and pulled, lowering him, his neck bending, his knees buckling, his mouth gaping wide, wider, opening and there was a groan coming from him as he dropped to his knees, until he finally, finally, got his mouth round Bodie, tasted him, touched him, took him inside where he belonged. Fumbling, clumsy hands hauled his zip down, his hands feverish in their need to touch his own cock, to match the movements of his hands to the movement of his mouth, giving him some pretence of unity in this.

Bodie looked down, and laughed in triumph and in pleasure. Doyle's head was moving back and forth, back and forth, the mouth wide and deep and sure, taking him in ever farther, until he could feel Ray's face pressed into his groin, Ray's chin pressing against his balls, the faint stubble scratching not quite unpleasantly, a distraction enough to make this last as Doyle swallowed him completely, throat muscles milking him. He sighed as Ray pulled back, moaned as a skilled tongue caressed him, teasing the slit, laving him, licking at his balls, swathing back up to flicker inside the slit; then the hot, wet mouth was consuming him again. Losing himself to the sensations and the power of having Ray Doyle on his knees at his feet, Bodie buried his hands in Ray's hair, pulling him in, thrusting himself deeper, until even Ray gagged, the spasm of muscle exquisite against Bodie's cock. He drew Doyle off a little, allowing him to breathe, and then held him still, fucking himself again and again into the skilled mouth that accommodated him with perfect skill and the flair of passion.

Bodie started muttering, dirty words, obscene compliments, an aural feast to accompany the oral one, every verbal stroke inspiring Doyle to greater depths, to stronger suction, to more intense pleasure-giving. One hand wrapped round his own cock, Ray brought the other up to stroke Bodie's balls, fingering and rubbing them, tugging on them

lightly, running his fingers through the soft hair between Bodie's legs, following it to where the flesh parted, to where the small opening beckoned. One finger, that was all, just one finger, barely skimming the muscle, and Bodie's hands were tight round his skull, digging into him, holding him utterly still as the brutality of Bodie's voice lashed him.

"You try anything like that ever again—and I mean *ever*, I'll rip your balls off and feed them to you."

Doyle was let free, and he sat back on his heels, his cock sobbing against his waistband. Doyle wiped one hand across his mouth, smearing where Bodie had been. "Scared?" he asked belligerently, making sure Bodie knew he was neither cowed nor beaten, but strong enough to brace himself for trouble.

"Me? Don't be so fucking stupid. I just don't—" and he grabbed Doyle again, holding him hard, thumb pressing on the hinge of Ray's jaw, opening him up to be invaded by Bodie's cock, "bend over for anyone, you hear me? Not," he thrust forward, deep, deep into Ray's throat, "even," and now he was standing astride Doyle's bent knees, giving Doyle no room to pull back, keeping his cock deep in Ray's mouth, "for *you*."

The traitor that was Doyle's heart leapt, hope surging through him, inciting him even as the cock in his mouth inflamed him. Ray's hand blurred on himself, balls drawn up tight now, even as Bodie thrust again and again and again, going suddenly still, the viscid wetness erupting in him, filling him, dripping from the corners of his mouth as he tried to consume Bodie, his own seed rising to meet Bodie's, his hand hard on himself as he fucked his own fist, thinking of Bodie, thinking of Bodie bending, for him, even for him—

And then Bodie was letting him go, withdrawing, stepping back, and Doyle couldn't stop himself, orgasm too close, thundering in on him. He knelt there, fully clothed, only his cock bare, Bodie's cum round his mouth, his eyes full of the sight of Bodie standing in front of him. Unexpectedly, Bodie leant forward, only his hand touching Doyle, as he wiped the cum from Doyle's chin and then pushed his wetted hand into Doyle's mouth, the fingers filling the emptiness left by his cock. Doyle sucked on the fingers, tasting Bodie all over again. A wordless moan escaped him, and he came, cum spurting over his fingers and onto his shirt as

Bodie watched, then stood, and turned, and walked away.

His breathing was embarrassingly loud in the aftermath, drowning out the small sound of Bodie, back turned impassively to Doyle, tidying his clothes, only the rasp of the zip covering the rasp of Doyle's breathing.

"Fancy a drink?" Bodie tossed casually over his shoulder, not looking at Doyle.

Sitting there still, Doyle steadied himself, ignoring the expected hurt as if that would make it go away. "I could do with—"

"A stiff one?" Bodie said, grinning the grin of the satiated male. "Tut, tut, and after you just having one. Ought to be ashamed of yourself, Ray."

And Ray was, ashamed of himself. Not for giving in to the urge to suck Bodie, but for sitting here like a violated virgin, hurt because his lover hadn't showered him with affectionate words, hadn't even looked at him once the sex was over. Ashamed of himself, because he had known perfectly well it wasn't going to be any different, and he had done it anyway. It was a bit late to cry over Bodie's spilled cream, and stupid of him to wish for something that hadn't even been on offer "Just give me a drink," he said, and didn't even hear the melancholy in his own voice.

Bodie looked at him sharply. "Don't you start getting maudlin on me," he said coldly.

"Yeh, I know, I know," Doyle muttered, taking his drink from Bodie, "you're just trade, not Lochinvar come to sweep me off my feet."

"Glad you've got at least one thing straight, mate." Bodie made a sound that might have been disgust, might have been any number of different emotions. "And for fuck's sake, will you put that away?"

Doyle looked down at himself, poor pale thing languishing against the roughness of his jeans, his own semen already drying, stiff patches forming on his shirt, tell-tale signs for all the world to see.

"Who needs a scarlet letter, eh?" he muttered more or less to himself.

The comment was one Bodie preferred to not hear. A moment, and then he had found something to do, busying himself with clearing away the congealing mess that had been his supper, giving himself an excuse to leave while Doyle tucked himself away and sorted himself out. In the kitchen, mind safely blanked, he hacked the cheese into manageable lumps, piled them on top of bread

and tomatoes, bunged the whole miniature mountain range under the grill. He stood there watching the cheese melt, bubble, begin to brown, the crusts blackening before the cheese was ready. There was beer in the fridge, and he grabbed two, sticking one in each pocket before he filled his hands with the two plates of toasted cheese. Not once did he think about Doyle, not once did he think about what he'd done, ignoring the insidious weakness that always clung round his knees after he'd had sex. Didn't think about what Ray was doing through in the other room, didn't think about anything at all, just the supper, and the beer, and the pretense that all was normal, that nothing could possibly have changed.

"If you stick the telly on," he said as he used his back to push the door into the living room open, "we'll be in time for the second half. Liverpool're going to—"

The room was peopled by nothing more lively than the failing plant at the window. Jaw tightening, mouth thinning, Bodie clattered the plates onto the table, the bottles following loudly behind. Stern faced, he snapped the television on, turning the volume up enough that the couple downstairs would be complaining again. To the roaring of the crowd and the babblings of the commentator, he methodically chewed his way through toasted cheese for two, and refused to think about Raymond Doyle, who had walked out on him. Again.

"Ah, there you are, Bodie," Cowley called down the corridor as Bodie made his appearance the next morning, one crooked finger beckoning the agent imperiously. "You'll be checking the security for the Home Secretary's meeting in Birmingham."

"That's Harrison's baby," Bodie complained as he caught up to his boss. "Sir."

A whip couldn't have cracked with more discipline. "It's whoever's baby I decide is daddy, and that's you, Bodie!"

"But Birmingham?" Bodie could just imagine it: him and Doyle, stuck together like two whelks on a rock, and God alone knew how Doyle was going to react for the next little while. "And it'll take days!"

"Days? Aye, it will, if you do your job properly, and mind that you do. Get on with it, Bodie," Cowley said, already growing abstracted as this problem was solved and the next one sat up and

begged for his attention. He slapped a thick manilla folder into Bodie's unwelcoming hand. "All the information you'll need and what had better be enough cash to see you through." Cowley spared a glance for the agent even he admitted was one of his two favourites. "Well, don't stand there guddling around looking for your brains. Your train leaves in forty-five minutes."

Bodie stifled a groan of complaint. "What about Doyle?"

Cowley was skimming through the report he was carrying, which was probably just as well, given the odd expression on Bodie's face. "What about him?"

"Isn't he coming with me?"

Cowley looked up for that, whipping his glasses off to stare at Bodie. Needless to say, he positively dripped sarcasm. "I didn't know you needed someone to hold your hand, Bodie. Perhaps I should send you to Brian for a refresher—or to Doctor Ross for an assessment."

Bodie managed a sickly smile after hearing those two names in the one threat. "But sir—"

"Ach, don't you 'but' me. On your bike, Bodie."

Even Bodie wasn't going to argue with that tone of command. "Yes, sir," he said obediently, making a rude gesture as soon as Cowley was safely behind a closed door. "Birmingham," he muttered under his breath, heading for his locker where at least he had a change of clothes and a razor to take with him. A quick glance at his watch, and he made a swift detour for the restroom, the home of eternal tea and therefore, Doyle. Unwilling to examine the feeling too closely, Bodie simply wanted to at least see his partner before he headed for points north, say goodbye to him. Check to make sure that Doyle wasn't going to be stupid about last night. Make sure that Doyle was still going to talk to him, after last night, that there wasn't going to be a chill of Arctic dimensions. Be just like the moody bastard to turn difficult on him...

"Oh, hello, Stuart," he said to the only person currently in the room amid a cluster of used tea mugs and discarded sandwich wrappings. "You seen Doyle?"

Stuart stretched his long legs even longer on the battered old sofa, had himself a good swill of tea before he bowed to the impatience in his fellow agent. "I'm happy to say I haven't had that misery this morning. Why—have you lost him?"

"Nah," Bodie said dismissively, Stuart not being

someone it was wise to reveal any reaction to. "Just wanted to let him know the Cow's exiling me up to Brum for a few days, maybe as much as a week."

"Well, why don't you write him a note," Stuart said as if he were speaking to a brain-damaged chihuahua. "Then you could pin it to the board and he could have someone read it to him."

"And fuck you too," Bodie retorted, slamming the door shut on his way out. Ten minutes later he had his kit together, a pen waved in the general direction of the necessary paperwork, and just about enough time to get to the station for his train and still manage to buy a ticket.

Still, he wasted another few minutes detouring to the gym and then to the armoury, just on the off-chance that he might bump into Doyle. After the way Doyle had disappeared off sharpish last night, it was small wonder that the seeds of doubt were flourishing madly in Bodie.

Another glance at his watch: if he didn't leave for the station now, he'd never make it in time, and then Cowley would make his life truly miserable. He'd just have to phone Doyle once he got up to Birmingham, talk to him then, make sure Doyle wasn't going to let last night get blown out of all proportions. That phrasing pulled him up short, suffusing him with memory best not explored outside the privacy of his own bed. God, but Doyle was good—the best Bodie'd ever had, if truth be told. It'd be a damn shame if Doyle let any poofterish notions spoil that.

Bodie shoved the small-paned front door open, almost smashing it into the object of both his desire and his thoughts. "Look what the cat dragged in," he said cheerfully, scrutinising his partner intently. "Another minute and you'd've missed your last chance to see my smiling face."

In a characteristic gesture, Doyle shoved his dark glasses more firmly into position, obliterating those too expressive eyes from Bodie's gaze. "I thought you'd already be on your way to the station by now."

Now there was food for thought: not only had Doyle come in early enough this morning to know that Bodie was being sent up north, he had then gone off somewhere until he thought the coast was clear. Bodie chewed on that for a second, then shoved it aside with all the other unwelcome thoughts stemming from the night before. Deep in his belly, there was a curl of reaction to the picture Doyle made, standing there like that, the faintest

hint of his sweat reaching Bodie across the early-morning acidity of traffic fumes. "Yeh," he started belatedly, realising that he'd been guilty of staring, not at all happy with the way Doyle was shutting him out, "I'd best be on my way before Cowley hangs me by my heels."

"You do that," Doyle told him, cooler than cucumber. He stepped aside, unnervingly polite, allowing Bodie to pass unimpeded.

Bodie had been prepared for almost anything, but not, apparently, this sudden feeling that they were strangers. "Aren't you going to say goodbye?"

Doyle shrugged, making it all very casual. "Goodbye, then," he said, turning on his heel and heading back in to familiar confines of CI5.

Bodie hefted his sportsbag a bit more comfortably over his shoulder, giving himself an excuse to look at Doyle again. "Oi!" he shouted.

"What?"

Unsure of why he was trying to provoke the very reaction he had previously been hoping to avoid, Bodie asked: "Going to miss me, are you?"

Doyle looked at him squarely, absolutely confident in the masking abilities of his sunglasses. "A crack shot like me? Fat bloody chance."

The words were perfect, exactly in keeping with the way they always slagged each other off. And if the tone were wrong? If there were added depths there, unvoiced meanings? Bodie always had prided himself on not dwelling on things. "Right," he said. "Well, I'll be off then."

Doyle waved, laconically, over his shoulder, the way he might if it were Lucas going off on a minor half-hour job.

Unaccountably, or at least to someone who didn't want to tally up life's little scores, a pang of loneliness skewered Bodie as he hurried off to catch his train.

The pang of loneliness that suffused Doyle was far from unaccounted for: Doyle knew every last atom of it, and knew it well. Discreetly behind the front door, he watched Bodie until he couldn't see his partner any more and only then did he go upstairs, back to the job and away from what was probably the stupidest mistake of his life.

Just because he'd let Doyle suck him off that once was no reason for Bodie to change the habit of their partnership, was it? Reports, in triplicate, dutifully and grammatically filled in, used ammu-

munition accounted for and replaced, expense vouchers and other lies slipped into Betty's tray, a quick stop at their favourite Chinese take-away and then Bodie headed straight for Doyle's flat.

Up the stairs two at a time, bell pressed in the fanfare that served as code to announce him and Bodie was waiting, not patiently. "Come on, come on," he muttered to himself, "what's keeping you?" Another tattoo on the bell, and the door was flung open, Doyle standing right there in front of him. Bodie took a breath, suddenly thrown off-balance, something not quite right in his partner and in himself. "Aren't you going to invite me in?" he said breezily, shouldering past his uncommonly quiet partner. "Especially as I've brought enough grub to feed an army." He paused for the usual comments; received none, went on hastily, gabbling on to fill a silence that shouldn't be there and which didn't bear explaining. "Chicken chow mein, sweet and sour pork, spring rolls, fried rice, chicken curry, prawn balls—" Another pause for the standard come-back, another non-standard silence, another hurried spate of words. "Pineapple fritters, egg fu yong, even got you those bloody onions you like, you know, the ones swimming in that soy sauce concoction."

"In that case," Doyle said in a perfectly normal tone of voice, "I'll get the plates and the drinks. Lager do you?"

"Yeh, lager's fine. Bring us a couple, will you—I had them do a nice job on the curry."

Bodie shoved the cluttered newspapers, books, ballpoints and the odd crisp packet off Doyle's coffee table, recluttering it immediately with foil cartons and discarded lids. He knew the instant Doyle came in through from the kitchen, could tell by the way the hairs on the back of his neck prickled, as if he were in danger. Which was ridiculous, he reminded himself. It wasn't as if he'd got Ray to do anything he hadn't wanted to, was it? And Ray, for all it had turned out he was a shirt-lifter, he wasn't a poof, one of those pansies who'd turn simpering-eyed on him. He was still a good bloke, just one who...well, one who did favours for his best mate, that was all. Convinced, Bodie grabbed his can of lager, popping the ring and slugging half the drink down. "Christ," he said, wiping his lips, "I needed that."

"You drink the breweries dry up there?" Doyle asked him, and it should have been exactly like any other post-job comment.

“Nah, the locals beat me to it. Actually, didn’t have much time, and anyway, all they had at the Home Sec’s digs and the conference rooms were these bloody wines. So sweet you could sell them as liquid lollies. Course, that suited Smith from MI5 to a T—”

Bodie rambled on, his usual tall tales delivered between the demolition of the Chinese food and the lager, Doyle making few comments, sitting cross-legged on the floor and not, as had always been their wont, parked beside Bodie on the settee.

Bodie’s mouth ballooned by the last of the prawn balls, Doyle cut in to the somewhat mangled account of Bodie’s Adventures In Birmingham. “I’ve been thinking,” was all he had to say.

Bodie almost swallowed the prawn ball whole. “You ought to watch that,” he spluttered, hoping against hope that he could keep all this light, horribly suspicious about what Doyle had been thinking about, and no-one did a better line in guilt than his partner. “You’ll do yourself a mischief.”

Doyle ignored that completely. “I’ve been thinking about what we did the night before Cowley sent you up north.”

Bodie did not like the sound of this at all: he knew Doyle, knew what happened when his partner settled down to what he called a good think and what the rest of the world, i.e. Bodie, called a Force Ten Brood. Mopping his mouth with a bit of kitchen roll, Bodie had a quick glance at Doyle, and liked what he saw even less: that set expression always heralded trouble, always meant Doyle was on one of his ‘change’ kicks. “Don’t suppose there’s much chance of you not sharing all this deep thinking with me, is there?”

His natural grace made inelegant by tension, Doyle clambered to his feet, started pacing around, another sign that made Bodie want to head for the hills.

“You had a chance when you saw him before you left, and you could’ve phoned in any time you felt like it,” Doyle said, confusing Bodie at first, who had been expecting some messy, emotional scene. “But you never said a word to him about me, did you?”

Not really a question, and it answered what the hell Doyle was going on about. “Told you,” Bodie said, all smugness to hide the wariness, “I’m not going to tell Cowley.”

“Why not?” Doyle paced back towards Bodie,

stopped the other side of the coffee table. “Why the hell not?”

Bodie shrugged, his loyalty to rules and regulations always questionable, and absolutely non-existent when those rules stood in the way of his loyalty to a few, a very few, people. “Some rules are made to be broken, and anyway, if I hadn’t found out till then, there’s not much chance of someone else sussing you, is there?”

“That’s not good enough, Bodie, and you know it.” Fierce, more demanding in this than Bodie had been that night a week ago. “Why haven’t you turned me in?”

“Because,” Bodie said slowly, having to come up with a genuine reason for the first time, forced into thinking about it by Doyle, “if Cowley knew—officially, like, if I’d made a report to him—then he’d have to transfer you, even if he didn’t fire you outright.”

“And you’d miss me?” Said quietly, the words dropping soft as rain.

Acid rain, burning into Bodie’s protective hide. “A crack shot like me?” he sneered, hitting Doyle back the way Doyle had hit him. There was an odd expression in Doyle’s eyes at that, but Bodie was in too much of a hurry to see, rushing headlong to remind Doyle just who had knelt for whom. “We all know how long it takes to get used to a new partner, and how fucking dangerous it is. I’ve no intention of having some wet-behind-the-ears git watching my back just because you’ve turned queer in your old age.”

“But I haven’t.”

Bodie just looked at him, his disbelief blatant. “Oh,” he finally said, “of course. You haven’t turned queer in your old age. You’ve always been,” he flung his arm out, bent his wrist and simpered for all he was worth: “a ginger beer.”

“Well, I have always been the way I am,” Doyle admitted, his somberness in complete contrast with Bodie’s rather desperate jocularly. “But I’m not queer, I’m bi.”

Bodie did not want to hear this.

“I’ve always liked both, even when I was trying to convince myself I was one way or the other.”

Did not want to hear this, did not, did not, did not...

“Finally realised I wasn’t copping out about anything, just happened to go both ways.”

“You’re a fucking queer!” Bodie shouted, needing it to be true.

"Why?" Doyle asked quietly. "So I can be your hole whenever you want one? So you can play the straight bloke to my poor little pansy?"

"I'm not *playing* straight," Bodie said, teeth clenching like his fists, heart pounding with something akin to raw fear.

"Course you're not," Doyle said, smiling with all the condescension of the Renaissance Man for the Neanderthal. "You're just the same as all the other straight blokes who lie back and think of England. Or," he paused, making it seem as if he'd just thought of this, "is it that all cats are grey in the dark?"

"What the fuck else d'you think it is?" Bodie demanded, machismo bursting out all over. "You're the one doing the whole Hephaiston bit, aren't you?"

"No arguing with that," Doyle agreed reasonably, smiling to himself as he saw both relief and self-doubt on Bodie's face. "And I'm not. Just want to set the record straight—" he grinned openly, "or half-straight anyway." And Bodie could deal with that as best he ought, Doyle told himself with more sympathy than one might expect. "And don't worry, I'm not going to start piping my eye if you don't send me roses for my birthday and I'm not going to start wearing high-heels and mascara—"

"Oh, I don't know," Bodie drawled, scrambling desperately to recoup his sangfroid, "I think you'd look rather fetching all dolled up like that. Like *whatsisname*, Tim Curry in that film."

Eyes agleam with speculation, Doyle came round to perch on the arm of the sofa, his new position leaving Bodie with the choice of having Doyle more or less sitting in his lap, or Bodie having to move, lounging back on one arm, sprawling himself in what just might be called invitation. "Fancy me done up like that, do you?" Doyle asked with softly dangerous insight.

"Can't you take a flipping joke?" Bodie blustered. "I wouldn't fancy you unless you'd been born with a cunt between your legs instead of a prick. If anyone fancies anyone round here, it's you fancying me, mate."

"Yeh, course it is," Doyle said reassuringly and the only reason Bodie didn't hear the sarcasm was because he didn't dare. "Straight blokes only fuck men like me because there's nothing else available."

"Right," Bodie told him, relieved now that Doyle was beginning to see sense about all this.

"So how come..." Doyle began, then stopped himself, reminding himself of how this had to be, of how he *knew* this had to be. "Sorry," he said instead, "lost my train of thought. Oh, yeh, that was it. Told you I'd been thinking..."

"Not that again, Ray!" Bodie moaned. "It's only a quick fuck, no need to turn it into a great debate."

"It wasn't a fuck, but that's neither here nor there for the minute. We need to set a few ground rules, here, Bodie," Doyle told him, refusing to be baited.

"Yeh," Bodie said quickly, harshly, "you suck me, I fuck you, we both keep our mouths shut and you don't go getting all weepy and clingy on me, and we'll do just fine."

"And you think that covers it, do you?" He half-laughed, shook his head in genuine amazement. "You really take the biscuit, you know that?" His voice became shaded with aggression, every statement becoming more and more adamant, finger poking Bodie in the chest. "How about adding a bit about you not turning possessive on me, eh? And you can just wipe that look off your face, I know what you're like, I've seen you in action with your birds before. I can fuck anyone I please, whether you like it or not, and whether it's convenient for you or not. Don't you dare ever fuck things up for me because your balls are doing your thinking for you and you want sex whether I'm with someone else or just not in the mood. And that's another thing: if I tell you to take a flying leap, you do that, all right?"

That was taking it too far, more than the fit of fairy pride the rest of the diatribe had been. "I'm not exactly in the habit of raping people you know."

Doyle gave him one of his more familiar smiles, the first indication Bodie'd had that Ray might be willing to let them get back on their old footing. "Sorry, mate, didn't mean it the way it sounded." He sighed, deeply, looked briefly away, and then pinned his partner with the seriousness of his eyes. "I had a speech all prepared, you know, but I've bloody forgotten it."

A fortnight ago, Bodie would have thumped him affectionately or ruffled his curls for that one, but the memory of the last time he'd had his hands in that hair stopped him. "Thank god for small mercies!" The would-be joke felt flatly between them, and Bodie bit his lip, still feeling out of kilter with Doyle, everything unbalanced by the sex

between them, Doyle's need for him and his own position of always, always being the one on top. "There's not much more needing to be said, is there?" he said finally, fervently hoping that Doyle would agree with him on this one. "No need to keep rehashing it is there? Dragging it out, going on and on about it like a pair of bloody Agony Aunts..."

"Oh, that's right," Doyle retorted, tone as sharp as the sting of Bodie's words. "Straight blokes don't talk about it, they just do it, don't they? Well?" he demanded, getting quickly to his feet, pulling his T-shirt off over his head, voice muffled and face well hidden. "Aren't you going to fuck me then?"

Dumbfounded, Bodie stayed put, collapsed against the couch, grateful that he'd already been lying down. "Ray?" he asked, very differently from the night when this had all started.

"What?" Doyle asked right back, something cold and bitter about him, something that Doyle understood and prayed Bodie never would.

"I...em..."

"What's the matter, petal?" Doyle simpered viciously. "Afraid your little mannikins will let you down? Scared you can't get it up? Not to worry," he added, still as nasty, the ugliness in his voice not quite covering up the well of conflicting emotions churning underneath. "It's just us boys, all men together, and other blokes always understand, don't we?"

"It's nothing like that, you bastard—"

"Then what is it?" Doyle shot back, heeling his trainers off, one hand gripping the back of the sofa as he pulled his socks off, the fingers too close for Bodie's peace of mind. "Got a girl tucked up your sleeve for later? Or are you scared you're not man enough to fuck me?"

With that, he turned neatly, walking quickly away, stopping in the doorway to pull his jeans off, the white of his underwear shadowed where it clung to the cleft of his behind. Deliberately, Doyle reached backwards and slipped his fingers inside, pulling the fabric free before he started to skim his pants down, the very top of the darkness between his buttocks revealed before he went into the hallway and on towards the bedroom.

"I'll never understand you, Ray Doyle," Bodie muttered to himself, lying there for another minute, refusing to acknowledge the way his heart was pounding in his chest or the way his cock was worrying at the stitches in his Y-fronts.

"You coming?" Doyle's voice, raised, dimmed

by the walls between the living room and the bedroom.

The *double entendre* of the simple verb sidled its way down the front of Bodie's underwear, tingling through his balls and lifting his cock. "Of course I'm coming," he shouted back. Give the poor bugger what he wanted, Bodie told himself, getting to his feet and following Doyle's untidy example, his clothes punctuating his path to the bedroom. Poor bastard obviously really needed a good fuck from a real man, and it couldn't be easy, stuck in the security services the way Doyle was—couldn't exactly go to the local gay club and find himself a nice boyfriend, could he? Yeah, Bodie told himself, grinning, give him what he needs—and get his own rocks off at the same time. Be stupid to turn down free sex, and not even Macklin thought he was *that* stupid. And it was a measure of his own self-delusion that he didn't even question the unresolvable conflict between the two views of Doyle he was taking, a proverbial bendy-toy, the passive queer, the fairy, and at the same time, unchanged, the same man who had guarded his back from the beginning.

In the bedroom, the ridiculous fur bedspread puddled on the floor, the blankets and top sheet shoved down to the bottom of the bed, one of his old bath towels spread out carefully to stop any grease stains, Doyle waited, listening intently to the encroaching footsteps. Moving quickly, he switched the big light off, putting on only the small angle poise on top of the tallboy. One last thing: he dug round in the bedside drawer until he found what he needed, taking one out to leave within easy reach. Didn't want to have to argue the point, and certainly didn't want to have to fumble around if Bodie tried to push the issue. A muffled swear word: Bodie must have stubbed his toe on the telephone table in the hall. It would be less than a minute now, a lot less, and Doyle took several deep breaths, schooling himself to impassivity. The muscles in his face were too stiff, and he had a horrible suspicion of the expression there. He used rearranging the pillows as an excuse to not look when Bodie stepped into the room, although he would swear he could feel Bodie staring at his bum. Another deep breath, and Doyle covered his face with a far more familiar expression, challenge mixed with defiance, not entirely safe in this situation with this man, but safer by far than anything honest. One look at the wariness hinted at

behind Bodie's eyes proved that Bodie didn't understand Doyle's sudden insistence on being fucked when a week ago he had been equally insistent that he was profoundly heterosexual. That was just fine, as far as Doyle was concerned. He'd had a week to think about this, and there were no two ways about it: he was better off by far having Bodie as trade than having Bodie find out the way he felt about his overly macho partner.

Utterly flummoxing Bodie, Doyle, who was supposed to be the 'bottom' in this, who was supposed to be the queer honoured by a straight man's generosity, Doyle walked over to Bodie, his warm hand snugly enclosing Bodie's cock. "I've already had a taste of doing you with me on the floor and you standing up, and I for one am used to a hell of lot better than that. Into bed with you," he said, hand still on Bodie's cock, his touch all the encouragement Bodie needed to follow him onto the bed, "and let's do it properly this time."

That was too close to wounding Bodie's pride, too much a part and parcel of this unnerving way Doyle was taking the lead, acting, for all the world, as if it were Doyle who was the top dog around here, instead of Doyle being the one who was going to be fucked to within an inch of his life.

Made rough by insecurity, he grabbed Doyle, shoving him down onto the bed, his hands bruisingly tough as he twisted and turned Doyle over onto his belly. "That's it, Ray," he muttered, hands going between Doyle's legs, "spread 'em. Spread 'em for me so I can fuck you—" His hands were clenched on Doyle's buttocks, Doyle's anus stretched wide and visibly opened. Bodie spat, once, the saliva shining wetly on Doyle's arse, Bodie's fingers stabbing the moisture into him. "Oh, yeh," he groaned, two fingers going in, rotating, stretching Doyle all the better to accommodate his cock, "that's it, pet, you open up for me." He pulled his fingers out and grabbed his cock with his wet hand, balancing himself on his knees to lean forward and fuck Doyle.

To find himself, so quickly he was literally dizzy from it, flat on his back, a naked, dangerously furious Doyle pressing one knee into his belly and the lethal fingers of Doyle's right hand digging into his neck. "I thought you said," breathless, and ruthless with it, "that you didn't go in for rape, eh, Bodie?"

"It's not rape—"

"Really? Well I never," Doyle hissed, everything

about him contrasting with the lightness of his words. "And here's me thinking that forced sex is rape—"

"Scared?" Bodie echoed another occasion when that word had been a sword between them. "Did diddums lose his bottle? A minute ago you were fucking desperate for it. What happened, eh? Did you get a look at my cock and faint clean away?"

"Got a look," and the knee slid lower, threatening Bodie's cock, still hard despite—or perhaps because of—what was going on., "at your idea of fucking, and I'm not having it, Bodie, not a bit of it. You want me, mate—"

There was something about it that was a question, something that made Bodie answer, made him honest within his own mind, heard the ricocheting desire reverberate madly.

"And you can have me, but you do it right, d'you hear me? You treat me right, you make me feel good and you don't—" an unmaning shove from his knee, "fucking come at me like a bull in a china shop and hurt me, right?"

"Right," Bodie agreed silkily, moving a little, Doyle's knee sliding out of harm's way, Bodie's arms coming up to grip him just right, and then it was Doyle flat on his back again, Doyle where he belonged, under Bodie. "Abso-fucking-lutely right, Ray. I'm not going to hurt you, I'm just going to make you scream because you want it so fucking much." He leaned down, not looking into the furiously glittering eyes, not wanting to read the expression behind the surface anger, and fastened his mouth and teeth to Doyle's flesh, the tender spot where neck flowed into shoulder. He held on tight, loving the way Ray was wild under him, the erection rubbing against him evidence that Ray wasn't struggling to be free. A sudden hissing intake of breath, a bit of genuine struggle, and he backed off, soothing the hurt with his tongue, still preferring not to look at Doyle. In the back of his mind, shame burned, that he had been so rough to start with, that he had been so consumed by his own lust that he hadn't stopped to think about what he was doing—Christ, he'd seen blokes end up in serious trouble from being fucked too hard and too dry, and god knows how long it'd been since Ray last had anyone up him.

No. That was uncomfortable, that made what they were doing mean something, made it dance alongside specialness. Better to think of Ray on his knees, Bodie's cum smeared across his face, or Ray,

on his knees, fucked by an endless stream of men, Ray, down the cottages, letting anyone have him.

“Over,” he groaned, more upset and aroused than he cared to admit by the images of Ray with strangers. “Let me at your arse, let me in you—”

The fear of seeing too much didn’t work both ways, and Doyle took a good, long look at Bodie, his hands busy on Bodie’s soft skin, strong hands massaging sensitive muscles, caressing erogenous circles of desire.

“You got a fetish about having me on my knees or something? Eh, Bodie?” he asked, open mouth tasting Bodie, open hands running over Bodie’s skin.

Bodie didn’t waste a breath on words, stroking himself back to readiness, his eyes feasting on the lithe sinuousness of Doyle’s strong body, his left hand seemingly addicted to the feel of chest hair covering nipples.

Doyle went willingly enough, but not all the way over on to his knees, stopping, rather, half-way, lying on his side, a quick movement bringing the small packet out from under the pillow. “Here,” he said, “this’ll do the trick.”

Bodie took it, an expression of blank incomprehension on his face. “What the fuck is this?”

“A condom, what the fuck did you expect?” from Doyle, equally as confused, Bodie’s reaction surprising him, and the delay frustrating him. “Are you going to use it or are you going to sit there staring at it?”

“What,” Bodie demanded, a slow anger beginning to simmer, the reaction no less real for its unreasonableness, “do you need a condom for? It’s not as if I’m going to get you pregnant, is it?”

“We,” Doyle replied tartly, “need a condom because I for one know where you’ve been shoving that prick of yours, and if you think I’m going to run the risk of having to see Doc Martin for a dose of clap up the arse, then you, sunshine, are going to have to make do with a wank.”

“Are you implying—” Face hardening, disappointment making him vicious, because it wasn’t supposed to be like this. There was an aching hole somewhere in his chest, in the small, silent part of him that knew what it was supposed to be like, but the rest of him knew only that it wasn’t supposed to be like this, it wasn’t supposed to be going all wrong. Ray wasn’t supposed to be like this, the whole thing was supposed to be something good, a

celebration of coming home, not this, this... He took a deep breath, shoving the emotions down deep where they couldn’t bother him, couldn’t cause any more chaos, all the suppositions relegated to the void. It wasn’t easy, but he kept his hands to himself, didn’t—physically—attack Doyle. “You didn’t seem much worried when you went down on your knees for me last time. Isn’t it a bit late—”

“‘Cept a man can get oral clap from a woman, can’t he, but how’s he going to get clap up his arse if he didn’t have some bloke in there, eh?”

It was reasonable, put like that, but Bodie rebelled against it, hated the idea of having to wear a french letter. He wanted to feel it, feel it all when he was inside Ray, for god’s sake, if he was wearing a condom he might as well be wanking with rubber gloves on. Anyway, the bare-faced cheek of Doyle implying that he, Bodie, had a dose—who was it who fucked anything, male or female, eh? “I’m not putting on a fucking condom—”

“Then you, my old china,” Doyle said tightly, entire body poised for fight or flight, depending on how much damage he was willing to do to Bodie, “are not putting anything in me.”

Bodie looked at Doyle then, staring at him sullenly, cataloguing what it would take to persuade Doyle round to his point of view. Took a good look at the truculence on Doyle’s face, measured the mutinous set to his mouth, weighed whether the battle would be worth the sex—and spending the next day explaining to Cowley how come Doyle had ended up battered to a pulp.

“I want you,” he said, sounding more lost than he realised.

“Then put the Durex on.” Said calmly, very quietly, but Doyle was still coiled tensely, and he had shifted so that both arms were free.

Voice rising, unspoken confusions knocking the feet out from under him. “I’m not wearing a fucking condom!”

“Then I’ve told you, you’re not fucking me.”

“Christ,” Bodie said in disgust, shoving Doyle backwards, throwing the packet down on to him, where it lay, rising and falling with his breathing, “it’s as bad as being with a fucking prostitute. Thanks all the same,” he was sarcastic now, bitterly so, clambering off the bed, still not sure why the whole thing was such bile instead of the sweet dissolution of sex, “but I’ve gone right off the idea.”

Then Bodie was on his feet, hastening out of the

room, gathering his clothes as he scrambled along the corridor, the living room door slamming shut behind him, and he was dressing himself any which way, shoving his feet into shoes, socks stuffed into his pocket for the sake of speed, anything that would get him out of there that bit quicker.

For the first time, it wasn't Bodie who was left alone, but Doyle, lying there in his big bed, the light burning the night through, while he stared at the ceiling and thought.

"Morning," Bodie said coolly as he met Doyle on the way in to Mr. Cowley's office.

Doyle only nodded a greeting, keeping his distance, physically and metaphorically, making it clear that he wasn't best pleased by what had happened the night before.

"Trouble in Lavender Cottage?" Stuart murmured nastily, his implication less than subtle and even less welcome. "The honeymoon finally over?"

They may have come perilously close to outright mayhem only last night, but they still watched each other's backs, and it was Doyle's strong hand that stopped Bodie's fist before it hit Stuart and got him fired for attacking a fellow agent. "Now, now, Bodie," he said in that peculiarly nannyish voice he reserved for those occasions when he himself wanted to rip someone's face off, "Stuart's just jealous," he turned to a suddenly wary Stuart, his smile singularly nasty, "aren't you, dear? Anyway," he put Bodie's fist into that worthy's jacket pocket, patted it through the fabric, "didn't your mother ever teach you not to hit the girls?"

"True," Bodie replied, drawing himself up to his full height and dropping his voice to its lowest register. "And I won't say anything to this pathetic little prick either because—"

"Good old Mam told you never to mock the afflicted—"

"—and I—"

"Bodie! Doyle! The pair of you, get in here and stop causing a draught. Stuart, if you can't think of a place to start looking for that information, I can always send you to Records. For a month!"

Stuart took off like a bat out of hell, and Bodie regarded his boss with what might have been genuine respect. "Wish you'd teach me how to do that—I've been trying to get rid of him for months."

"Yeh, not very fond of clinging vines, are you?" Doyle said, and it was there again, all the mire from last night dulling that one bright moment of rapport.

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that," Bodie muttered under his breath as the phone rang and Cowley dealt with what, judging by the weary edge to the Scotsman's tarnished patience, was the latest in a very long line of telephone calls. "Clinging vines are a real pain, yeh, but at least they're not as bad as pansies."

If George Cowley himself hadn't been sitting there, Bodie would have ended up splattered across the nearest bit of floor. As it was, it was a close-run thing, Doyle's hands not balling into fists for he knew far more effective methods than mere punching. "So that's what last night was all about, eh? You just don't like what's growing in my garden."

Stiffly, with a surfeit of dignity. "You could say that."

"Yeh, but then I'd be as big a fucking—"

"I'll thank you to watch that mouth of yours, Doyle, and if you can't, then I'll have you on Royal garden parties and church fêtes for a month."

"Sorry, sir," Doyle said as he glared at Bodie. "I don't know what *came* over me."

With Cowley's ever-suspicious glare bent on them, there was nothing Bodie could say to that, but he gathered the comment in and hoarded it away with all the other little digs, concentrating on that because then he could forget the real pain of Doyle—Ray Doyle, his partner, of all people—having deliberately deceived him.

Having been given no reason for real suspicion, Cowley had already dismissed the momentary disharmony between his most experienced team, turning his concentration to the more important matter of a conference between sworn enemies: factions in both camps were incensed by such selling-out, which left Cowley worrying not only about the dangers from enemies, but the lethal possibilities of certain allies showing up.

Twenty minutes later, in the car, Doyle driving, Bodie read the files aloud, temporary, tacit truce in force, the struggle for equanimity on the job a serious, up-hill struggle.

"...nothing I hate more, I mean, *nothing* I hate more than baby-sitting terrorists done up as diplomats, sipping tea with their fucking pinkies sticking out as if the most shocking thing they'd ever done was fart in public. I hate this," Doyle

fumed, tyres protesting his driving skills, “nothing I hate more—”

“Change the bloody record, will you? We neither one of us wants to do this, but our Führer has spoken, and it’s right there in the small print: his word is law and don’t bother arguing. All right, so he’s set us off on a wild goose chase—least he hasn’t got us stuck up in that bloody manor house waiting for a mouse to squeak.”

“You’ve changed your tune. A minute ago—”

“A minute ago,” Bodie interrupted, opening yet another supposedly relevant file, “I didn’t have you doing the complaining for me, did I?”

“Yeh, well,” Doyle muttered, “told you, it gets right up my nose.”

It was as close to an apology as Bodie was ever likely to get and closer to civility than anything he had expected after last night’s complete balls up. Thank god, he thought, for the job. “Anyway,” he said, signing on the dotted line of the truce, “it could be worse.”

Doyle careened them round the corner, a trip made all the more unnerving by the fact that he’d turned to look at Bodie.

“Oi, watch where you’re going, mate—you nearly bowled that OAP into the Belisha beacon there.”

“Nah—missed her by miles,” Doyle replied airily, easily dismissing the haranguing pensioner. “So go on, what is it that could be worse?” Doyle demanded brightly, perfectly aware that he was just that shade too enthusiastic, that the normality was that bit too forced to be convincing, but what else was he to do? Play the star-crossed lover or do his outraged saint? “Come on, Bodie,” he said, keeping most of the tension from his voice, “don’t keep me in suspense—what could be worse?”

Good question, Bodie thought, his mind long since having drifted off track. “Oh, ye of little imagination,” he said loftily, trying to remember what he’d been thinking about before, “can’t you think of anything that could make it worse?”

Doyle, in between shifting gears and shunting them round overloaded lorries and carfuls of sleeping children and arguing parents, gave that all the due thought it deserved. “Could always be stuck with Stuart on the job with us. Or we could have Cowley in the back seat.”

Given recent events, this really didn’t seem like the best time to make any dirty jokes about ‘having’ Cowley—or anyone, for that matter. Despite all the

best intentions in the world, despite the fact that neither one of them gave the slightest of reactions, that one, simple comment had brought last night crashing back in on them. Even without closing his eyes to shutter the outside world, Bodie could see Doyle again, naked and hard, erection stoic against the rippled muscles of his stomach, and the flexing clench of his buttocks. It was, he decided, something close to a miracle that when he finally remembered to say something so that they could both pretend that nothing had changed, his voice was perfectly normal. “See? Now you’ve got the idea. Could be worse, we could have—Macklin handling the extra training.”

“Could be worse,” Doyle mused as they left the motorway and started weaving their way through a town the tourists swore was quaint and which was, as far as Doyle was concerned, nothing but a bolognese of too-narrow streets, one-way systems and lolligagging tourists, “yeh—” he announced suddenly, grinning, “it could be worse—we could be liaising with Willis!”

“It could be worse—” Bodie put in his tuppenceworth, quite embarrassingly grateful for the normalising of the situation between them, absolutely thrown to realise that Doyle’s jeans were growing snugger with each passing kilometre, “we could be undercover as waiters.”

“Yeh—or chambermaids. Or it could be worse for the conference blokes—,” Doyle moved as best he could, pinned behind the steering wheel as he was. Christ, but he half-wished Bodie would stop looking at him like that! He’d need a bucket of ice down his front in a minute if Bodie didn’t stop drooling all over him like that. “—we could be undercover in the kitchen with you doing the cooking, frying the lettuce and burning the boiled eggs.”

Not the most fun they’d ever had running a job into the ground, and not the funniest they’d ever been, either, but the stale joke had done the trick, giving them footing that was at least familiar and off the beaten track of churning sexual awareness, the surface chit-chat neatly covering the turmoil below.

“So was there anything else in those files I need to know about?” Doyle asked, all business, eyes firmly fixed on the winding road that was far too long for his tastes, his shoulders aching from the length of the drive and the tension of being with Bodie, of pretending that everything was just so,

life just one big ripping yarn. His jeans were uncomfortable, the back seam caught between his buttocks, the front digging into his testicles, worsening the discomfort of unrequited lust. "Oi!" he said again, glancing briefly at the wool-gathering Bodie, somewhat cheered by the perception that his stone-age partner just might be seeing sense. "I asked you if there was anything else in those bloody files."

"This and that," Bodie replied quietly, turning pages and reading pertinent details out loud and without his usual scurrilous remarks. Necessary information droned out, each aspect of the operation doled its due, a perfectly routine situation. At his side, Doyle shifted gear and avoided pot-holes with more than customary care, the car jarring less. He should have been more, not less comfortable, but his body didn't feel quite right, something out of kilter, some vague disjointedness in his bones, some leitmotif of unease making him need to shift and change more often than Doyle did the car. A few glances at Doyle's sunglassed profile didn't help at all, of course, rather, added to the odd feeling, as if the world were new and Bodie old, some relic brought to life in a time where the old magics were now simply old-hat, parlour tricks to amuse the children while the rest of the world got on with the serious business of making sense of the universe.

Bodie couldn't get comfortable, which could have been explained away by the innate discomfort of a tall man in a Capri, but there was a job on: there might, if things went wrong, be shooting and killing, and if he had lost his edge to distraction, then it might be he who would be shot, or injured, or every soldier's nightmare, maimed.

Or, Bodie thought, and it was as if he were a child again, it might be Ray who gets hurt. Might be Ray who never comes home.

"Hey," he said, bursting into *bonhomie* as Doyle crunched the car along the gravel drive of a house that put *Brideshead Revisited* to shame, "tell you what: after we've finished with this lot, why don't you and me paint the town red? My treat—we can have dinner, might even persuade me to go dancing."

"Yeh?" Doyle said quietly, the car sliding to a stop to the jeers of a couple of dubiously suited security-types on the front portico. There was a tint of hope dawning in his voice, and he looked at Bodie over the tops of his dark glasses, his eyes brightened by possibilities.

"Yeh," Bodie said, punching him familiarly on the arm before grabbing the first of the duffel bags from the back seat. "Go for a slap-up meal, a bit of dancing, then," he leaned in close, a small seed of panic blossoming as he smelled the mixed scents of Ray Doyle's after-shave and arousal, "if we're really lucky, the girls'll come across—"

"Girls?" As chilling as a bucket of water on two dogs.

"Yeh," Bodie replied as Murphy neared them. "What else did you think I had in mind?"

"This," Doyle said through thinned lips, one long finger pushing his protective glasses more firmly into place, "or that."

"Come on, Ray, don't be such a fucking prima donna," Bodie murmured quietly, supposedly to stop Murphy from hearing, but perhaps, just perhaps, because guilt lowered his voice. "I mean, it wasn't a million years ago you were trying to convince me you weren't a complete fairy, was it?"

"You know," Doyle replied distantly, cutting himself off cold turkey, "you are a complete bastard. An absolute fucking arsehole."

"Now what?" Bodie hissed, grabbing Doyle as his partner made to get out the car. Letting go of him after a single, lethal glare before those viciously bright eyes were hidden behind blackness again. "What the fuck's got into you?"

"Not you, I'm glad to say, Bodie," Doyle said very quietly and very, very coldly, "not you."

Then Murphy was there, making comments about the amount of stuff they had brought with them, asking questions, wanting the files, pushing away everything but the job.

And although neither word nor deed commented upon it, Murphy noticed, and watched, and worried, as Bodie and Doyle, the department's Siamese twins, didn't look, or speak, or notice each other, except in the line of duty.

Warring factions neatly disarmed—some by treaty, others by C15—the huge house was slowly emptying, voices becoming hollow as they drifted down corridors and through doorways. Footsteps, now, sounded merely lonely as they neared, or departed, all threats now waved off to their respective shores. George Cowley was already back in London, no doubt on the phone, turning this most recent triumph into increased funding. Willis' lot had been the first to leave, and now it was the

cleaning crews turn to take over the magnificent house. The ink on the treaty was dry and miracle of miracles, the truce was holding. Which, with the passing of hours, had been more than could be said for another, unofficial truce.

Walking past gaping doorways revealing rooms within bedecked by vases of slowly dying flowers, Bodie was definitely and emphatically, not looking for Doyle.

Doyle, in the far wing of the house, wasn't looking for Bodie either.

And it bothered both of them.

What bothered them, partners still in this at least, was that no-one thought to offer the whereabouts of the other. Here they were, at opposite ends of the house, and not one of their fellow CI5 agents mentioned where the other half of the team was, nor did a single solitary soul ask one where the other was.

It was unnatural, and should have been unreal, but already the feeling of being solo was beginning to settle around Doyle's shoulders, influencing how he thought, how he moved, reacted. Changing how he saw himself, and his future in CI5. The empty space at his side where Bodie had always been left his flank unprotected from the endless souging doubts that questioned what he was doing in CI5, that wondered if the ends could ever justify the means. That couldn't forget that he'd held his gun to a man's head, and with every clear, calm, calculated intention of using it.

God, but he could use a drink. Would have one, as soon as he got back to Town. Would have a few.

But not, he thought, automatically deflecting the pain, with Bodie and his bloody birds.

He had a few friends, impressively discreet friends, and he'd visit one of them. Defiance was a wonderfully warm feeling after the chill unravelling of what had always been simply *there*: him and Bodie, always thought of, always spoken of as a pair, always thinking of themselves as a team. Yet here he was, wandering the house doing the last turn of his mop-up check, doing his damndest not to think about Bodie and hoping that he wouldn't even see Bodie.

The drive back didn't bear thinking about.

It didn't, as it turned out, bear talking about either. On the portico, other colleagues yammering with the relief of an unbloody job done and the excitement of time-off. Doyle, standing silently to one side, sunglasses on, staring at the huge expanse

of manicured, deNatured garden. The others all left him to it: after all, he was probably contemplating the role of Man and Nature, the yoking of one to the other, another of Man's sins. But perhaps he was doing nothing so loftily esoteric. Perhaps Ray Doyle was simply trying not to hear as his partner, his best friend, laughed and joked and made plans with the others and did nothing to notice Doyle's turned back or his silence.

Behind him, he heard the dirty jokes, Bodie's voice loudest among them, heard the dispersing to cars, the decisions of who was going with whom. Heard the pronounced lack of comment when Bodie asked Murphy for a lift back up to Town. A slight pause in the chattering mayhem, and then he could feel it, digging into the back of his head, between his shoulder blades: the quick looks, the questioning glances that were, of course, done behind his back. He wondered, for a moment, what the expression on Bodie's face must be—might be. He thought he knew, thought he could be sure. Had believed himself omniscient when it came to his partner. Had believed himself right, as he watched his partner's slow coming-to-terms.

Now, with car doors slamming, with all the uncertain goodbyes hanging unacknowledged like dust behind a car, Ray Doyle was wondering if he even knew himself.

Tyres scrunching gravel, engines purring or raging, one after another after another they left, the smell of their pollution heavier than the flower perfumes hanging in the air. A final car, his ears identifying the voices: Murphy, Stuart, Bodie. Heard the latest rupture of laughter, heard the beginning of another joke. Bodie, of course, which meant that it would be another 'fairy' joke, another brick to rebuild Bodie's self-image and belief in himself.

Or it could simply be another nail in the coffin, the last few blows before the end.

He should never have sucked Bodie.

Should never have let himself get involved with a colleague.

Should never have given himself away to Bodie.

Definitely should never have fallen in love with the insensate bastard.

The last sounds of so-called civilisation disappearing off into the distance, the first sounds of the next infesting horde coming from the house, Doyle left the garden to its own devices and the artifices of the gardeners, took himself off towards his own

car, his step brisk and lively, his whistling cheerful and happy. His own devices, and his own artifices, and it was, perhaps, as well that there was no-one there but himself to be fooled.

A wild night, drunken abandon, riotous living, raunchy humour. Spiralling through him, Bodie felt the unfocussed need, the blind seeking, recognised it for lust, the need to bury himself—not in Ray, no, not him—in some lovely woman, an acquaintance for the evening if not a lady of the night. Someone lovely, and adventurous, someone like him, on the look-out for sex and lust and a quick goodbye.

Murphy had disappeared a good half-an-hour ago, dragged off unprotesting by his girlfriend of the past several months. Bodie couldn't remember her name, but could remember the other things about her: a pretty woman, too clever for Bodie's taste, that sharp tongue too honest by half. Still, Murphy had the right idea, running off home for sex—unlike Stuart over there, haunting the darts board, betting the unwary out of a few quid as he downed enough beer to sink the Bismark and float the Titanic.

Yeh, Bodie decided, Murphy had the right idea, definitely. Unfortunately, Murphy also had the right girlfriend, an aspect of Bodie's life that had been sorely neglected of late. Back at his flat, he had an address book full of names, but it seemed a bit off to phone someone up to invite himself over for sex. That left the local talent, and a slow survey of the room showed most of that to be already taken, the few still unattached either unwilling or unappealing. A quick run-through of his resources: yeh, he had more than enough to cover the cost of a pro. The last of his pint disappeared in one long swallow, his Adam's apple bobbing. He stopped, the tumbler held tightly in his hand, the memory held tightly in his mind. Without even trying, he could remember Ray sucking him down, taking him all the way in—or taking him in all the way, depending on how he looked at it, depending on how much he could trust the rotten sod.

He refused to name his sudden rush to find sex anything close to desperation: refused to name a lot of other things, too. There was a club not far from here, one he'd become a regular of when first he came back to England from Africa and all the English women, in their frothy summer frocks or their hard make-up, seemed either too fragile or too hard for what he needed. A bit of sex, a bit of

welcome, a bit of comfort, that's what he had needed then: it was what he needed now as well.

Walking, now, Stuart left behind without a thought—Christ, what had he been thinking to go for a booze-up with *Stuart* of all people?—his footsteps inaudible under the sounds of traffic and the multitude of other people walking along the concrete pavement. Voices came and went as he passed solitary individuals and couples, laughter, argument, the sounds of strife indistinguishable from the sounds of a good time being had at any cost, the morning after be damned.

Round the corner now, to the relatively quiet street with its stairs leading down to open doors with looping neon signs beckoning the tourist, the traveller and the thirsty. The club had been here for years—except the door was shut, boarded over with cheap plywood, graffiti, and concert posters layered on it by year.

Now that really pissed him off. Face like fizz, he stalked off down the street, his need for sex growing exponentially as it was denied him. Any minute now and there should be the traditional lamp-post on the traditional corner, with the traditional mini-skirted, fishnet-stockinged prossie swinging her handbag. That, of course, had changed a lifetime before, but the idea was still the same, although nowadays it was easier to find someone if you were in a car. His car was still at HQ, where he'd left it days ago, driving down with Doyle—

The thought was cut off with ruthless efficiency: for this night at least, Doyle did not exist, because Bodie was looking for sex, so what did he need Doyle for?

Another club, one he knew by reputation, all of it encouragingly salacious. The familiar aroma of alcohol and tobacco, perfume and sex, after-shave and lust. Not the highest of classy places, but a lot better than many he'd been in. Better girls—nicer, posher, too, he thought, checking out what was on offer, his cock half hard already, making its demands known. Her, he decided instinctively, walking straight for her, not even bothering with the pretence of coming here for a drink. That wasn't the thirst he needed to slake tonight: it was this terrifying pit of emptiness in his belly, not the familiar hunger that could be fed anything from junk to gourmet, but an aching hollowness that was, more and more and despite all his efforts, beginning to carry Doyle's name.

He'd soon see about that. It was infatuation, that

was all—not infatuation with the person, he was quick to reassure himself as he neared the woman of his choice: it was infatuation with the idea, the novelty of it—even the taboo of it, Cowley’s views on non-fraternisation completely coinciding with Bodie’s. Lust, impure and far from simple, but satiable, and supplantable. All he had to do, Bodie told himself, assessing the natural and artificial charms of the woman he would want for the next hour or so, was fuck his brains out with someone who *really* knew how to please a man.

A movement off to the side caught his eye: a handsome, almost pretty young man with hard eyes and harder smile, everything calculated to attract the paying customer. Not, Bodie was pleased to note, his cup of tea at all. Simply not to his taste. With a swagger to his shoulders, he turned back to the woman he had been heading for, looked at her again, and discovered that some of the lustre had tarnished, the truth underlying the image showing through. He wasn’t quite sure—if only because he refused to work it out—why he’d lost interest in her, but at least, as he told himself, better now than later when he’d already paid for her efforts.

He began a slow circuit of the room, and hated the way he noticed the rent-boys as much as the female prostitutes. Hated the way he responded to them, when they moved a certain way, when they laughed a certain way, when they posed, one knee bent, crotch thrust forward, and a sullen tilt to their mouth.

He did not, he repeated, did not want Ray Doyle. Well, not for anything other than a good, hard fuck. Another slow perambulation, this time specifically looking at the men and the pretend-boys who were as old as himself. Maybe that’s what he needed: take another man, have him the way Doyle had refused. Get Doyle out of his system.

But then, what if it didn’t work?

Or what if he liked it, more than he ought?

Volte-face, and he was in front of a blonde with tiny waist and large bust, coming flat out with it, offering money, impatient for her reply. Dealing with her ‘friend’, restraining himself from grabbing her by the hand and dragging her off to the room nearby. Hating himself for the moment of wariness glimpsed in her eyes—hating himself for remembering most where he’d last seen that same wariness, that same near-fear of him, and his sex.

Christ, he thought with bitter amusement, keep this up and they’ll be running away screaming.

Or running away by standing still and saying nothing, Doyle on that portico, staring at those bloody trees, damned sunglasses—

“It’s just up here,” she said, interrupting him, and if it hadn’t been for the his cock pressuring him, he would have had a problem placing who she was.

“What’s your name?” he demanded out of the blue, to make this more than a nameless fuck, even though all he wanted was simple, uncomplicated sex, a quick in-and-out, nothing fancy, nothing hinting at romance.

“Sally,” the woman replied, keeping her eyes on this one. He was strange, this good looking young bloke who couldn’t possibly need to pay for sex, and she just hoped he wasn’t dangerous. “Why don’t we sit down and get comfortable?”

“No, thanks,” Bodie replied, making an effort to be civil, trying to treat her like a person and not just a hole, refusing to turn into the sort of bastard who deserved to be looked at like that, shadows behind her eyes, nervousness in the way she was edging towards the phone. “It’s all right,” he said, managing a smile, somewhat shamefaced at the way she was retreating from him like a virgin with Dracula. “I’m normal, just a bit... Well, I’m not exactly used to doing this, feel a bit funny about it.”

The little-boy charm worked as always, he thought, although Sally was more reassured by the way his fists unclenched and the way his eyes were no longer blank and distant. Having been through this a million times, the poor young husband not knowing what to do with himself when the wife’s doctor cut off the sex or old wives’ tales scared the young wife into celibacy, she asked with professional sympathy: “Wife pregnant, is she?”

Bodie stopped dead for a moment, and looked at Sally, and thought about Ray. “Yes,” he said, slipping into the balm of lying. “Yeh, and she’s well, you know...”

“Of course I know,” Sally purred, coming up to him now, running her hands over his face: he’d paid for more than just a quick fuck, and if his wife were pregnant, then she just might end up with another regular, which was always nice. “You’re left to do without, and it’s not as if you want to be unfaithful to her, is it? Well,” she said, teasingly slipping her hand across the front of his trousers, eyes widening in genuine pleasant surprise, “being

with me, that's just seeking professional services to help you through a rough spot, isn't it? Think of me as a sort of counsellor," she said, making the most unethical, in any other profession, reconnaissance of his crotch.

Bodie closed his eyes, letting her work her magic, impressed by the way she undressed him, the way she coaxed him to the bed, easing him down to lie there, persuading him to open his eyes to watch her. She was impressive at that as well, undressing with more bump-and-grind than the average stripper. Flat on his back, legs spread, one hand on his cock, the other on his balls, both hands moved in the same languorous rhythm of Sally taking off her red dress and black shoes.

He was hard now, and more than ready, suddenly, fiercely glad that he hadn't rung up one of his girlfriends: Sally was being paid, cash transaction, to give him pleasure, to let him fuck her. No obligation for him to return the pleasure, no duty for him to perform well. All he had to do was enjoy himself while she lay back and thought of her bank account.

"C'mere," he muttered, reaching for her, toppling her over onto the bed before she'd finished with the old-fashioned garter belt that played to so many male fantasies. Bodie didn't want fantasies, wanted only the reality of himself, fucking a woman, Ray Doyle a million miles from his thoughts. He rolled her onto her back, her name already forgotten, erased by the sight of her naked and spread and open. Bodie grabbed himself, positioned himself between her thighs, and sank into her, fucking her as hard as he could, fiercely, defiantly glad that he'd paid the extra fiver so that he didn't have to use a Durex. Should have done that with Ray, he thought, lowering his head until his mouth was open on smooth skin, her full breasts pressed flat under his chest, but not so flat as Ray, and too smooth, even her nipples soft as she lay there, gasping and groaning in the throes of passion, her hips writhing and undulating with superb skill, the entire performance picture-perfect.

And Bodie, in her to the hilt, found his attention wandering, found himself pounding into her as if it were a chore, something he had to do to relieve his cock. Unnerving, and he made himself look at her again, kissed her beautiful mouth, accepting her talented tongue inside his mouth, following it as it lured him inside her. Ran his hands over her, the softness of her buttocks pressing his hands into the

bed as he cupped her, the smoothness of her thighs, the richness of her breasts, nipples peaking hard now against his palms.

Ray had fought him, lean, lithe, hard, cock digging into him, fingers digging into him, the passion a twisting, turning presence between them, driving him to distraction—

He wiped the sweat from his forehead, and from his cheeks, set himself doggedly to caressing the woman under him, the woman whose name he didn't remember, the woman whose eye colour was a mystery to him, the woman he had been inside before he had even registered her natural hair colour. He knew every mark on Ray, every scar, every muscle, even that small mole at the top of his inside right thigh. Knew the colour of his eyes in every mood, knew the way he moved, the way his mouth worked when he swallowed a man. Knew how his hair felt between Bodie's fingers, his hands tangling in long, straight blonde tresses that were but a substitute. He'd had Ray under him, bucking like a wild thing, ready and desperate for him, and now he couldn't get that thought out of his mind, even as he fucked a woman he would normally think beautiful, a woman with an abundance of every feature he preferred, and he didn't want her, a feast turned to famine.

Bodie slammed into her, hating her, hating himself, hating Ray. Furious with his boredom with what he was doing, furious with his body for betraying him. Praying that he could come soon, that he wouldn't lose his erection and his pride.

Permitting himself, finally, to think about Ray under him like this, legs wrapped around him, hair tossing wildly, hips thrusting up to meet him—

Joylessly, he came, his body flooding her with his release, his mind numbing in self-defence. Polite even here, he rolled off her immediately, refusing to check his watch.

Sally, less polite perhaps, looked at the clock beside the bed.

"It's all right," Bodie told her again, sitting up, stretching the kink out of his lower back where all the muscles were protesting as much as his mind, "I'm not staying. You won't have to put up with me again."

"Oh, it's not that at all," Sally told him with all the brightness she could muster after having been flattened like that.

Bodie wasn't listening to her, was trying not to listen to himself. There was an en suite bathroom—

ought to be, for what he'd paid—and he used it, the water too cold on his cock as he washed himself off. As if he were completely alone, he went back into the bedroom, dressing himself with routine efficiency born of too many years of active duty. Tonight, he felt like an old man, aches and twinges appearing for the first time without benefit of injury, nothing wrong with him but over-exertion. Or depression.

He didn't leave her a tip, didn't even acknowledge her presence. Instead, wrapped in thoughts he didn't want to have, he left, going down the stairs one at a time, coins and car keys jingling merrily.

There were taxis passing every now and then, their yellow lights beckoning, but he ignored them, walking steadily, his easy pace covering the distance quickly, the effects of tonight's beer slowly fading. It took him a while, but he was, eventually home, shutting and locking and bolting the door behind himself. All he wanted was to crawl into bed and sleep for a month. Almost there, and the flashing red light on the departmental phone caught his attention.

"Fucking hell," he said to no-one and nothing in particular, reluctantly coming to pick the phone up. "What is it this time?" The connection went through, and Sparks, who'd been on night-ops for as long as anyone could remember, was telling him to hang on a minute, the line clicking into silence before he could protest.

"Right," Sparks said, "message from Mr. Cowley."

Bodie groaned aloud at that.

"And well you might," Sparks said with singularly unwelcome cheeriness. "He's sending you to Macklin."

"Christ, what for? And when?"

"First thing tomorrow morning. Oh, wait, no—that's first thing *this* morning. Macklin's expecting you in..." a smug pause, Bodie far from smug as he checked his own watch, "four and a half hours."

"Message received, Control," Bodie said, following the perfect letter of the law, slamming the phone down and giving it a two fingered salute. "And fuck you too, Mr. Cowley, sir."

He stomped off to bed, hoping that once, just this once, his flat could be bugged, and with a direct line to George Cowley's left ear. "Fuck you!" he shouted.

But the only answer he got was the people next door thumping on the wall.

Miserable, and horribly aware of why, Bodie crawled into bed and pulled the covers over his head. His last thought, as he sank like a stone into sleep, was to wonder where Doyle had been when his message had come through. And what the hell he was going to say to his partner in the morning.

"I can see," Macklin said, arms and legs akimbo, blond hair not even the slightest bit ruffled, "why George sent you two back to me. He always did believe in throwing the minnows back. And you two," he crouched down between them, his trainers very white against the dust of the floor and the filthy state of the two agents lying thereon, "must be the most pathetic things George ever managed to bring in. What's the matter with the two of you?"

Every joint creaking, Doyle hauled himself up into a sitting position, wiped the dust from his hair and face. "Thought that was your job."

"Oh, so it does still have some balls left. I was beginning to wonder," Macklin sneered in so pleasant a voice. "Come on, Doyle, it's obvious. You and Bodie aren't communicating—you're not even working as a team. You two were better together the first week you were partnered than you are now, and you had better pull your socks up."

"Or else?" Bodie asked from where he still lay on the floor, right hand over ribs that would have been broken if Macklin hadn't been pulling his punches so much.

"That's right, or else," Macklin told him, deft fingers lifting Bodie's shirt up to check the ribs, sharp eyes noting the way Doyle's gaze slid sideways, looking at Bodie then looking away again.

"Or else what?" Bodie wheezed between Macklin torturing him under pretence of examining him. "He can't fire us—too short-staffed."

"You're right about that," Macklin agreed, tugging Bodie's shirt back into place, half his attention on watching Doyle. "But there are fates worse than being fired."

"All right," Doyle said tiredly, "I'll bite. What's the fate worse than death?"

"Being demoted," Macklin replied calmly, picking up the wickedly sharp steel-toothed comb he was going to use for the next little lesson. "If you two don't measure up, he's going to shove you both into B-Squad."

"He can't do that—"

“Yeh, he can, Ray,” Bodie told him, getting to his feet carefully, eyeing the way Macklin was playing with the sharply gleaming steel. “It’s right there in the small print.”

“So’s everything else, and most of it’s illegal.”

“And since when has that ever stopped George Cowley, eh?”

They were both standing now, slowly circling the deceptively becalmed Macklin.

Doyle didn’t have time to answer, Macklin coming at him just as Towser, shrieking like a banshee, came bursting through the door, and battle, euphemistically known as a ‘refresher course’, was once more joined.

It had, or so it felt, been going on for centuries. Every bone ached, every muscle had been strained or pulled or torn. Their brains were every bit as sharp as hot porridge, and neither of them could muster the strength to more than blink. The two camp-beds were side by side, Doyle lying flat on his back on the one under the window, Bodie on his stomach over beside the back wall, his face turned, instinctively, towards the door, left arm hanging limply to the ground. Neither man was up to talking, even if either one of them had known what to say. After all, what could they say? It was inescapable and beyond covering-up: witness how quickly word had got back to Cowley. Even they could see it staring them in the face. The rapport was gone, their teamwork a thing of the past, the partnership in tatters.

Without shifting his head, Bodie could see Doyle. Could see when his partner made the tiny move that warned Bodie that Doyle was about to look at him, Bodie averting his eyes quickly, focussing blindly on the door rather than meet Doyle’s eyes and the knowledge that was in them.

They both knew. Couldn’t help but know. But there was no law that said Bodie had to admit it.

They did, however, glance briefly at each other, Macklin’s encroaching footsteps a threat.

“Well, well, well, I am surprised. I thought the pair of you would be Sleeping Beauties by now. I’m obviously going to have to work you harder tomorrow.”

Doyle didn’t even groan, just turned his face to the wall, only to snap his attention back to Macklin when the light went out. Either an enforced and welcome bedtime, or another attack. Across the room, he knew Bodie would be just as tense as he, although he could no longer sense it. Experience

told him what Bodie’s first moves would be—always supposing Bodie hadn’t come up with some new variation.

“Right, you two,” Macklin said, and despite all their problems, Bodie and Doyle would have looked at each other in sheer astonishment at the gruff affection audible there, “this conversation doesn’t exist, right? If you so much as hint about it to anyone, I’ll call you liars to your faces, and if you mention it to George, I’ll come after you both and kill you.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Bodie said, exhaustion and irony threatening to make him collapse into giggles. “So what’s this non-existent conversation about then?”

“What d’you think it’s about, Bodie?”

“It’s about us,” Doyle said, disembodied, his comment drifting across the room. “It’s about me and Bodie, and what’s gone wrong.” A pause, and Doyle found it in him to be grateful to Macklin for giving them all the benefit of darkness. “You know, don’t you?”

“About you and Bodie? I’ve been watching you—of course I know. And it’s not as if you two are the first this has happened to.”

“What,” Bodie said, and his voice, flat and blunt, had been intended to be sharp and cutting and outraged, “the fuck are you trying to imply?”

“Don’t bother, Bodie, it’s too late to lie your way out of this one. Come on, I’ve seen it all before, and it’s my job to get to the root of whatever’s wrecking a decent partnership. And it’s obvious with you two.” And later, Macklin knew, when they weren’t so tired, when they weren’t both so completely wrung out, they’d realise just how much they’d actually given away there, when neither one of them asked what the hell made it obvious—or even what ‘it’ was.

If it weren’t so sick, it would be funny. In fact, because it was so sick, it had a lovely humour all its own, and Doyle laughed, briefly, unpleasantly. “Yeh, well, me and Bodie know all about what’s gone wrong and why. Don’t we, Bodie?”

Through the uncurtained window, Bodie could see the slight lightening where the sky appeared above the blank wall of the next door warehouse. Could see a couple of stars between the clouds, not that he could be bothered with so much as bothering to remember which stars they were. To one side, he could hear Macklin breathing, waiting for him. Diagonally from him, he could hear Ray, or

really, Doyle's camp-bed, the canvas and wood creaking. "Yes," Bodie finally said, making it all real, and inescapable. "Yeh, we both know what went wrong."

"Do you?" Macklin asked sharply. "You think you do, because you're a pair of know-it-alls. But I wonder if you've any idea of what the real problem is."

Doyle was still finding this all amusing in its own Pythonesque way, was surprised that Bodie had sounded so dour and solemn. "So you don't think two of CI5's best—two *men*—fucking each other is a real problem?"

"No."

The flat, undramatic denial shocked two people in that room.

"Are you trying to tell me," Bodie said carefully, "that if we were to do what Doyle said we did, it wouldn't wreck the partnership."

"Of course that's what I'm saying. I've told you, Bodie, I've seen more in life than your dirty little mind could ever imagine, so believe me, partners fucking each other isn't the big problem you think it is."

It might well have been the first time in his life Macklin heard the comment, Bodie's voice very still in the darkened room. "Then you're a complete idiot. You don't think that would be a problem? Then how come Cowley's sent us here, eh? And how come you think we're finished, if us fucking isn't a problem?"

"The fucking isn't the problem. The problem," and Bodie and Doyle could hear him get to his feet, and Macklin could see them now, as faded and colourless as corpses in the dim moonlight, "is you two fucking it up."

Footsteps, three, four, then silence as Macklin stopped again. "I'm recommending a medical leave for you both, overwork, stress, the usual excuses. I can get you a week, and then you'll both be back here, and then in to see Doctor Ross. A week, that's all. And if you can't get yourselves sorted out—"

"Then it's B-Squad. Babysitting, inter-departmental liaisons, observations, Grade 2 operations..."

"Fate worse than death," Bodie said, thinking about what he'd done, thinking about values and trust and caution.

The door shut behind Macklin, and Bodie's unanswered comment lingered between the two men shut in the small, dark room.

"Suppose that means," Doyle said, proffering the first verbal olive branch, "that we can go home now."

"Suppose it does. D'you want to?" Bodie himself wasn't sure he knew what he was asking, knew he was supposed to be trying to sort out the mess, and horror of horrors, that meant they might actually have to talk. The B-Squad. He'd leave before he'd move down to that lot of podges—always hoping that Cowley didn't throw an entire book of small print at him.

"Don't know if I have the energy to move."

"Don't much fancy staying here."

"Don't much fancy," Doyle told him firmly, bringing all the unspoken little details right out into the open, "doing anything much more strenuous than breathing, so if you think you're going to have me on my knees tonight—"

"Oh, get off it, Ray," Bodie snapped, too tired to care overmuch about his aggrandised image, only the pathetically impotent stupid enough to claim potency under these conditions, "who the fuck would have the energy for sex after this little lot, eh?"

"So we're going then?"

"In a minute," Bodie replied, lying there, listening to Ray breathing, listening to the sound of a barge going downriver, a dog barking in boredom or loneliness.

"It's been a minute," Doyle said, after about twenty minutes, hauling himself to his feet, moving before he couldn't stay awake. Carefully, acutely aware of how delicately they were dealing with each other right now, their partnership a poor, shrivelled thing shivering in the dark. "Are you coming, or would you rather sleep here and maybe we could see each other tomorrow?"

It would be so easy, Bodie thought, watching the gathering clouds scud across the sky. Just say 'see you', let the problems cement between them and that would be it. Resign from the squad, and if Cowley wouldn't let him resign, just disappear anyway. Back to Africa, any number of real money-makers over there. There was Sri Lanka, and India. Not to mention the rest of Asia, and Hong Kong. Any number of places, any number of jobs. And for the first time he could remember, the idea of leaving England uneased him, some part of him having grown old and settled down when he hadn't been looking. Not so easy then. That was the moment when Doyle moved, his trainers squeaking

slightly on the concrete, his profile passing in front of the multi-greyed clouds. Head downbent—Bodie was willing to bet the mouth would be as well, that expression having grown more familiar over the past little while. Yes, the mouth would definitely be downturned.

Hadn't kissed that mouth. Not that he would, of course, because real men didn't kiss other men.

But that prossie last night. He'd kissed her, and did he dare be that honest? To relive what he'd been thinking with his mouth on hers, his tongue inside her?

"Look, Bodie," Doyle said, hands on hips, sportsbag between his feet, determination knitting his brows, "if we leave it as it stands right now, we'll never be able to face each other again, right?"

Bodie didn't have to agree, both of them knowing human nature and each other.

"So this is it, isn't it? If we split up now—"

"Then we'll've split up for good and bugger any stupid notions about sorting it out later..."

They both of them knew there wouldn't be a later, not once they were out of this cocooning dark and facing each other in the light, the distance of festering embarrassment and humiliation seeping between them. Doyle had made his choice—had made it the night he let Bodie push him into fellating him—and now it was Bodie's turn. Well, he laughed at himself as panic threatened, he had claimed he wanted to be top man, hadn't he?

"Don't suppose you've got anything decent in by way of food?" Bodie demanded, brusqueness heavy to cover his nerves.

"You're never hungry!"

"I'm always hungry—said so yourself," Bodie replied, struggling to find the old patterns to paper over the new cracks. "And not for any of that healthy crap you're always trying to make me eat. Worse than Stuart's idea of conversation."

A small comment, well-camouflaged, but Doyle had always been good at reading between Bodie's lines.

"That supposed to be an excuse for the fairy jokes or an apology?"

"What fairy jokes?" Bodie asked, stuffing bits and pieces into his holdall. "Oh," he said in the voice of discovery, "those jokes! Anyway, don't know why you got so bent out of shape over them. Not as if they had anything to do with *you*, was it?"

Stiff-armed, Doyle stopped Bodie dead in his tracks, his hand hard and immobile against Bodie's

chest. "Let's get something clear right now," he hissed, furious enough to rock the proverbial boat. "You don't fucking lie to me, d'you hear me? I don't lie to you, and you don't lie to me. You think you're the only one that's done things he shouldn't've?"

"Yeh, but unlike you," Bodie said in the spirit of telling the truth and nothing but the truth, "I admit it."

"*Touché*," Doyle replied drily, half wishing he hadn't been quite so keen on truthfulness. "So don't you go trying to pull the wool over my eyes so that I think you've turned into some bloody saint—"

"Can't," Bodie told him dolorously, needing to push aside all of this soul-baring stuff before he left himself more naked than he was quite happy with yet. "My Da wouldn't let me take Holy Communion. Wrong church."

"All right, Bodie, I get the message, and I tell you what, I'll let you off the hook for a bit."

"Oh, you're too, too kind."

"You won't be saying that this time tomorrow."

Having seen Doyle learn everything he knew from Cowley before adding a few particularly effective twists of his own, Bodie knew he was in for something closely resembling the Inquisition. "No," he said, blindly, the whole idea too much, too close, too soon. "No, I'm not going to sit around spilling my guts like a fucking pansy—"

There was a second, a fraction of a second, where Doyle wanted to bring his hand up and hit Bodie, hard, break the smug, macho bastard's nose, teach him a few lessons the hard way. But almost as quickly, and fast enough to avert incipient disaster, his own underlying emotions reared up, reminding him rather forcibly of how powerful certain deep-seated feelings and fears could be. Give him time, he reminded himself again, finding it easier than he had expected. There was a patience in him that few ever tapped, but Bodie seemed to have found the motherlode. "All right, all right," he said, his own soothing tone taking him aback, his hand softly stroking where stabbing fingers could have killed, "I won't push it, not yet. In your own time, eh, Bodie? Give you a bit of time."

Bodie, a well of cowardice opening up inside, almost asked him 'time for what'. Time, he knew, to let him come to terms with something he couldn't even name yet, something that Macklin had been careful not to mention in a conversation that didn't exist.

"Been a bit of a shock, I suppose."

"What has?"

"All this," Doyle said quietly in the dark, leaning in that bit closer, nearing temptation, referring to both Bodie's self-unveilings and his own discovery of love.

Bodie could see him, could feel Doyle's breath on him. Knew he could kiss Doyle if he wanted to. If he dared to.

"If we don't get moving, we'll still be standing here come morning."

"In that case," Doyle stood aside, ushering Bodie in a neat reversal of their usual ploys, "lead on, MacDuff."

And there wasn't a snowball's that Bodie was going to give him the correct quote on that one.

On the deserted street, several cars parked, two of them belonging to Bodie and Doyle.

"Which car?"

"Mine," Bodie said, predictably.

In silence, they climbed in; in silence, they drove, still not speaking when they arrived at Doyle's flat, the excuse of lugging their gear in and throwing together a late, late bite to eat giving them enough banalities to make small talk over.

Dirty dishes on the floor beside the sofa, the television had long since abandoned itself to the national anthem and the radio was reduced to things even Doyle's mother would find boring.

"We're going to have to call it a night some time," Doyle said into the quiet.

"Suppose so." Flat, telling neither of them anything.

"We've already said we neither one of us are up to anything," Doyle reminded him, not allowing himself to be annoyed by Bodie's skittishness—as if Bodie was the one with cause for concern.

"Yeh, we did, didn't we? Right," Bodie got to his feet like a statue coming to life, his aches and pains visible if not entirely audible, "where d'you keep the spare blankets this time?"

Still curled up in the corner of the sofa, Doyle stared at him through eyes that were very large and very green, and in anyone else would have been called guileless. "Bed's big enough."

"Where're the blankets, Ray?" How long was it now since he'd been comfortable sharing a bed with Doyle? An eternity or a blink of an eye, it was all the same. There was sex between them now, and

it was one thing to use the bed to fuck in, but it would mean something else entirely if they were to sleep together, as sedate and sexless as any old married couple. "The blankets," he said again, willing to make an issue of it.

"Cupboard at the top of the stairs. And the distalgesics are in the medicine chest."

"Right."

A few minutes later, and Bodie was back, this time to hand Doyle a couple of the painkillers, leaving him to it, actually clearing the dirty dishes into the kitchen. The hint was, admittedly, somewhat heavy-handed, but Doyle had looked too settled sitting there on the sofa where Bodie was supposed to be sleeping. Not too long ago, he would have tossed the extra covers over Doyle's head, laughed at him and gone to sleep in Doyle's bed himself. But to do that now would be tantamount to inviting Doyle in beside him, would be almost like asking Doyle to incite them to sex again. He couldn't face that tonight, sex sounding more like work than pleasure, and there were too many things echoing through his skull, from the emotions he kept on glimpsing in Ray's eyes to Macklin's shockingly blithe acceptance of the idea of two men fucking each other. Macklin, of all people, not seeming to think it made either one of them any less a man, or treating them one whit differently from before. That conversation might not exist, but it was only a spit away from tacit approval of him and Ray, Macklin and Cowley hand in glove when it came to enforcing internal policy.

Then there was the not so minor matter of what the hell had shown, what the hell had tipped Macklin off—and who else would see it? Who else had already seen it? How many people already knew?

Head pounding, the painkillers still twenty minutes away from kicking in, Bodie leaned on the kitchen counter, dizzied as much by what had happened as by his own conflicting emotions, innumerable desires at war with other wants and needs, and all of it tangling like string in the aftermath of a kitten. Doyle would be upstairs by now, safely out of the way, so he went back into the living room, relieved to find himself alone, Doyle's absence some small proof that perhaps they could rebuild the old rapport. Automatically, he went round turning all the lights out, checking the locks again, listening to the small sounds coming from upstairs. The sofa was long enough for him to lie

out full-stretched, and new enough that the cushions were comfortable, the blankets heavy enough to make him feel secure, warmth helping soothe his muscles.

He had no intention of pondering over anything, had no wish to think a single thing through. All he wanted was to sleep, and sleep, and sleep.

Too early, he heard a noise, smelled something, the combination making him stir from his nest of blankets.

"Here," a distinctly bleary and seriously dishevelled Doyle said, plonking a plate piled with toast on the coffee table, two steaming mugs and the bottle of painkillers already quite at home amidst yesterday's newspaper and Bodie's folded clothes.

"God, Doyle," Bodie groaned, blessedly forgetting the none-too-subtle changes in their relationship, his brain still deeper asleep than his body, "what time is it?"

"Quarter to nine. Needed another tablet, didn't want to chance it on an empty stomach."

"And misery loves company." Still, he pulled himself upright, remembering everything all at once the moment Doyle looked at his bare chest, at nipples Doyle's fingers had played with while Doyle's mouth had been busy elsewhere. Trying to make it look natural, Bodie pulled the covers up a bit higher, knowing he was just begging for a sarky comment.

"Oh, my maiden aunt," Doyle said, sneering, for all that his eyes were dark with something other than contempt, "is the poor little innocent afraid I'm going to jump him?"

"You're doing your prima donna again," Bodie sneered right back, tired and vicious and annoyed that Doyle was being so unnecessarily difficult.

"Me? I'm not the one sitting there," Doyle was very quiet, so quiet that not even Bodie could pretend not to see the pain and corroded trust behind the nastiness, "worried shitless that he's going to be raped, am I, Bodie?"

Doyle turned on his heel and left, as angry with himself for letting Bodie wind him up like that as he was at Bodie for doing it in the first place. At the doorway, he looked back at Bodie, saw the lost, confounded expression, and remembered why he had fallen for Bodie in the first place.

"Oh, for god's sake," he said roughly, "get some rest. You look like something the cat dragged in."

Then he was gone, and Bodie was left alone with enough toast to feed a battalion, and enough guilt and confusion to defeat an army.

Two hours he lay there, knowing Doyle was upstairs, almost directly over his head, fairly sure that Ray would be no more asleep than he was.

Two hours of going round and round and round in circles, coming no closer to a solution than when he'd started. He wanted the sex, there was no doubt about that—what he didn't want was the skipping around holding hands and pressing wild flowers between the pages of poetry books.

Not, of course, that Doyle owned a single poem let alone an entire book of them. And not that Ray had ever shown the blindest bit of interest in flowers as anything other than a way of sweetening up some bird. At least, Bodie had always thought they'd been for girls. Never knew, though, did you? Look at him: he'd let men suck his cock, would fuck them too. None of the queer stuff, though, not him.

Convenient, wasn't it, to forget about kissing Sally and wishing her to be Doyle.

Nah, he would be happy with the sex, and Doyle would just have to see to it that he didn't fuck things up by being too emotional about it all, too sentimental, all clinging, simpering at him...

And when, Bodie asked himself with a sudden stab of honesty, had Ray ever done anything like that? If it hadn't been for someone bumping into him in that pub that night.

Unpleasant, threatening thought—for all that Doyle was willing to do down on his knees for Bodie, there was no escaping it: Doyle was very much a man, the same man he'd been from the first day Bodie had met him, from the first time he had saved Bodie's life. Not some effete, precious little queen, but a man who liked men, who didn't feel himself unmanned by taking another man's cock into his mouth, or taking a man up the arse, or any one of a million things Bodie could imagine, lying there, his cock responding to the erotica in his head. Would Doyle be willing to do all of those things? And what would he demand in return?

His cock pulsed once, the heavy throb almost frightening to a man who thought himself straight and was becoming aroused at the imagining of what another man would do to him.

Overhead, the bed creaked, shuffling footsteps, the toilet flushing, the reversing of the sounds.

Without thinking about it, drawn like a moth to the flame, the image of a naked, sleepy Ray Doyle a candle leading him on, Bodie went up the stairs, his own clothes left behind, nudity no problem now that it was his choice, and him in control. The bedroom door was characteristically left open, and Doyle was curled up in the bed, duvet right up over his head. The venetian blinds were tightly shut, and the room was almost dark, the rattling of rain on the window panes finally registering with Bodie. The sound made him shiver, and he came closer to the bed, lifting the duvet and climbing in to Doyle-scented warmth, his sleepy partner welcoming him automatically, octopus limbs wrapping round Bodie.

"Like a block of ice," Doyle mumbled in Bodie's ear, hot hands rubbing his back to take away the chill.

Bodie didn't say anything, simply permitted Doyle the liberty of making him warm, putting up with the hands that strayed all over his body. Didn't argue when his cock had the predictable response. It was only sex, he told himself again, and Doyle wasn't some prancing little poofter who was going to embarrass him in front of his friends.

He felt Ray's open mouth on his body, felt Doyle slowly descend, the tacit offer to suck him. Bodie eased over onto his back, and spread his legs wide in anticipation and invitation, one that Doyle was quick to take him up on. The wet mouth was cool at first, then warm enough, and then hot as the blood rushed to Bodie's cock, making him fully erect, making him more than enough to fill Ray's mouth. Here in Doyle's bed, with Doyle putting every last ounce of skill into it, it was better than the first time, and Bodie couldn't stay silent. He shoved the duvet out of the way, kicking it aside until he could see Ray sucking him, could see the curve of Doyle's naked back as he knelt over Bodie. Watched, fascinated, lost to lust, as Ray reached between his own legs to fondle his own cock, the foreskin long, sliding back and forth silkily.

The rhythm was the same, Ray's mouth on Bodie's cock, his hand on his own cock, making the experience one and the same thing.

"Like that, Bodie?" Doyle asked, lips still brushing Bodie's arching erection.

Inarticulate with passion, Bodie reached down to press Ray's mouth back on to him, only to be frustrated.

Doyle, smiling, eyes feral, cock tapping against

his belly, crawled up Bodie's body, his cock coming to rest, briefly, against Bodie's, rubbing with slick pleasure immediately, his words so inciting they made Bodie forget he had another man's cock rubbing against him. "D'you want to fuck me?" Ray asked, tongue tip tasting Bodie's right nipple. "Want to fuck me enough to keep me clean?"

Bodie hadn't even realised he'd made the decision until that moment, hearing himself say it. "Where d'you keep the Durex?"

A brilliant smile for that, and then Ray scrambling, never once completely letting go of Bodie as he got a condom and the cream he'd need for himself. More sucking, Bodie's cock wonderfully big in his mouth, and then he was smoothing the condom down onto Bodie, cream lubricating it just enough. "All right," Doyle whispered, rolling onto his back, bringing Bodie with him, letting Bodie have the illusion of being on top, "fuck me, go on, Bodie, put it in me."

Bodie grasped his cock, pressing it to the small hole, gasping as the muscle dilated and he sank slowly into incredible heat and even more incredible pleasure.

Doyle lifted his knees higher, pulling his legs up out of the way, exposing himself more, Bodie entering him more deeply, until Bodie's abdomen was hard against him, pubic hair caressing his balls, belly hair rubbing against his own hard cock.

"For fuck's sake, Bodie," he groaned, trying desperately to rub harder, "touch me. I need you, oh, christ, give me your hand—"

Had it been anyone else, Bodie would never have done it. But this was Ray, whom he might yet have to give up, and this was better than any sex he'd had before. Reluctant at first, he wrapped his fist around Doyle's cock, the skin so soft over such hardness. He stroked, once, and was rewarded by the sight of Doyle tipping his head back, the utterly vulnerable throat exposed in pleasure.

"Oh, yeh," Doyle murmured, feeling Bodie inside him and around him, "oh, yeh..."

Bodie couldn't tear his eyes off Doyle's throat, the Adam's apple bobbing with every word Doyle said. Couldn't resist the unprotectedness of it, couldn't resist the trust, and he lowered his mouth, open lips and teeth following the lines of Doyle's throat, mouth feasting on skin, cock caressed by the deep smoothness of Doyle's inner body. His cock was devouring Doyle, and he held Doyle's cock in the palm of his hand, and he felt himself more of a

man than he had in years, for Doyle was helpless with pleasure under him, legs splayed, arse open wide, manhood given over to Bodie. Mouth gaping open in wordless murmurings, and Bodie fucked him harder, held his cock tighter, stroked harder, bit him there, on the lobe of his ear, sucking on his skin, all of Bodie concentrated on the pleasure of being inside Ray Doyle and bringing him, powerfully, to orgasm.

“Yeh, Ray, that’s it, feel me up you. Love it, don’t you, being fucked, eh? Being fucked by me, no-one else, not ever anyone else, won’t want to. Feel that?” he thrust forward, his cock completely encased in Doyle’s body and rotated his hips in tiny, soul-destroying circles, Doyle grabbing Bodie’s shoulders, pulling him close, bringing them more tightly together.

Eyes wide, Doyle stared up at Bodie, couldn’t believe his ears, couldn’t believe how good this was, what Bodie was willing to do. Loved it, and loved Bodie and wasn’t afraid of it. Felt orgasm thunder through him, felt himself erupt over Bodie’s cradling hand and onto Bodie’s belly, felt Bodie’s cock so huge inside him as his arse spasmed around the heavy flesh. And then, there it was, Bodie suddenly still, a canopy over him, orgasm claiming Bodie too. Dissolving, dissolving, blending together until it was as if nothing had ever changed, the two of them in perfect, flawless harmony.

Bodie was heavy on top of him, but that wasn’t a problem yet. How could it be, with Bodie looking so dazed and bemused, still not quite back in the land of the living, his eyes closed, his mouth open. Common sense still to return, it was too much to resist, and Doyle pressed his open mouth to Bodie’s, tongue softly stroking.

Bodie felt the tongue against his own, and knew he should be shocked and appalled, but all he could feel was a terrible tenderness for this man. He allowed the kiss, refused to give it up when Doyle made the first attempt to break it, followed Doyle’s tongue with his own, exploring Ray’s mouth, coming to know it as well as he did his own. It was only when he heard himself groan, and that sound disappeared into Ray, that it hit him

what he was doing. Practicalities gave him something to do instead of look at Doyle, so he busied himself with getting rid of the condom and cleaning himself off, his mind boggling as he mopped another man’s semen from his belly.

How long would it be, a treacherous part of his mind wondered, before he would be wiping cum from his arse? A glance over his shoulder to find Doyle lying there wide open, staring at him. Bodie stared back, at the man he had fucked, and the man he had kissed.

“Lightning hasn’t exactly struck you dead, has it?” Doyle asked him gently, careful not to touch, careful to let Bodie be in charge of that for the moment. “It can’t have been all that terrible a thing.”

And didn’t Doyle realise that that was what made it all so much worse? It hadn’t been terrible—it hadn’t been so different from kissing a woman. Apart from that tenderness, apart from the way he had needed to kiss Ray. Not something he wanted to deal with. Not something he could ignore.

“Christ, Ray,” he mumbled, looking away, folding in on himself, “what am I going to do?”

Doyle rose up onto his knees, putting his arms around Bodie, offering what little comfort he could, wishing desperately that he knew what to say, that he knew what would help. Everything he could think of sounded like platitudes, and those were worse than nothing. He eased Bodie around, reassured when Bodie co-operated, didn’t fight him at all. “Come on,” Doyle said, pulling the duvet up over them, able at least to keep them warm, “we’ll sort it out. We’ll make it work.”

“Will we?” Bodie demanded, having to look at himself in a new light, absurdly, ashamedly wondering if he would recognise himself in the mirror, if the difference would show. Would it be worth it? Could anything be?

“My god, Ray,” Bodie muttered, turning away, curling up into a ball, “what have you done to me? What have you made me?”

And all Doyle’s answers to that were things Bodie would never want to hear, so he kept his silence, and kept his distance, and prayed that they would, somehow, make it work.

BEATING AROUND THE BUSH

Writers often take inspiration from real life, and unlikely as it seems, this little piece sprang from an ongoing situation in M. Fae's apartment complex. 'Noisy Neighbors' could easily be the story's subtitle: that's certainly what M. Fae has. And as for what those neighbors are up to, what Bodie and Doyle hear is exactly what entertains M. Fae every few days... (However, she does hasten to add that she personally does not use ladders for the same purpose!)

SPINE popping in noisy remembrance of just how many fights he'd been in over the past fortnight, Bodie sank down onto the settee with a sigh of almost pure relief spoiled only by the moan inspired by the achings in his bones and the protestings of his bruises.

"You know," Bodie said once he'd finally stopped both his stretching and his attendant ouchings, "I swear that OAPs are getting tougher every year."

"Why—the old dear that hit you have a brick in her handbag?"

"Brick? The way I feel," and his groan was as spectacular as the bruises left by someone's very irate granny, "it was the Great Wall of fucking China."

Doyle, himself about as limp a squashed cabbage and nowhere near as sweet-smelling, flopped down onto the sofa beside his partner. "At least all you got was whacked by Dickinson's granny. I'm the one that—"

"Got pushed into the canal. God, Doyle, you don't half whiff. Mind keeping downwind for the next month or two?"

Either because it wasn't worth it, or because those eyes genuinely were closed since Doyle had fallen asleep where he'd landed, there was no answer forthcoming.

Bodie took a good, long look at the cherubic innocence of that sleeping face, and gave his partner a hefty elbow in the ribs. "Can't you at least

have a bath? Or pour a bottle of Brut over that rat's nest you call hair? Here, hang on a minute," he muttered, leaning over, ignoring Doyle's now narrowed and exceedingly mistrustful eyes, "is that a bit of fish you've got in there?"

"Probably," Doyle replied, paying no attention to the purported fish as he batted Bodie's prying hands out of the way. "While you were having such a lovely little chat with Dickinson's granny, dear old Dickie was knocking me from one end of that bloody fish shop to the next. Surprised all you've found is one bit of fish—the sod tried to drown me in a barrel of bloody eels."

Bodie took one look at Doyle's expression and gave his joke a very hasty burial. "Poor old bugger," he said instead, doing a terrific job of keeping both face and voice straight. "Tell you what: you toddle off and have yourself a bath—a nice long one—and I'll nick round the corner and pick us up a curry. How does that sound?"

"Suspicious," replied Doyle, who knew Bodie better than to take such generosity at face value. "But a dream come true. Here," and he nearly gave Bodie a heart attack by reaching into his back pocket—a feat of quite mind-boggling physical dynamics—and not only taking out a tenner, but actually giving it to Bodie. "Get us a curry, bhaji, biryani and a couple of chapatis and anything else that looks good."

"And what am I going to eat?"

There was an answer for that, but Doyle wasn't

stupid enough to give it. “You can eat whatever you buy for yourself. But if it’s samosa,” he said, heaving himself to his feet and heading in the general direction of his bathroom and every aromatic potion he could muster, “make sure you get enough for me too, gannet.”

“Yes, sir, at once, sir,” Bodie clipped out smartly, executing the sort of salute his old sergeant major swooned over—MacKay had been a funny sort of bloke, actually, now that Bodie stopped to think about it.

“Yoo-hoo!” Doyle carolled less than sweetly and less than a foot from Bodie’s left ear, which explained why Bodie nearly wet himself. “I thought,” Doyle said rather loudly, as if Bodie were deaf as well as dumb, “you said you were going to pick us up a curry?”

“Not to mention half the bloody shop. Here, have you got enough beer in?”

“Dunno. Best check—unless you’re willing to settle for Harp? My dad brought me a case over last week, haven’t even touched it yet.”

“Oh, the joys, the joys,” Bodie declaimed over clasped hands and fluttering eyelashes, “of a daddy who runs an off-licence.”

“And if you don’t get on your bike, you’ll soon discover the joys of my boot up your arse.”

“Oooh, I love it when you go all butch on me,” Bodie fluted outrageously, camping it up even more when Doyle started turning all sorts of interesting shades in the interests of not bursting out laughing. “Be ever so nice,” Bodie winked this time and flapped a decidedly limp wrist just for good measure, “duckie-pool!”

That did it, Doyle’s choking on laughter having sweet and instantaneous revenge by simple dint of leaning on Bodie, who reacted, for once, in a perfectly normal, mature way: he took one noseful of Doyle’s eel-washed hair, turned tail and ran.

Sniggering contentedly, Doyle took himself off to the bath, letting the water run onto a couple of handfuls of some mineral bath salts left behind by some overnight visitor, a dusty bath cube unearthed from the cupboard under the sink, and the dregs of the Womble bubble bath he’d half-inched from his niece last Christmas. With a sigh of relief that was actually pure—a fact no doubt inspired by the absence of Bodie’s filthy mind, although Doyle had been heard to opine that Bodie’s mind was always absent—Doyle sank into the scented water, bubbles coming up to his ears, some of them even

braving the tangled web that had occasionally been called hair. Leaning back, letting all the aches and pains leach out of his body, Doyle was somewhat revolted to discover a bit of fish caught not by a hook and line nor even a net—not even the hair net he secretly wore to bed the nights he washed his hair—but caught by dear old Dickie smashing him into that tray of mackerel. Distastefully, he picked the bit up by the fin and with some twisting and turning that would normally require a rubberised spine in the average mortal, he managed to get it down the toilet. He gave another sigh of relief, this one even purer than the other, and sank completely under the bubbles, letting the water come right up over his head, which turned out to be a less than wise decision. Surfacing like a U-Boat in the surf, he scrubbed the stinging perfume-filled soapy water from his eyes, finally opening them just in time to see a slimy, black, miniature Nessie slithering and bobbing, not prettily at all, under his chin. The highly trained CI5 agent, who had faced terrorists, primed-and-ticking atomic bombs and George Cowley first thing in the morning, did what any sensible person would do: he screamed, giving new life to the old expression ‘like a banshee’, and doing new justice to ‘like a kangaroo’, as in to leap like one, the water heaving upwards with him right over the sides of the bathtub to lie in little pools, each with its very own range of bubble mountains.

Of course, highly trained as he was, it only took the now shivering, blue-balled Doyle only a mere second to realise the slimy thing was, in fact, precisely that: a dead eel. Or at least a bit of it, and Doyle wasn’t about to examine it closely enough to find out which end of the eel it was.

“Bodie!” he shouted, on the general principle that if Bodie could always manage to be there when Doyle needed to have his life saved at the last minute then the least the jammy sod could do was show up when it was the contents of Doyle’s stomach that were in such danger. “Bodie!” Christ, what a time for Bodie to turn altruistic on him and offer to get the food in—always supposing any of it survived without being devoured on the way home. “Where are you when I bloody need you?” he muttered, unrolling screeds of toilet paper. Gingerly, and that adjective is wisely chosen due to the fact that Doyle was up on his tippy-toes, he approached the thing in his bathtub with all the courage of Little Miss Muffet on her tuffet, although his hair probably sported more ringlets

these days, André having been a bit over-keen this last time.

Fortunately, Doyle was able to pick up the eel, whichever end it was, without touching it with so much as a finger, and without screaming—again—or being frightened away. The slimy black eel, complete with the soggy wad of toilet paper that had dripped enough to add a puddle or two of its own to the sodden floor and accompanied by Doyle's heartfelt shudder, was given an appropriate burial at sea—or in the toilet bowl anyway. With a fastidious wiping of his hands, Doyle gratefully saw the eel off, and then climbed back into his bath—having first made sure, of course, that there were no other denizens of the deep invading his own shallow pond. Satisfied that he was alone for the time being until that other, somewhat less slimy but still definitely as slippery, relic of this afternoon's tempest in a fish shop came back with mounds of Indian food.

It wasn't until he'd washed his hair for the third time that it had dawned on him that he hadn't warned Bodie just precisely, and in graphically gory detail, what would happen to him if said toad brought back anything even vaguely resembling sea food. Such as prawn curry or scampi, although what Sabir would be doing with scampi wasn't a thought Doyle wanted to dwell upon. A hammering upon the door interrupted his contemplations of scampi à la tandoor, Bodie's bellowing enough to wake the dead, so you can imagine what it did to a sensitive-eared fellow like Doyle. That's right, he was startled enough that the soap went flying out of his hands to land, unnoticed, in one of those little puddles with the bubbles afloat on top.

Needless to say, when Bodie came barging in to drag Doyle out of the bath, he went skimming across the floor to land, with a surfeit of noise and a complete lack of dignity, on his bum with his feet threatening to decapitate Doyle—which was nothing compared to what the rest of Bodie threatened to do as soon as he caught both his breath and Doyle.

It took a while, but Doyle did actually manage to stop laughing, although the mouthful of bubbles and scummy, shampoo-laden water probably had more to do with that than any compassion for poor Bodie's well-bruised bum.

It took an even longer while, but Doyle was finally out of the bath, hair hanging in rats' tails about his ears and his oldest, tattiest and therefore best-loved dressing-gown trailing from his shoul-

ders. Bodie took one look at this vision of sartorial, not to mention tonsorial, elegance, stifled a severe attack of the giggles, preened haughtily, and then beat the hastiest of retreats before Doyle could catch him.

In the living room, there was a flurry of plates and almost a cascade of biryani, as Bodie handed it to Doyle who thought Bodie was putting it on the table, and both of them ended up licking more than a few grains of rice off respective wrists and hands. With enough lager to wet the whistles of an entire band, enough food (and Doyle was more or less pleased to note that Bodie had refrained from bringing home a prawn curry, which was a bit of a pity because Doyle had some of his best threats already loaded and ready to go) to feed even a hungry Bodie for a couple of hours, they settled themselves down in front of the telly for a nicely undemanding night of goggle-box gazing and gob-stuffing. As the theme music finished, the programme (neither one of them could have told you what it was, Bodie caring only that it wasn't about pensioners and Doyle relieved that it wasn't about fish, alive, dead or tangled in his hair) just starting, there was a pregnant pause before the punchline was delivered.

The unmistakable sound didn't come from the TV set or either one of them, but they both heard it—for that matter, the dead in the cemetery up the hill probably heard it. It was instantly recognisable for anyone apart from the terminally innocent, and that was an epithet that could hardly be hurled at Bodie or Doyle. They were men of the world, or at least men of the local urban area, both of them rather quick to recount their exploits—suitably enhanced, of course. Coming from next door was nothing so mundane, boring, or amusing as that most favourite prop of farce and cheap hotel: the headboard banging rhythmically against the wall. Oh, no, not for Ray Doyle who always had had a talent for landing himself right in it. There was a resounding slap of hand on skin, followed by the muted roar of what could only be a man wearing a gag.

Most people would at least look at the person they were with if they heard that sort of noise, even the appallingly restrained English, and while Bodie and Doyle could both be accused of being English, no-one in their right mind would ever call them restrained. With the sound still echoing slightly, Bodie didn't look at Doyle and Doyle didn't look at Bodie. The pair of them sat there like ornaments on

a mantelpiece, staring at the television as if they were both absolutely fascinated by yet another summer repeat of *Dad's bloody Army*. In fact, they had both become even more engrossed, which had nothing to do with the unfunny series and everything to do with sound of another slap and a far more enthusiastic muffled roar of approval.

Captain Mainwaring was doing something on the screen that was supposed to be taken as terribly rude, but which paled, just the teensiest little bit, when compared to the rippling waves of sound coming from next door.

The next noise was that little bit louder, and sounded for all the world like someone getting a singularly good thrashing. Every single time the room resounded with the slap of skin on skin and the appreciative, not to mention incredibly loud, moans of approval, Doyle wouldn't look at Bodie and Bodie certainly wasn't going to look at Doyle. They sat there, still side by side on that settee, methodically working their way through the pile of Indian food, wading their way through *Dad's Army* and on to the next comedy (which most people tended to think of as the reliable and completely accurate evening news), their faces matching each other in a complete lack of expression. Now, given that these two were never quiet for more than two minutes at a time, given that they both hated the news and *Dad's Army*, given that both of them were bursting for the toilet, the fact that neither of them budged was enough to make any enquiring mind want to know why. Even ones of such apparently guilty consciences as these two.

Doyle could always use the excuse that he rode bikes—souped up motorbikes, of course, none of those namby-pamby little pedal-powered things for a tough man like him, or at least that's what he told the bloke who did his perm for him—as explanation of the fact that he knew what the next sound was, that duller not-quite-slapping sound of leather on skin, but he didn't much fancy trying to convince Bodie's legendary, filthy mind that Doyle had used profound innocence to suss out the perverted sexual practices of his next door neighbours.

There was another bellow, again not from the television, and then—silence. Still neither one of them looked at each other, although Doyle did shift uneasily in his seat and Bodie did check his watch as the silence stretched and stretched.

Well, that was it, then: they'd had their fun, had a lovely time, and were now probably cuddling

together, which meant that Bodie and Doyle could both sigh, and relax, and Bodie could toss—still not quite looking at Doyle, of course—a casual comment to Doyle about the crap on the telly.

“Yeh, 's all rubbish this time of year. I think they think everyone's outside enjoying all that summer sunshine.” It had rained every single day since Bank Holiday Monday, today being the first day without actual rain, one of those really disgusting, clammy days, perfect for not much more than making fish stink, a fact to which Doyle for one could attest.

“Still,” Bodie mused, spine bowing as he slid down the settee to rest his shoes amidst the mess on the coffee table, “gives us a chance to catch up to what's been on the telly, doesn't it?”

“Oh, yes,” Doyle agreed stentoriously, “and we must be grateful for small mercies, mustn't we?”

The Devil himself probably couldn't have mustered such a twinkle in his eyes. “Such as no longer stinking like a fishwife. Course,” one blunty-fingered hand tweaked a few still-damp curls, “there's still that striking resemblance—”

“Striking? The only striking round here—”

Was not, apparently, going to be Doyle fulfilling one of life's great ambitions on Bodie, but the neighbours, starting up again, and it was beginning to sound as if these blokes must have had a few megaphones lying around.

With the first sound, Bodie stopped looking at Doyle and Doyle stopped looking at Bodie, and both of them started staring at the blaring cops&spy programme unravelling on the screen.

This time, when silence fell, neither one of them was in any hurry to rush right in there and assume they were home free. Ten minutes, twenty minutes, half-an-hour.

Either it was genuine exhaustion, or it was disappointment that the floor show from next door had stopped, but Bodie announced he was going home.

“Fair enough,” Doyle said, not making the offer for Bodie to kip here, there being some rather urgent business for him to take care of. “See you tomorrow then.”

“What,” Bodie made rather a point of being appalled, “aren't you going to see me out?”

“Why, you lost again?” Doyle retorted making a point of matching Bodie in the appalled stakes, but he got to his feet anyway, traipsing along behind his still spit-and-polished partner, wondering how

the hell Bodie managed to stay so clean and pressed, and why anyone would want to even start out that way. "Here's the door," he said in his best *Watch With Mother* voice, "and here's the handle. I'm sure you'll be able to do this all by yourself next time." He actually tweaked Bodie's cheek, the one on his face, not his bum. "You're such a big boy now."

Bodie, never one to be outdone, said smugly: "Yeh, I am, aren't I?" and looked down at the front of his trousers. And promptly wished he'd kept his big mouth shut about his even bigger problem. Well, it was the first time he'd worn these trousers, how was he supposed to know they'd reveal a man in all his glory first chance they got—or first exposure to Doyle's new neighbours?

"So you are," Doyle managed to sound completely unimpressed, although he was having to fight the urge to cross his legs in self-preservation: Bodie was a big bugger, and given Doyle's proclivities, the very thought of bugger, and that big, in the same sentence was enough to make him reach for a bucket of KY. "And you can stop pointing that thing at me, Jake the Peg, and toddle off home."

"But then again," Bodie winked and rubbed his hands, succeeding in looking like the raddled old man from *Steptoe and Sons*, which was not a pretty picture and in fact threatened the reappearance of Doyle's curry, biryani and bhaji, "I might just pop in to see Claire..."

"Pop that in, and she'll probably explode." It dawned on Doyle that standing on the doorstep, discussing the size of his partner's cock was hardly the wisest thing to do, given that he and the other blokes had all moved in on the first of the month, that the racket had been going on, that the other blokes were smart enough to keep themselves discreetly from view right now, and that there were doors peeking open all down the hallway. Oh, great, he thought, shoving a very surprised, one might even say taken aback, Bodie back out the door and into the corridor, the door shutting firmly on Bodie's howl of protest, now they were all going to think it was he and Bodie making all that noise. Brilliant. He'd never be able to show his face in the lift again.

This time, their encounter had been with nothing more dangerous than stacked files, and although Bodie had a nasty papercut on his left pinky, they had survived the day in one piece, if

not unscathed, Cowley having been prowling the corridors like a bear with a sore head it was determined to share.

They were sitting blank-eyed in front of *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, at least, that's what Doyle had thought it was, but there was so much kow-towing and odd little bows directed to one of the upper boxed, and so much really boring crappy old stuff on, he was beginning to wonder.

"Here," he said, thumping his partner in the ribs again, which was always a most satisfying way of getting Bodie's attention, "I thought you said Rod Stewart was going to be on, with the Faces as well?"

"That's what Murphy told me."

A magic act, complete with the sort of fluffy white bunnies that always made Bodie think longingly of his Gran's rabbit stew, came on next, much to the applause of the lobotomised audience and the hoots and boos of Bodie and Doyle. Casting a jaded eye towards the screen—metaphorically speaking, of course, Doyle's eyes not being jade and Cowley not being the type to sympathise with someone half-blinding himself to protest what passed for television these days—Doyle made his decision. "This much rubbish—definitely has to be a Command Performance. See?" he said, the camera panning the audience giving him new evidence. "All them jewels, white tie and tails, sequined evening gowns—"

"And that's just the men."

Which was when those other men next door decided to start another session.

Funnier than the semi-slapstick, would-be comedy act on the screen, Bodie and Doyle sat side by side, not looking at each other. Then one would glance, look away quickly before getting caught. Then the other would do the same thing. They actually managed to keep this up enough to end up looking like the men's final at Wimbledon, until a particularly loud roar was followed by a very sudden silence. Needless to say, both their imaginations were running riot. A quick glance from Bodie, a quick glance from Doyle, the sudden resumption of life's little pleasures next door, and that was the recipe for two grown men dissolving completely into giggles. Not chuckles, guffaws, sniggerings or hilarity. Giggles. They'd be ashamed of themselves in the morning, or would have been, if any of their chums from CI5 had been privy to big butch Bodie and dangerous Doyle giggling like schoolgirls who

haven't yet moved on to bigger and better things.

The entire thing wasn't exactly helped by the next act on the telly, some bloke in black using a whip to crack cigarettes out of his assistant's mouth, the lash of his whip not even half as loud as the racket coming from next door.

Recovering somewhat, although his ribs would thank him to behave in a more adult, mature and less side-splitting manner next time, Doyle hiccupped: "But seriously," at which point Bodie started giggling again, setting Doyle off while next door there was something going on that seemed to involve a great deal of moaning, groaning, huffing, puffing and leather whips cracking. "No, no, I'm serious, Bodie."

"Yes, yes," Bodie plastered on his High Court Judge face, kept specially for occasions such as this and dressings-down from Cowley, "of course. The entire matter is of the utmost seriousness."

"Prat," Doyle said affectionately, thumping him in the ribs again. He nodded his head towards the wall whence came all those amazing sounds. "What d'you think they're up to in there?"

Bodie looked at him askance for that, or perhaps it was just that they were sitting side by side and he didn't want to risk looking at Doyle full on, not now that next door was shouting something about mounting and Bodie didn't think they were talking about butterflies or philately. "If I need to tell you, mate, then believe me, grey hairs or not, you're too bloody young to know."

Doyle looked at Bodie askance, which was hardly surprising: no-one ever mentioned Doyle's greying hair. Well, no-one but the bloke who put the colour rinse through it, but he was letting his mind wander, which wasn't a particularly good idea, given the way Bodie was looking at him. "No, it's all right," Doyle hastened to say, with a horrible sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that had absolutely nothing to do with the garlic toast and spaghetti bolognese he and Bodie had had for supper and had everything to do with being perceived as an innocent lacking in carnal experience: let Bodie think that and he'd never hear the end of Bodie's 'when I was in Africa...' stories with their insatiable women and rampant erections the size of rhino horns. Mind you, he still wasn't about to harp on about himself being older than Bodie and there was no way he was even going to mention the grey hairs that other people were polite enough not to notice. "Of course I bloody know

what they're doing in there—the Mother bloody Superior would know what they're doing. I was just curious about the specifics, that's all."

"Oh, the specifics," Bodie camped, fluttering those eyelashes again. "You mean what type of whip, whether or not they use a crop or a quirt, or sjambok?"

"Nah," Doyle replied loftily, refusing to be outdone whatever the hell Bodie's 'shambook' was, casually picking garlic-bread crumbs off his jeans, all the better to avoid looking at Bodie, "with that amount of sound, they have to be using a belt. A two-incher, I'd say."

Bodie craned round and looked at Doyle's crotch, then nodded sagely. "Yeh, two inches is about right. But never mind, little boy, when you grow up and your body starts to change, your little thing will start to get bigger."

If he had thought he could win, Doyle would have challenged Bodie to a ruler right then and there, but having not forgotten a single millimetre of what he'd seen the last time Bodie had been over, Doyle decided to let sleeping logs lie. "You'd be surprised how much it grows," Doyle opined, reclining back against the cushions as if he'd just won hands—or other parts of the anatomy—down.

There was a resounding crash from next door, enough to make these two tough agents wince and to make the man next door orgasm. Loudly, and in detail, and for once, with perfect diction.

"Taken the gag off, I hear," Doyle said casually, crossing his legs. It didn't take much to get him going, so it was no surprise that the carryings-on next door were having a very predictable, not to mention embarrassing, effect.

"Hmm, does sound that way, doesn't it?" Bodie agreed demurely, picking up last Sunday's newspaper and putting it on his lap to read, a ploy that failed miserably due to the minor detail that not only was the newspaper upside down, but he was wearing his good suit trousers which allowed rather more room for growth than was either wise or discreet. So much for thinking these were a better idea than the cream-coloured cords. Next time he came to Doyle's, Bodie vowed to himself, he was going to wear his brown gabardines, a long polo-neck, his three-quarter length coat and his cricket cup—but not necessarily in that order, of course.

Doyle, meanwhile, was beginning to put two and two together, what with Bodie's upside-down,

bulging newspaper and the last evening's delineating cords. "Here," he said, all bright eyed and bushy haired, "I've just realised something! About you, mate."

Cowley would have been most impressed by how well their infamous near-telepathy was working tonight. Bodie was just relieved: there was no mistaking that expression on Doyle's face, and there was not a snowball's chance that he was going to sit here and let Doyle say it. "Oh, look at the time," he said, not even trying to sound convincing, which was just as well considering how it came out, "and as our beloved boss would say, the night's are fair drawing in." Which was a lie, this being summer and the night's were getting like Doyle's patience, i.e. shorter. "I'd best be getting home."

"Course you should," Doyle told him, winking. "After all that hashing and bashing next door, I can see why you'd be in such a rush to get home. Need any help finding it?" Meaning, of course, the door.

Which meant it went without saying that Bodie misunderstood, blushing bright and ever so casually clasping his jacket at crotch level. "Thanks all the same," he said, standing on his dignity and a pea from last week's nearly dropped biryani, "but I know where it is."

Doyle, whose mind was probably filthier than Bodie's, caught on immediately. "Then you won't need to borrow my magnifying glass then, will you?"

"Course not," Bodie replied from the safety of the doorway, poised and ready for flight down the hall, "it's not *your* pud I'll be pulling, is it?"

It was Bodie's best exit line ever. It was also completely fellatious, sorry, fallacious, but that joyous event was for us to know about and them to find out.

This time, it was Bodie's new flat that was to blame. Some hideous office tower block stood between him and the BBC transmitter, resulting in broadcasts that bore a startling resemblance to Siberia in winter. Hence, Bodie got himself thence, inviting himself over to Doyle's to watch the *Old Grey Whistle Test*, never mind the fact that not everyone would consider it polite to turn up, unannounced at that, on someone's doorstep at eleven o'clock at night. Leaning on Doyle's doorbell, Bodie juggled the bags of chips and pickled onion that were alternately dripping vinegar down

his sleeve and burning his hands.

Doyle opened the door and, highly trained as he was, saw Bodie. "Beware Greeks bearing gifts," he said, stepping aside to let his partner in. "What're you after this time? Claire's brother find out you've been shagging both his sisters at the same time?"

"Duncan's a brain-dead twat who wouldn't recognise a shagging if it sat on his face," Bodie replied in a fine example of his breeding and background. "Wanted to see the *Old Grey Whistle Test* tonight—"

Doyle brought yet more of the Harp lager through, the bottle of tomato sauce balanced precariously on top, and when Bodie found out where Doyle had been carrying the brown sauce, that worthy would probably throw a fit. "What d'you want to see that for? Bunch of pretentious farts—"

"Just because the only taste you have in music is fucking *disco*—"

"It's not disco, it's dance music."

"Oh, yeh? And what's the difference?" Bodie grimaced as he rescued the brown sauce from Doyle's back pocket, but didn't hesitate to liberally cover his cod and chips. "See, you can't answer that, cause there isn't any difference—Abba, disco, 'dance', it's all the bloody same, isn't it?"

Not really, no, Doyle thought, 'dance' being what he heard in the straight clubs, and disco being what he fucked to in the gay ones.

"Well," Bodie said round a mouthful of too-hot cod, "apart from the fact that dance is the latest word so that people won't think a bloke's been hanging about queer clubs listening to disco."

"Oh," Doyle said lamely, stuffing a good-sized handful of chips into his mouth so he wouldn't have to answer, discovering to his dismay just how hot the damned chips were. Manfully restraining his tears, he mumbled: "I thought it was a musical difference myself..."

"You? Yeh, but you're stone deaf, aren't you?"

Doyle wondered if Bodie knew where this conversation were leading or if Bodie was just living down to his reputation of all brawn, no brain.

The familiar (to Bodie at least, Doyle having no time and not enough hearing left for Whispering Bob) theme music started, and Bodie actually shushed Doyle, who co-operated for once, mainly because he could hear odd, and really relatively quiet noises coming from next door. The usual

spanking noises were absent, and the roars of approval. All he could hear was a low murmuring and a creaking sound and maybe, just maybe...

"Oi, Bodie," he said as he turned the volume on the set down, "can you hear something from next door?"

Next door being synonymous with hearing things, Bodie gave Doyle a look and came over, turning the volume back up.

Doyle switched the set off completely, and grabbed Bodie by the arm. "No, I'm serious, listen."

Bodie listened, heard the same low moaning, the same metallic creaking, and under it, a low buzz that was probably some absolutely normal plaything, but which might, just might, be nastier.

"You don't suppose..." Doyle trailed off, verbally, not mentally.

"Look, just because they're not making their usual racket..." Bodie trailed off, mentally in his case, because there had been something said next door, something that sounded...happy.

"What the hell are they up to in there?" Doyle demanded.

"That, my old china," Bodie told him, steering him neatly back towards the sofa, "is none of our business."

There was a resounding yell of 'no!' from next door, and a very hefty thud.

Bodie looked at Doyle, and Doyle looked at Bodie.

They kept on looking at each other while the quiet from next door went on and on and on.

"What if something's gone wrong?" Doyle asked quite reasonably: funny how weeks of listening to someone having sex tended to make a person feel like he knew his neighbours.

There were more sounds coming from next door, dragging noises, the occasional thump and bump, which should have made a pleasant change from the tradition bump-and-grind.

Bodie shrugged, casting one last, lingering gaze at the television where he just knew Genesis were doing their thing right now. But then, next door might still be doing their thing and— "It's a brilliant excuse to find out exactly what they get up to, isn't it?"

Doyle grinned like a gargoyle but with far less connection to any church building. "We'd be like Boy Scouts, wouldn't we? Doing our bit for the community."

"Helping little old ladies across the road."

"Making sure our sadomasochistic neighbours haven't got themselves tied up in the wrong knots..."

"Boy Scouts always do knots," Bodie said, bowing his partner out the front door. "And if we're really lucky," he said just before Doyle turned the corridor corner, "they'll invite us in."

Doyle popped his head back round the corner. "For a spot of tea," he said with wide-eyed innocence.

Bodie nearly ruptured himself laughing—Doyle, innocent? Oh, that was a good one!

Being quiet as a mouse although considerably larger, Bodie crept round the corner, almost colliding with Doyle's bum. The rest of Doyle was in the way too, but it was his rear-end doing the sticking out, and Bodie very nearly availed himself of the opportunity to fondle his crouched-down partner. "Ray," he whispered.

No response.

"Ray!"

Doyle finally looked up from where he'd been peering through the letter box. "Can't see a fucking thing. Can't see any fucking either."

"That's what I was going to tell you. The window cleaner was here today, right?"

"How the hell would I know? I was at work, which is more than I can say for some people."

"I was working too," Bodie muttered, not telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth, going through a blackmailer's confiscated collection of compromising photographs not exactly arduous labour. "But I knew the window cleaner was here because he's left his ladder here to finish the job tomorrow."

"His ladder, did you say?" Doyle did actually say. "Outside, where we can put it up to the window?"

That chuckle should carry a government warning or an X rating, or both, Bodie decided, following his rapidly disappearing partner along the corridor and down the stairs. Doyle couldn't half move when he put his mind, and those long legs of his, to it. By the time Bodie was round the back of the building, squeezing between the parked lorry and the windowless side wall of the next block of flats, Doyle had already found the ladder and was trying to angle it up to the appropriate window.

"For god's sake, Ray, make that much noise and they'll hear you!"

"That pair? Once they get started, they wouldn't

hear the second coming unless it was one of them.”

“Yes, but we’re supposed to be spying on private citizens out of concern for them, due to the possibly dangerous change in their normal practices, aren’t we?”

“Oh, yeh, we are, aren’t we? Anyway,” between them, Bodie and Doyle had manoeuvred the ladder into position and Doyle was already scaling it like a diva rehearsing an opera, “it’s not as if we’re doing any harm, is it? Oh, my,” he whispered, and Bodie couldn’t hear the comment, could only see Doyle’s lips move and his eyes widen. “Oh, my, my.”

“What?” Bodie whispered fiercely.

Doyle just grinned.

Safety be damned: Bodie was up that ladder in two seconds flat, standing one rung below Doyle, clinging on precariously just under Doyle’s white knuckled hands.

Bodie peered over Doyle’s shoulder, looking in between the slats on the half-opened venetian blinds that weren’t blinding much from view at all. “Fucking hell!” Bodie breathed out loud, in genuine and awestruck admiration. “Would you take a look at that!”

“I already have,” Doyle whispered back, eyes front, fixed on the source of all that noise. It was definitely a blackroom, complete with festoonings of leather, everything from chest harnesses to the wickedest ball-stretchers that ever made a non-masochist cross his legs. There were whips and quirts and yes, Bodie saw, right there between the heavy leather belts and the ivory-handled cat-o’-nine-tails, was a beautiful sjambok. There were racks and racks of other stuff hanging about, but Bodie and Doyle were more interested in what was hanging about in the middle of the room. Two middle-aged men, one in full leather hood with mouthpiece, tit-clamps, English cage and ball-stretcher, the other middle-aged man naked apart from a very nice studded leather harness across his chest and the gleam of nipple-rings. The one in the hood was trying, with the very gentle help of his friend, to climb back into the leather sling that was suspended from the two-by-six attached to some sort of wooden support frame. The entire rig was ingenious, but obviously new, judging by the fact that the hooded man had fallen out of the thing, thus explaining the thud and the dragging sounds.

“Not murder, just mayhem,” Bodie murmured into the hair over Doyle’s right ear.

“Looks that way. Here, look at that! Christ, small

wonder we could hear it buzzing on the other side of the wall.” A long pause as they both watched, dry-mouthed, as one man slid that huge vibrator up the other man’s well-lubricated bum. “Ouch,” Doyle said quietly.

“Oh, sorry,” Bodie said, trying to lean back far enough that his erection wouldn’t be poking at Doyle.

It hadn’t been Doyle Bodie had been poking, but one of the ladder rungs. Bodie now having moved, the same thing could no longer be said. Well, it could be said, but it would be a bare-faced lie, and it wasn’t Bodie’s *face* Doyle was particularly interested in baring. “Getting to you too, is it?” he asked, moving his leg as much as he could, which was surprisingly much, considering he was up a great big ladder.

“Me too? You mean you—”

“That’s my Bodie,” Doyle whispered, “the articulate half of our team.”

“Yeh, well,” Bodie replied, forgetting to finish his comment as the unrestrained man in the room turned towards the window.

It was probably the fastest retreat in British history.

They neither one of them stopped until they were safely inside Doyle’s flat, door locked and the pair of them posed on the couch as if they’d never even heard of ladders in their lives before.

It was awfully, awfully quiet.

“Quiet, aren’t they?” Bodie said.

“Yeh. They are,” Doyle said. Another little pause. “I make more noise than that myself.”

“Do you?” Bodie replied remarkably calmly considering his cock was boring a hole through his underwear and his heart was thumping its way through his chest wall. “I’m neither one way or the other.”

“Oh,” Doyle said, realising he could take that anyway he fancied. He sat there, hands primly in his lap to cover his very unprim response, not looking at Bodie, trying to work out if Bodie’s little performance—well, pretty huge, really, now that he stopped to think about it again—on the ladder were just generalised lust for anything still warm, under fifty and willing, or if it had something to do with the fact that Bodie had been plastered against Doyle watching someone get a vibrator up his bum.

“So,” Bodie said, “you’re loud in bed then, are you?”

Next door, the neighbours had obviously

discarded the hood and mouthpiece, although that sling just might still be in use: something was being done that involved shrieks of 'ride 'em, cowboy' and someone bellowing like a bull.

"Yeh," Doyle replied as soon as the racket had died down. "Yourself? You said neither one nor the other?"

Bodie could feel the mood-spoiling giggles just waiting to rise as prominently as his cock: typical, he thought, the two of us sitting here discussing our sex habits the way other people chat over a cup of tea with the Vicar. "Well, you know how it is. Sometimes it's best to be quiet, and then other

times, I've been told I make more noise coming into the station than the Flying Scotsman—and no, they've never even met Cowley never mind given him any drugs."

"Fair enough," Doyle said ever so casually, pausing a minute as they both crossed their legs in response to the call for gelding that came bellowing enthusiastically from next door. "Fancy drowning that pair out?"

"Why not," said Bodie, grabbing Doyle by the hand and leading him off into the bedroom, a long way from gelding but hopefully only minutes away from mounting. "Save us a fortune on earplugs..."

WEDNESDAY MORNING

This sad little vignette is what happens when you combine old Beatles songs, BBC documentaries, and far too many hours being far too nice to far too many children. And M. Fae does not apologize. Oh, and don't forget your hankies.

“**SO** that’s it, then?” Doyle asked, his incredulity painfully obvious.

“Mmhm,” Bodie agreed absently, trying to decide if this shirt could serve another day before it needed washing.

“It’s just over, finished?”

“Finito, kaput,” Bodie said crisply, stuffing the shirt into the launderette bag, starting now on the aertexT-shirts he used for running and squash.

“You’re serious about this?”

“Never more so.”

Not one for pacing, Doyle was propped up against the wall, and to the casual observer, he would have looked relaxed, at ease. “You’re just going to leave, up and off, just like that?”

“No, not like that,” Bodie said sarcastically, doing his impersonation of Tommy Cooper, “like this.”

“It’s not something I think you can joke about, Bodie.”

“Yeh? Well, it’s a free country, you can think whatever you like,” Bodie told him, the last of the T-shirts sorted, starting now on the drawer where he kept his socks and underwear and gun harnesses. “But what you think doesn’t matter a monkey’s uncle. I’m going.”

“But you can’t just up and off—”

“And what’s to stop me, eh?” Bodie demanded, cruel in his unthinking haste. “Let me tell you, Cowley’s small print isn’t worth the paper it’s written on.”

“Yeh, but there’s more than just a contract to hold you here,” Doyle told him, fingering the clutter of after-shave and the calamine lotion left from their last holiday, when they’d gone to Guernsey and Bodie had spent too much time on the beach with him, fair skin burning quickly, Bodie’s discomfort putting a serious crimp in their plans to spend the entire week fucking their way across the Channel Islands. Sharp-eyed, face hard, Doyle glowered at Bodie, repeating himself that bit more loudly: “I said, there’s more than just a contract keeping you here.”

“Ray,” Bodie said, more with weariness than compassion, “I’ve already told you. There’s nothing at all keeping me here.”

“Not even me?”

“You? Oh, Christ, I don’t believe it!” Hands on hips, his packing interrupted by sheer astonishment. “You? All right, so we’re good mates, but it’s not as if we’re married or anything daft like that, is it?”

“I’m not trying to say anything like that. I’m just pointing out,” and he was also struggling to hold on to his temper, “that you and me, well, we had something...”

“What we had,” Bodie said crisply as he stacked the unwanted clothes into the tea-chest for disposal, “was fucking and friendship. Hardly something worth hanging around this dump for.”

“What d’you mean—”

“Oh, come on, Ray, look around you. England’s

finished, the sun set on the bloody Empire years ago, but half this stupid bloody island won't admit that. What is there here for the likes of me, eh? Rotten weather, a job that's getting nastier every day, doing the Government's dirty work—Christ, Ray, I actually went out and voted against this lot. And now Cowley's talking about promoting us—"

"Yeh, exactly. Better money, no danger—"

"You don't get it, do you?" Pitying, almost.

"I don't see—"

"You can't see the nose in front of your face, sunshine. No danger. That means no excitement. It means sitting behind a fucking desk, answering the bloody phone, pulling our forelocks to keep the bloody Minister happy. What kind of life is that, for fuck's sake?"

Doyle came nearer, standing beside his partner, flinching in pain when Bodie deliberately moved away, putting distance between them. "We neither of us are as young as we used to be—"

"What the hell is the matter with you? You're sounding like an old man, and you're not. At least your body's not. I'm not so sure about what's going on under that mop of yours."

"Yeh? Well, there's not a fucking thing going on between your ears, is there? Running away like a naughty schoolboy. Going off to see the world again, are you?" Vicious now, to hide the sting of tears. "Running off to sea again?"

"That's a mug's game," quietly, distantly calm. "I'm going to the Foreign Legion."

"Oh, yeh, the poor man's Beau Geste. The Foreign Legion? What the hell for?"

"Look at me, Ray," Bodie demanded, grabbing Doyle by the shoulders, shaking him. "Look at me. What do I look like? Even when I'm in civvies, what the fuck do I look like?"

Doyle stared at him, his eyes painfilled and painful to see. There was a yellow streak a mile wide in him, and he wanted to lie, to pretend, to break Bodie down and make him stay. But he straightened, stepped back. Told the truth. "A soldier. You always look like a soldier."

"That's right, Ray. That's what I am," he said fiercely, thumping himself on the chest directly over his thundering heartbeat, "in here, where it counts. And I miss all that, miss the family, miss the camaraderie..."

"And you don't have any of that here." Not a question, but an answer, one that Doyle would

have to bear, and with it, the sense of failure, the knowing that he wasn't enough. "So now you're going to where you can have it again, with a bunch of strangers..."

"Ray, don't carry on like this. You've never been a soldier, you've no idea what it's like. It's... just different from everything else, and some of us can't give it up."

"Oh, no, Bodie," Doyle said, his voice as small and bitter as his smile, "it's not can't. You *won't* give it up."

"Yeh, well..." He escaped into taking his papers out of his hiding place, not caring now, of course, either that Doyle knew that particular secret or that Doyle knew just how many passports Bodie carried.

"Can I write to you?"

"No."

"No? Oh, yeh? You can't fucking stop me—"

"You won't know how to reach me."

"I dunno, Bodie the Bastard Englishman, c/o The Foreign Legion, France, that should find you."

Bodie fanned the passports out under Doyle's nose. "I could pick any one of these, Ray, and you only know the name on one of them. Anyway, the Legion take away your old name and give you a new one when you join."

That was when Doyle did, actually, understand. "So it's not me. What you're doing is running away from you. A new name, a new personality, is that it, Bodie?"

"And what's wrong with that?" Low, vicious, dangerous, the sheen of civilisation dulling to show the self-honesty beneath. "I've done things in my life, Ray, things I hate myself for, but I didn't think I had any choice. So what's so wrong with me wiping the slate clean? I've already paid my debt—"

"But you've never been in prison."

Bodie had, but the experience in the Congo had nothing to do with atonement and everything to do with revenge and adding another dirty mark to his tally.

Realisation wasn't slow, not now that Doyle knew some of what was behind Bodie's tidy little façade. "You don't mean prison, though, do you? You're talking about the Paras and the SAS. CI5."

"Only CI5. The other two were what I wanted to do."

"So if you're such a fucking soldier in here—" Doyle jabbed him, stopping just short of doing real damage, settling for merely winding Bodie, "then

why'd you leave the Paras *and* the SAS both, eh?"

Bodie walked away, going through into the living room, giving Doyle his viciousness, sadly aware of whence it stemmed. "I'm surprised you think I left."

"With the way you keep on running away? I'd be more surprised if you had left."

Bodie ignored that dig, seeing right through it. "I was moved on because I was too good for them to chuck me without a second chance, and the SAS is a bit more lenient, as long as a bloke's discreet."

"And you think the Legion won't care?"

"I *know* the Legion won't care."

A long silence, made emptier by Bodie going through his books, leafing through them, separating them into piles, two poetry books going into his bag, an assortment going into the wooden crate, the rest going back on the shelves. "Don't suppose there's any chance of you tying up the loose ends now, is there?"

"You mean you expected to—" He glared at this man, the man who had been his friend for over five years, his lover only very slightly less than that. The man who had been packing when Doyle had come over unexpectedly, the job in Cornwall wrapping up a lot faster and messier than anyone had predicted. "You were planning on leaving me without so much as a by-your-leave, and now you think you can ask me to tie the loose ends up for you? What the fuck made you even consider something that stupid?"

Bodie twisted round to look up at Doyle.

"Because you were my friend."

Were. That was the only word Doyle heard. Were. Past tense. Finished. Finito. Over. He closed his eyes, holding the pain far, far inside, pressing it down the way he would to staunch the flow of blood in any external wound. "And if I hadn't come back early," if I hadn't come over here to make love to you because I had missed you so much, because I'd been so scared I was going to die yesterday without ever telling you I loved you, "what did you have in mind?"

"I was going to leave you a letter."

Doyle laughed at that, a tearing sound, raw and harsh and ugly. "Oh, yeh, that's my Bodie. Always keep your papers in order and don't forget to do your letters. What was my letter going to say, Bodie? Gone off to join the Legion, clean up behind me, your old pal, Bodie. Was that what you were going to give me?"

"For fuck's sake," and it was startling to hear pain in Bodie's voice, frightening to see the cracks showing, "what do you want from me?"

"I want you to stay!" Doyle roared, needing to turn away, needing to walk out of Bodie's reach before he either killed the other man or threw himself at his feet. "I don't want you to run away, and—"

Only yesterday, he'd been pinned down in the prettiest little cottage by the sea, two gunmen actively trying to kill him, the routine operation gone horribly, terribly wrong. "You never know the minute, Bodie, and I don't want you to die."

"And unless God died and you got promoted, what you want isn't worth a piss in the wind. We're all going to die—me, Cowley, you. All of us. It's just that some of us aren't afraid of it."

"I am," Doyle said with agonising clarity. "And you said you were, too."

"Yeh, and I've said a lot of other things too, Ray, and you should've known better than to believe me. You should've *known* better."

"Yeh, I should, shouldn't I? More fool me for trusting you, eh?" It was supposed to be a barb, poison-tipped and sharp, but all it did was hang Doyle's pain out for all to see.

"I'm sorry," Bodie said, too gently, so gently that it almost broke Doyle.

"What for? It's not as if you asked me to love you, is it?" And how bitter a sweetness to finally say it, and like this, the words framed in goodbyes. "Nobody's fault, Bodie, just one of life's sick jokes. You know," and he gave them both the gift of his smile, swallowing hard to keep the pain at bay, "I swear, when I die, I expect to find God laughing. Probably sharing the joke with Cowley as well."

"Probably." An awkwardness, with nothing to fill it but words that would be best left unspoken. "I'd better get this lot finished."

"Be for the best. Don't mind tying up the loose ends, but I'm not charring for you."

"Thanks, Ray," Bodie said, passing him on the way to the bathroom, giving him a friendly mock-punch on the arm. "you're a brick."

"Thick as one anyway," Doyle said when Bodie was gone. Slowly, he picked his way between the boxes, settling himself on the floor, unashamedly going through Bodie's bag to find the only two books Bodie was making room for in the one bag allowed him by the Legion. A paperback Oxford Book of English Verse, not very specialised, but

probably had enough favourites from enough poets to keep Bodie going. The other volume, very slim, hard-bound, the dark-blue fabric fraying at the dented corners. Of course. A book of war poems, Sassoon and Owen, Yeats and Whitman. Part of Bodie, that, part of him Doyle had never even thought about.

"Find anything interesting?" Bodie, from the doorway, sharply.

"As a matter of fact, yeh," Doyle told him, carefully and unhurriedly replacing the books. "Stuff I wish I'd thought about before."

"It wouldn't've made any difference. Honest, Ray, it wouldn't."

"I know, I know. Just all this's come as a bit of a shock. I though I was coming home..." He had to stop there, had to shove the pain a bit farther away before he could find his voice again. "And instead, you're leaving." He gave Bodie another smile, his anger having no place here, where there really was no-one to blame, only two people whose needs were as different as night and day. "Don't look so worried, I'm not going to have a fit of the vapours or throw myself off the balcony."

Bodie was fumbling around, putting toiletries in his kit, an amazing amount of stuff packed, thanks to that cherished military skill, into a surprisingly small bag. "I really am sorry," he said in the general direction of Doyle's left knee, whether because he didn't want to see Doyle's eyes or because he didn't want Doyle to see his, no-one had any way of knowing. But he was sorry, obviously had never intended to cause this much pain. Had known Doyle, perhaps, as much as Doyle had known him.

"Right," Bodie said a shade too heartily, squirming at the probable scene now that it was time to actually say goodbye, "that's that lot done. I...em...I'm catching the train down to Dover, going to take the Hovercraft over..."

"Wouldn't want you to mess up your plans, would we?" He hadn't intended to be so sarcastic, the bitterness showing through beyond his control. Quickly then, to cover up and to close the dam before it could all come spilling out, "So what goes where?"

"The crates go into storage at this address," a crisply folded piece of paper put into Doyle's hands, "and this," several large denomination notes, again crisply folded, "is to buy the lads a few drinks, have a bit of a farewell do."

Without the guest of honour. Doyle would give the money to someone else, let them handle it, he wasn't going to a fucking wake.

"The rest of the stuff..." Bodie looked around, shrugged. "Anything you want, help yourself. The telly and the hi-fi are bought," as if Doyle didn't know that, Bodie's opinion of HP well known, "and you like a lot of the records, of course. Anything you don't want, see if the lads could use, and just dump the rest."

"Got it," Doyle said tightly, making Bodie look at him, forcing Doyle to find another of his dwindling smiles. "Anything for the Cow?"

Of course, he thought, almost finding it funny. A letter.

"Just this," Bodie said, handing Doyle the white envelope. "All the other paperwork and bank stuff, all that's been taken care of."

Doyle did not say a word about how institutions warranted advance notice of losing Bodie when all that had been planned for him was a posthumous letter.

"So," Bodie said, looking around the room, "that's about it. I'd best be off."

Doyle couldn't agree, couldn't lie that much, not even for Bodie.

"Will you drop me a postcard, let me know you're all right?"

"Ray..."

"All right, all right." God, this was hard, it was too hard... "Listen, I know you left next-of-kin blank when you joined our mob. Do me a favour, and don't do that with the Legion?"

"Fair enough," Bodie said, beginning to realise just how much he must have meant to Ray Doyle, just how much love there must be there. "I'll put you down. Care of CI5, because we—you—get shifted around so much."

"Yeh, that'll be best."

"So that's it, then."

"Yeh."

"Look," Bodie began, clumsy, beginning again. "Don't get stuck on me, Ray. I mean—"

"It's all right, I know exactly what you mean."

"You should give Murphy a ring, he's a nice bloke..."

He should be furious that Bodie was passing him on like a borrowed book, but a treacherous gratitude was welling in him, that Bodie cared at least enough to try to set him up with a nice bloke, now that Bodie was leaving him behind.

Bodie picked his bag up, slung it over his shoulder. Stopped in the door for a minute. Nodded goodbye. Then he was gone.

The door slammed shut, and Doyle sat down as if his legs had been amputated. Around him lay the detritus of Bodie's belongings, the remains of the life Bodie hadn't wanted and he, Ray Doyle, was at the centre of it. At the centre of nothing at all.

Outside, the city was making all its usual noises, full of life and vibrancy, and along its streets, Bodie was walking away from him.

Alone, Doyle simply sat there for a long time, waiting until Bodie would be on the train. He started sorting through the unwanted bits and

pieces, his watch marking the time until Bodie would be at the coast. Moved on to the bedroom, stripping off sheets he'd lain on when Bodie and he had, or so he had thought at the time, made love. Cleaned out the drawer where they kept the lubricant, finding the photo of them that Doyle had asked some stranger to take when they'd gone down to Whipsnade that weekend, doing all that as he knew Bodie would be catching the Hovercraft.

He sat down again then, turning Cowley's letter over and over again in his hands. He didn't even have that much for himself.

Doyle sat there, alone, wishing he'd at least been brave enough to kiss Bodie goodbye.