

BENE DICTUM

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NOUGHTS & CROSSES

• M. FAE GLASGOW • HELEN RAVEN •
• SEBASTIAN •

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BENE DICTUM: NOUGHTS & CROSSES

PROFESSIONALS SLASH FICTION

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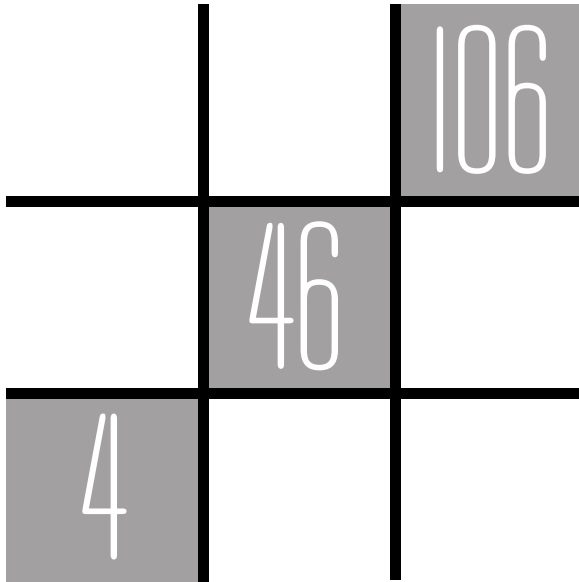
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The fiction word count for BENE DICTUM: NOUGHTS & CROSSES is 124,793
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WONDERFUL TONIGHT
SEBASTIAN

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE
M. FAE GLASGOW

THE SAME RIVER
HELEN RAVEN

FROM FILLING IN THE CRACKS TO REBUILDING THE WHOLE STRUCTURE

How is it that a mediocre T.V. show—from the '70s!—can inspire such passionate, fine writing all these years later? And the fiction within the covers of this zine certainly is fine. But really, look at the facts: The Professionals was rather your standard action show (perhaps disturbing to the British public for its casual depiction of guns and its peppering of Americanisms throughout the dialogue, but only a mild “Brit Starsky and Hutch” to Americans). The plots were predictable, the settings trite, and as for character development—were the leads any changed at the end of the series? Hardly.

Still, The Professionals struck a deep and abiding chord with slash fans. We can write tomes expanding on the slightest gestures or throwaway lines. And as for character development—well, this is where slash writing excels. The Bodies and Doyles in this zine have broken free of their one-hour, no-change-allowed format. They have real relationships, they exist outside of any particular job they're on, and the things they do and say today affect them months later. Not only have our three authors filled in the cracks to tell us what the T.V. program never came close to saying, but they have worked at rebuilding the place, giving a more rounded, detailed look at one of our favorite fictional universes.

What kinds of stories will you find in Noughts & Crosses? Emotionally involving and entangling ones. Sweetness and light? Well, the rich, bitter-tinged sweetness of dark chocolate and coffee. The almond not of amaretto but of cyanide. And if you're a reader who believes first and foremost that slash equals romance, then perhaps you should look elsewhere. These pieces do not deal with romance—love yes, but romance no. Some end happily and others do not.

I'd also like to say a few words about the title and the authors themselves. All three hail originally from the U.K., although the Scot has, like many of her defiantly, independent people, fled to sunnier climes. All three writers are known for producing controversial, disturbing stories that delve into the psychology of their characters. Readers seem to adore their work or loathe it. I adore it and that's why I am so pleased to have the three of them here together. And the title? Noughts & Crosses is the UKish term for a game Americans know better as:

TIC — TAC — TOE

Three in a row.

Helen Raven

M. Fae Glasgow

Sebastian

Editorial Lament: There seems to be some sort of fundamental difference in the way I, an American, would (given free rein) punctuate these stories and the way the authors have done so. The punctuation ranges from interesting to idiosyncratic. And how, I ask you, how could Sebastian's work be changed? Her punctuation—and spelling—may be unorthodox, but they work. I yield.

SEBASTIAN

PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS

M. FAE
GLASGOW

PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS

HELEN
RAVEN

THE SAME RIVER

The original working title of this story was quite different from the final version: too blatant, too brittle, too cold. Helen debated what to change it to, and I, of course, had my favorite candidates. No, she said, your choice is not quite right, it's too revealing also. We'll call it The Same River. And you know something? She was right. It strikes just the right note, for flowing water casts a strong vision: inexorable, persistent movement along the river's course joining more water until it reaches the sea only to return to the sky and repeat the cycle again. But I think you will find that The Same River has other pervasive images and moods. There is an enduring sadness and quietness to the piece. Perhaps we should have called it Melancholia. No, don't make the mistake of expecting heart and flowers, sweetness and light, fast-paced action, or even cozy domesticity. This is a world of gloomy, overcast days where just as the clouds begin to break, night's bleak darkness overtakes it all.

Late-summer 1988,
approximately five years after "Graveyard"

"WELL, WELL. RAY DOYLE WITH REQUISITION FORM M23. CAN IT BE THAT TIME OF year already?"

"Gotta keep up with the trends, John. Can't be seen with an outdated model. Man's got a reputation to think about." Doyle leaned lightly against the counter and pushed the form towards the mechanic.

"You wear 'em out, more like. I know you lot. Precision machine and you send it to the chippy in the rain."

Doyle snorted, imagining the reaction at his local take-away, and waited while Edgely checked against a list sellotaped to the wall, and then wielded a rapid biro. "So what have you got for me this time?"

"Oh, a beaut, sir, a beaut." Lifting the hinged counter: "Come right this way to the luxury showroom."

Each workshop they passed was filled with light, the smell of oil, and the hiss of hydraulics. "Busy today?"

"We've got a refit-program on the knees. Supposed to reduce the stresses when the loading's off-centre."

"Shame. Shearing-failure was always good for a few days off."

The warehouse-area was deep in the basement. The word was that the designers had taken the specifications for a high-security prison and multiplied them by ten. The guard checked Doyle's I.D. and then shut him away out of sight of the complicated, two-man procedures for opening the foot-thick door. Released, Doyle followed Edgely down the dimly-lit aisles.

"There you go." Edgely stopped by one of the bays and flicked a switch set in the partition. "Fifty-Twenty Four. Fresh out of the shrink-wrap."

The mechanoid was in low-energy mode, seated and slumped under the pull of gravity. Seen like this, they made Doyle think of the past, not the future: an ancient statue carved out of some grey stone, with the painted hands and eye-slit eerily fresh and black. He glanced briefly at the serial number stencilled above the bay, then addressed the bowed head, inviting the machine to share his grievance: "They knew I'd be

collecting you today. Did they think to warm you up ready? Did they buggery."

In turn, Edgely complained to the figure in the neighbouring bay. "This is one of those trainers I was telling you about. See what I mean about bloody prima donnas. You're best off in here, lad." To Doyle, with his best obsequious twist of the lips, "Shall I boot him up for you now, sir?"

Doyle returned a genuine smile. "Nah, I'll do it myself. Break him in. What's his password?"

Edgely knelt, unlocked a drawer set in the base of the bay, and passed a thin cardboard folder up to Doyle.

Overcast. *Where do they come up with these?* "Huh. Well, I'll be changing *that*." Standing directly in front of the head, he enunciated, "Fifty-Twenty Four. Overcast." A green light started to blink at the top of the visor. "Power. Up." The light changed to a continuous red, and a low humming noise started.

Doyle watched with his hands on his hips and his head tilted slightly. "Last Fifty-Twenty I had took about a minute. Don't s'pose that's changed?"

"Won't change till the next model. Not to notice, anyway."

Doyle looked at the mechanic. "Any word on that?"

"Just rumours. There's talk that they're moving up to a Six-Thousand, and they won't do that overnight."

"So what would—" Doyle broke off as a whispering of hydraulics announced that the sleek head was rising. It was his third time for this but the strength of the adrenalin-rush showed how far he was from taking it for granted. Breath held, he felt his pulse measuring the slow sequence as the line of the eye-slit centred on him, and then the small, inset oval that was the protective plate moved smoothly to the side.

"Not a bad-lookin' lad, is he? Would you call that a pout?" Edgely had the soul of a turnip—the adrenalin in Doyle wanted to pulp him with a single blow.

"Could be." Terse to the point of impatience. "When'd you last shave him?"

“Rick did the lot 'bout an hour ago.” Edgely had gone all subdued. Doyle made an effort to relax, to get back to the standard banter—if only to prove to himself that he could still cope with humans directly.

He turned to the other man and produced a wry smile. “All part of the job, eh? Bet it’s not what you expected when you did your HND?”

A snort. “Probably part of the course now. Five years time, *all* machines will have to shave.”

“Why d’they do it, John? It’s mad. Isn’t it?”

“Well, they have to put testosterone in the cloning-vats or the meat never goes through puberty, and you wouldn’t want a kid’s mouth stuck in *that*, would you?”

Edgely had no reason to know how very unsettling that image was for Doyle. “Yeah, but why do they mess about with the meat in the first place? I don’t think they even tried using metal for the whole thing, not even at the beginning. They’ve got it into their heads that a few pounds of meat instantly makes this beast ‘user-friendly’.” A brief glance and a harsh laugh. Too harsh, to Doyle’s own ears. “And lumbering it with a life-support system... Well, it’s mad.”

“They’re tekkies, Ray. It’s a challenge. Their idea of fun. That’s all there is to it.”

“If it’s so much *fun* let *them* come in each morning and brush its teeth.” The incomprehension was genuine, the resentment displaced. So much for his effort to relax. “Well, let’s take him off your hands. C’n you give me vision?” Doyle turned back to the mechanoid, looked into the black slit of the visor.

Edgely flicked another switch. The screen at the back of the bay made a spitting sound, displayed a few seconds of migraine, and then settled to a clear picture of Doyle himself, with Edgely in the background and green status-messages chattering above it all in the corners.

Doyle gave the screen a brief glance, then folded his arms. “Fifty-Twenty Four. Do you know who I am?”

“Yes. I know who you are.” Doyle winced slightly. He’d asked them to change the voices, introduce a bit of variety. How difficult could it be, for God’s sake? But no. The standard-issue mechanoid drone seemed to be here to stay.

“Who *am* I?”

“Raymond Doyle. CI5 Agent 6.1. Assigned as Trainer to Unit Fifty-Twenty Four.”

“Spot on.” In a lower tone, to Edgely, “It was Trent got one imprinted for Bancroft, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, January that was. Had to send him back. Couldn’t do a thing with him.”

“Hmm.” He raised his voice again. “Fifty-Twenty Four Overcast. Self-defence. Off.” The red light on the visor started to blink rapidly. Wasting no time, Doyle stepped onto the low platform, reached behind the helmet to pull out the cable that connected the mechanoid to the screen, and stepped back out of range. “Fifty-Twenty Four. Self-defence. On.” The light stopped blinking.

“I’ll go see to the door.” Edgely headed off down the aisle.

Left on his own, Doyle dropped the air of briskness, and stared at the mechanoid as he’d been wanting to. The body was the same as his last 5020, and not so different from the 5010 before that—compelling, of course, but by now he knew by heart the patterns of light on titanium and steel and latex. Maybe that developing familiarity explained the growth in his pre-occupation with the few square inches of a mechanoid that were harder to describe and impossible to predict. It was a pre-occupation he seemed to share with no one else, not even other Trainers. A human mouth set in a head of bullet-proof steel. Horrible. Beautiful. How could you stop looking? How could you resist the urge to touch, to feel the contrasts? Or to extrapolate the slightest individuality of shape or movement into an entire personality? Dangerous games to play.

Doyle’s absorption in the machine was broken by the sound of human voices: Edgely had reached the door and was dealing with the guard via the intercom. Time to start the lesson. He took a step back, lifted his gaze to meet the mechanoid’s. “Follow me,” then he turned and began the walk to the door. He heard the characteristic bursts of sound from the neck—the vision system tracking him out of sight. Then silence. Was he going to have to go back and spell it out?

No, he wasn’t. A chorus of hydraulic hisses from legs and spine and arms, and then the first thud on the concrete floor—a quarter of a ton of machinery in sublimely inefficient motion.

Doyle turned and waited while the machine caught up with him, then gave a brief smile. “Good. You realised what the command meant, and that it was directed at you. That was a good start.” One of these days he’d come up with a mechanoid equivalent of a pat on the head and a chocolate button.

By the time they reached the door, it was open. The guard formally checked the serial number,

formally made Doyle and CI5 take responsibility for the mechanoid's actions, and very formally obtained Doyle's signature three times.

On the way up to the ground floor, Doyle asked, "You gonna put me through the same routine to get a batch of day-packs?"

Edgely laughed. "He's getting worse, isn't he? Still...sitting there looking at them on the screens all day. What d'you expect?" They reached the reception area with its small store-room. "How many d'you want?"

"Make it ten. I've got most of a batch left at HQ."

"OK. They're in the usual place." Edgely busied himself with the associated paperwork.

"Do you know what one of your day-packs looks like?" Eye-contact again—or should it be 'visor-contact'?

"Yes."

"Fetch a batch of ten from the shelf over there."

Edgely raised his head to watch the moment when the machine lifted the substantial container—if it weren't for the adjustment of posture, you would have thought it no heavier than the cardboard folder that Doyle carried—then he went back to the paperwork. Doyle carried on watching. An experienced mechanoid would know that it was supposed to return to Doyle's side immediately, but 5020-4 was fresh out of the lab. The head swivelled through nearly 180 degrees to locate Doyle—an action impossible for a human. Doyle simply watched, neck aching in sympathy for non-existent sinews, giving no clue. A pause, then the body came smoothly round into alignment with the head, and the mechanoid walked the few paces to stand by its Trainer, who rewarded it with a nod and a smile.

"Seems a bright lad. D'you wanna sign for his rations?"

Doyle signed. "Thanks, mate. See you in a week or so." He headed out of the building and 5020-4 followed him.

The security procedures at HQ started at the front desk. Warned by Doyle, Crawford had a fresh log-book ready, but the procedures and signatures still took nearly ten minutes, with another five minutes to prepare a security card for 5020-4.

Once through the main door, they headed for the kennels in the cellar. While not built to the same standards as the warehouse at the central depot—the security on the building itself made up the difference—the local kennels would still defeat any safe-

cracker Doyle had ever heard of. CI5 had installed four kennels: Kennel A was reserved for the mechanoid under training, and Kennel B was currently assigned to 5010-12. Doyle doubted that there would ever be a time when all four were in use.

"The other packs are over there." Doyle pointed to the steel shelves opposite the chair (or 'throne'). The mechanoid looked in the correct direction but did nothing. Doyle waited. The head turned back towards him. Doyle sighed quietly.

"When I said, 'The other packs are over there', I meant that I wanted you to place the batch that you are carrying on the shelves."

A slight pause—Doyle always imagined circuits melting and reforming—then the mechanoid obeyed the command. When it turned round, Doyle had that impression of uncertainty, of questioning that he tried, as always, to analyse. Was the head tilted slightly to the side? Probably not.

"When I told you about the packs the first time, that was an 'implied command'. Humans use implied commands a lot. Did you think I wanted you to carry that batch around all day?"

"Humans are complex, varied and inconsistent. Sometimes they can not explain what they want. Sometimes they do not know what they want." The measured pacing made it sound like a quote.

Doyle grinned. "Well, that's true enough." Serious again: "But when we concentrate we can be rational enough and predictable enough to work together. And to work together well enough to build... Well, to build something like you.

"So it's best if you assume that there *is* a reason behind everything I do and everything I say. If I don't explain immediately, make guesses—I *know* you can do that—and if you need more information, ask for it. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

Doyle held up the cardboard folder, then pointed at the throne. "The seat of the chair lifts up and there's a storage space underneath. I like to keep this file in that storage space."

A pause, then slowly, "Do you want me to put the file in the storage space?"

"Yes."

The file was taken smoothly from his hand, the hinged seat lifted with minimal fumbling. It never ceased to amaze Doyle: the coordination, the problem-solving, the capacity to learn, the (occasional) appearance of spontaneity. It was indeed *the* British achievement of the twentieth

century, even if Thatcher *had* been the first to say so.

“Good. Very good. Next, I’m going to change your password and give you an alias so I don’t have to use your serial number all the time. Do you have any preferences for your password or your alias? Well, I know you *don’t* but try to guess what *I* might choose.”

A long pause. “Grey.” If the voice had been capable of changing tone, that would probably have come out as a question—maybe the 6000 Model would get there. A longer pause. “Testosterone.”

Doyle’s initial reaction was a yelp, then he settled down to helpless, knee-weakening laughter. It was well over a minute before he regained control over his lungs. “Don’t tempt me. Oh, God. To see their faces.”

“Did I make an incorrect guess?”

“Umm...” Doyle frowned and scratched his head. “Not ‘incorrect’ so much as...inappropriate. Or maybe *too* appropriate. Look, I don’t normally get onto humour this early, but... You’ve been taught the word ‘machismo’, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And do you understand the connection with testosterone?”

“Yes.”

“Well, how much machismo would you say you have? Going by the definition? A lot? A little?”

Pause. “A lot.”

“Right. On a scale of one to ten, you’re a twenty. And how much testosterone have you got?”

“None.”

“Right again. And those two facts in combination are very funny.” He waved a hand dismissively. “I don’t expect you to really understand this now. Maybe not ever. But humans make jokes—or see humour in things—a lot and you need to be able to recognise it so you can...ignore it. Anyway, if we used ‘Testosterone’ as your alias you’d never get any work done ‘cos every human you met would be helpless with laughter.”

“Do you want me to make another guess?”

The appearance of spontaneity. How *did* it work? “No, that’ll do. I like ‘Grey’. We’ll use that as your alias. And for your password...” A few seconds of studying the ceiling, then he addressed the mechanoid’s underlying security-system in his special ‘command tone’: “Fifty-Twenty Four. Over-cast. Change Password.”

<<State. New. Password.>> The security-system’s voice was, if anything, even more mechanical, and the mechanoid’s lips did not move. It was very eerie. Maybe the meat wasn’t such a demented idea.

“Guesstimate.”

Pause. <<Repeat. New. Password.>>

Doyle had to repeat the word twice before the system was satisfied that his pronunciation was consistent—not bad since he was always half-prepared for it to reject the change altogether.

<<Password. Changed.>> And the system switched itself back to normal operation.

“Grey, what’s the energy level on your current day-pack? Rounded to the nearest percentage point.”

“Eighty three percent.”

“Oh, plenty. Right, let’s go and get a coffee.”

On the way up to the rec room, Doyle took them into the central office, slid his marker to ‘In’, and asked Betty to make a label for 5020-4. Betty was still not used to the mechanoids and avoided looking at them whenever she might be in the field of view—it was a common reaction.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us to your new friend?” The most common reaction of all in the corridors of CI5. Doyle reflected that humans—*some* humans—were far more predictable than machines.

“Can’t you read, McCabe? It’s only written on him about twenty times. And he’s had the standard briefing so he already knows enough to want to avoid you.”

“So who am I, Mister Fifty-Twenty Four?”

The machine looked at McCabe and then back at Doyle and said nothing.

A brief nod from Doyle. “Answer him, Grey.”

The head turned again. “James McCabe. Agent 3.2.”

“See? They all get the standard briefing. Maybe one day you’ll accept that and leave them alone until they’ve had a chance to settle in.” At the beginning he’d had the same attitude as the rest of the lads—a mechanoid was the ultimate gormless newcomer—but the more he got to know the design, the more protective he became. It simply wasn’t *fair*, not with something that would never get its own back. Besides, he didn’t like conducting his lessons in public.

“Grey? Sounds like a professor.” Lucas. “What’s wrong with ‘Rambo’ or ‘Masher’ or—”

“Or ‘Frankenstein’? Proper names. You’re letting the side down, Ray.”

“His choice, mate. Don’t blame me.”

“His choice?” Lucas was not impressed with spontaneity. “Between what? Your hair-colour and your eye-colour?”

“3.2, tell your partner it’s not wise to insult a man who’s in sole command of a Model Fifty-Twenty.”

“Oh, Terry’s not bothered. He’s got a spare skull back home. And a couple of arms.”

Once they were on their own in the rec room, Doyle said, “You probably didn’t understand much of that. Lucas hasn’t really got any spare body-parts at home—McCabe was joking. And I was joking when I threatened Lucas after he commented on my grey hairs, on my age. People *do* tend to be sensitive about signs of ageing—signs that their body is deteriorating—but it’s usually presented as a joke, especially when the person is still fit, like me.

“When there are other people around, I will probably joke quite often about ordering you to hurt someone. Or someone else will. Don’t get the wrong...expectations from these jokes. I will probably *never* order you to hurt someone or even to touch someone. And if I ever do have to give you such an order, I will make it very, very clear that this is not a joke, that this is serious.” He lightened his tone and gestured towards the corridor. “So just ignore nonsense like that outside.”

There was about half a centimetre of grit-and-liquid left in the pot. If he had been on his own, Doyle would have made do with the despised vending machine.

“You know how to work one of these coffee-makers, don’t you?” Along with the standard briefing, there seemed to be a standard course (or memory-chip?) in basic twentieth-century skills.

“Yes.”

“Good. Get on with it. You’ll find everything you need around somewhere.” He sank into a chair and picked up the paper that had been left on the arm. French farmers and British lamb. Pages on the wedding of some actress he’d never heard of. Off-the-shelf outrage from politicians. Not the easiest job in the world, making this mess comprehensible to a machine.

“How do you take your coffee?” Grey had been standing motionless by the sideboard throughout the process of gurgling and dripping.

“Black, no sugar.”

“Is one of these mugs yours?”

“Not really, but if there’s a plain yellow one there, I’ll have that.”

Quite a sight: several million pounds-worth of lethal machinery, meekly pouring you a coffee. *Any* man would get a charge from that.

“Now pour one for yourself. We’ll take them up to

my office.”

Sitting in his own chair, Doyle said, “The chair by the window’s designed to take your weight. Lug it round to face me, and sit down.”

Doyle was sideways on to his desk, right elbow propped on it, mug resting on the opposite thigh. He and Grey looked at one another for over a minute. To Doyle, it never felt like being stared at.

“Why do you think I asked you to pour yourself a coffee?” Quickly, before the mug was more than halfway to the mouth: “That wasn’t an implied command to drink the coffee.” The mug was lowered again. “It was a genuine question. What do you think my reasons might be?”

Long pause. “Do you want to find out if I can drink the coffee?”

“No, I’ve found that out with my previous mechanoids. I know you can...ingest small amounts of liquid and solids. I know you have no sense of taste. Or smell. I know that you’d look bloody ridiculous drinking from the mug because the visor gets in the way. Think again.”

A longer pause. “Do you want to drink the coffee? Is it a second mug of coffee for you?”

“No, that’s not it. It’s not a practical reason, really. It’s connected to the reason for this whole training-period with me. Think again.”

Slowly, “You are training me to be human.”

“Well, that’s the goal, but it’s not realistic. You’re never going to fool anyone.” Probably confusing those circuits horribly, but it had to be said. After that, Doyle fell silent, wanting to see if Grey would recognise that the question was still in play.

“Drinking coffee is a human activity.”

Doyle had been about to give up. “That’s it. Good. That’s the reason. I don’t want you to drink coffee—that’s more trouble than it’s worth—but sitting there with a mug to play with is better than nothing. And ‘play’ is the important word. Humans tend to fidget. They like to have something to do with their hands or their mouths, and it makes them uncomfortable when another person is too still. Watch me, watch other people, and then try it out for yourself. I’ll tell you if what you’re doing looks unnatural, but I can’t really tell you what to do because it’s something that humans do unconsciously—I don’t know what the rules are, I just know when they’re being broken. A lot of human behaviour’s like that, I’m afraid.”

The head tilted forward to focus on Doyle’s hands. Doyle did his utmost to be unaware of the scrutiny

and to act as a normal fidgety human—in this he was improving with practice.

“How do you think I will conduct this training?”

Visor-contact again. “I think you will perform your work as a CI5 agent and I will watch and learn.”

“That’s probably how they imagine it in the lab, but you’re wrong. I tried that at first but mechanoids are just not suitable for the majority of CI5 work. You’re too heavy, too slow, too ignorant. So I had to come up with a different approach, and it seems to work well enough. Can you guess what that approach is?”

Pause. “You ask me a question. I give an incorrect answer. You explain the correct answer to me.”

A bright lad, indeed. How the *hell* did it work? And why didn’t all of the 5020s turn out like this? The old nature versus nurture problem? “That’s about the size of it.” Oh. Probably not in the dictionary. “I mean, you’re right. Well done. But I haven’t got a list of thousands of questions—I started one and it bored me stupid. Instead, we’re going to watch a lot of TV and I’ll ask you questions about what we’re seeing.” He nodded toward the left, and the shelves which held the large set. “Videos mostly, at first. I’ll give you things to read when I’m not here. And when you’re ready we’ll start dealing with real people directly, but that might take a month or more.”

He paused, and studied the motionless mechanoid. “Something else I want you to observe and copy—as well as the fidgeting—is the way humans behave when they’re listening to someone. You’ll see that they nod from time to time, and say things like ‘uhuh’ and ‘yeah’ and ‘really?’. If I’m talking to someone and they *don’t* give me that kind of encouragement—they just sit there like you’re doing—then I’ll think that they’re not really listening, or that they disagree strongly with what I’m saying. And that’s usually *not* the impression you want to give. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“OK.” He stood up. “Shift your chair round so you can see the screen properly. I’ve found the best thing to start with is... When you were in the lab, did anyone ever mention a soap-opera called *Brookside*?”

Doyle gave them a long break for lunch. He bought himself a sandwich and they sat in the park, observing and being observed. His natural inclination was to avoid being seen in public with a mechanoid, so rather than churn himself up with procrastination, he probably went for ‘walkies’ more than any other

Trainer.

It wasn’t that he was ashamed of the mechanoids—the romantic in him found their willingness and their dependence almost touching, almost brave—but the reactions of other humans could sometimes be difficult to deal with. The fear and disapproval he could ignore easily enough, since those people simply kept their distance. But he hadn’t yet found a satisfactory response to the conspiratorial winks and the “Awright, mate?”

It would be easier if he were comfortable about examining his own motivations. He’d composed a speech (never delivered) for the benefit of the winking morons: “Look. They’re not like that. And I’m not like that. I don’t work with this mobile hydraulic ram because it makes me feel like a master of the universe. I work with it because it can’t die.” A painful truth, but one with no blame attached, and at the beginning, when CI5 first contacted him, it had been the pure truth. It had not stayed pure for long.

They finally left the park when a child started to cry and refused to walk past their bench. Doyle apologised, got Grey to apologise as well, and on the way back to HQ he explained the principles behind his techniques for calming frightened humans.

By the time the second tape of *Brookside* finished, it was past five o’clock. “Right. That’s the end of my working-day. What’s the level on your day-pack?”

“Forty-eight percent.”

“OK. Enough for a few hours’ homework. I’ll give you some books to read in your kennel. See on the right up there? Take the first two volumes of *Classic English Short Stories*.”

A few minutes later, in Kennel A: “I’ll be in at about nine tomorrow morning. I want you powered up, fitted with a fresh pack, and shaved and clean by the time I arrive. You can do your own grooming, can’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Start with a new toothbrush and razor. You’ll find supplies in the cabinet under the sink. See you tomorrow.” Doyle locked the door on the mechanoid.

Doyle’s own evening was not that much more exciting than the machine’s. A slow drive home, a revival of the previous day’s meal, more time in front of the TV. He frequently felt he should be doing something more, but that was only for the sake of appearances. He was not unhappy. Not

positively unhappy. Just tired.

Because he was still in mourning for Bodie. Three years. Was that long? Unreasonably long? No one trod carefully around him any more. Sometimes he felt that most of the lads had honestly forgotten Bodie, had forgotten that Ray Doyle had ever had a different number. But maybe they took each new agent to one side and briefed him on what not to say.

Had it been a mistake to come back? He asked himself that about once a month. He had been...happier in Scotland. Eventually. Once past the numbness and the anger and the worst of the hallucinations—‘phantom-limb sensations’ would you call them? Less tired. Well, a different tiredness, easily explained by the life of a trainee chef in a restaurant that took itself very seriously. There had been moments when he had *known* that one day he would be truly interested in life again.

Back in CI5... Well, there were memories all around, of course, but a lot had changed when Jensen had taken over from Cowley, and the changes were what he noticed—consciously, at least. And despite what they’d promised—tempted him with—his work was completely different. None of that swagger and sweat. He could still have some of that if he chose, but it wouldn’t do Grey any good, and these days his competitive instincts were pitting him against the other Trainers—when an agency was looking for a mechanoid, he wanted their first question to be: “Have you got one that was trained by Ray Doyle?”

No, not a mistake. The mechanoids gave him many good moments—this time with them was probably something he needed, part of his recovery. Another year or so would probably do it, and then he’d get back to the real world.

The real world. When you were in CI5 it seemed like the unreal world, a shadow world. Even in his place on the periphery, he’d rediscovered that habit of perception almost immediately. So difficult to leave such a vivid life, to make the decision to step into the shadows. He and Bodie had never managed to make that decision, never talked about it, even after Mayli had presented them with such an easy way out. No, for them it had to be the hard way: months of pain and effort to get Doyle back on strength, and Bodie dead in surgery less than two years later.

Was it any wonder that he was having problems combining CI5 with a normal life? Especially this time round. “*And what do you do, Mister Doyle?*” “*Oh, I train mechanoids for CI5.*” Real bloody conversation-stopper. Once in a while he’d go out for a drink with

the lads, but that was hardly a bid for normality.

Still, he wasn’t unhappy. Or if he was, he didn’t want to make any effort to be happier. Contentment of a sort. Things would change soon enough. Nothing was forever.

The training proceeded. Grey was working hard, although Doyle felt uneasy about thinking along those lines since it led inevitably to the preposterous notion that the other two had been coasting. A lazy machine. Ridiculous. But Grey was starting to display human mannerisms (or rough approximations), making his way steadily through the books, and gradually making more and more comments of his own.

Several times, Doyle had been on the verge of saying, “You really do want to pass for human, don’t you?” Despite all of the off-putting aspects of the design, it was very difficult to stop yourself ascribing emotions and motivations to the mechanoids. Doyle frequently felt that he was the only person in the universe who tried to resist making the error. Britain’s comedians didn’t help: the craze had died down in the course of the year, but at the beginning no evening of TV was deemed complete without a portrayal of a neurotic or bashful or lecherous mechanoid. Particularly lecherous. Ben Elton’s contribution was undoubtedly the best (and most obscene), but it had increased the difficulties for any Trainer appearing in public with a mechanoid. For a while he’d been making a compilation tape—something for late Saturday night at the next Trainers’ conference—but before long things had gone too far. He’d never even watched the tape himself.

At the end of the work-day on the second Friday, Doyle said, “It’s time you got to see how humans live. You’ve never been inside someone’s home, have you?”

“No.”

“Well, tomorrow afternoon at about five I’ll come in and collect you and take you to my flat for a few hours.”

“Tomorrow is a Saturday. You said you do not work on a Saturday.”

“Usually I don’t. But I do think that this sort of visit is important, and tomorrow is the most convenient day at the moment. Anyway, it’s not going to be exactly hard work for me. I’ll just be doing what I was going to do anyway.” An automatic smile of reassurance, but the lack of response immediately reminded

him what he was dealing with.

His neighbours seemed to have got used to the occasional presence of a mechanoid at Number 33. Grey's arrival didn't go unnoticed, but the curtain-twitchers no longer summoned the entire family to gawp and giggle. In the early months he had thought many times of the CI5 house that had its own courtyard—that house would have spared him the walk from the car to the front-door. But that was strictly A Squad accommodation and these days he was practically Support—lucky to be assigned a flat at all.

"It's through here. There are two more flats upstairs, with civilians in them. I want you to walk particularly carefully. The floors here *can* take your weight, but dynamic loading doubles the stresses and it's best not to take any risks." Not that Grey ever did more than a steady plod.

"The rooms all lead off this corridor. This is the living room. The furniture belongs to CI5 but the other stuff's mine." Doyle knew that the flat was probably not the best example of a human home, not a cosy accumulation of forty years. "Most people have more things than this, I suppose. Working for CI5, you get moved around a lot. Packing and unpacking—it's a nuisance. You get into the habit of living simply." True, but not the whole truth. He was living much more simply than when he'd been 4.5. He'd started getting rid of his largest things while he'd been clearing Bodie's flat, having decided immediately that he could not continue with CI5. When he'd got the job in the north of Scotland—the far end of the earth, it had seemed—he'd discovered that everything in his life that was still important fit easily in the boot and back-seat of his car.

"And this is my bedroom. Again, the furniture belongs to CI5. You know that humans sleep lying down, don't you?" Grey had had a brief sight of Newson stretched out on the sofa in the rec room, but at the time Doyle hadn't had a chance to comment on the phenomenon.

"Yes."

There was little else to say about the room.

"This is the bathroom. Do you understand the purpose of everything you see here? Or do I have to explain the basics of human physiology?"

Doyle counted the head-movements as the mechanoid scanned the room. He hoped the 6000 Model would do something about the field of view—the bird-like twitching got on his nerves sometimes. With the thirty-fourth movement, Grey turned to him

and said, "I understand the purpose of everything I see here."

"Yeah?" Suddenly sceptical, Doyle leaned forward, took a Body Shop bottle from the shelf and held it up. "Bath oil. What on earth do they tell you about that?"

"Oil moisturises the skin, preventing irritation. Scented products provide sensual pleasure."

Doyle nodded and put the bottle back. "You've convinced me. Don't tell anyone I'm getting dry skin, though."

A few seconds later, in the corridor: "Why must I not tell anyone?"

"It's..." Doyle sighed, and frowned as he tried to analyse the potential embarrassment. With a mechanoid there was no such thing as a throw-away line. "It's partly machismo and partly basic human privacy. Men aren't supposed to pay any attention to the state of their body beyond basic hygiene—'take me as you find me' attitude—and most men wouldn't admit to finding dry skin uncomfortable or to going shopping for something to help with it. That's the machismo thing.

"Otherwise...you don't generally give information about someone's private life—something you've found out by visiting their home, for instance. The rules for this are very complicated and humans love breaking them, but to start you off... Only pass on information about someone if you think it's public knowledge or if you think it's important to your work and that people could benefit from it. If someone asks you for information, and you think it might be private, ask them to explain why they want it and how people could benefit from it, and only give the information if you are satisfied with their explanation. And check with me or your next Handler if possible. Can you think of any reason that someone could benefit from knowing that I get dry skin and use Body Shop bath oil?" It was a rhetorical question and he turned and continued the walk to the kitchen.

"If the human had dry skin too, he might benefit from using the same bath oil."

Doyle laughed, then smiled up at the mechanoid. It was *fun* dealing with an unformed mind. Like being a parent but without the sleepless nights and the tantrums. "Yes, but is that relevant to CI5 work? To any work you're likely to end up doing?"

Pause. "No."

"OK. This is the kitchen. A lot of flats in London have small kitchens, especially in houses that weren't designed as flats but have been converted later. I'll be

making myself a meal soon. Getting you to help me. What have you ingested in the lab? Any solids? They teach you to swallow, don't they?"

"Yes, they have taught me to swallow solids with different textures and moisture-content. These included pieces of an apple, pieces of an orange, chicken-meat, biscuits—"

"OK, that's enough." He hadn't seriously been intending to give Grey any of the pasta or salad. What was the point?

"And the last room's... Well, it's a storage room, really, and that door leads out to the garden. I won't take you into the garden—mechanoids weren't designed to walk on lawns."

Back in the kitchen, he showed Grey each of the ingredients of his meal, explained where he'd bought them and the preparation required, and then made a start by putting the kettle on for the pasta. Later, he got Grey to chop the onions—one of his favourite uses for a mechanoid, since mechanoids couldn't cry and their hands were very easy to clean. When the meal was ready, he put everything onto a tray with a bottle of beer from the fridge and a glass.

"Carry this into the living room and put it on the table by the window."

Doyle liked to have music while he ate. His current favourite was a Jacqueline du Prè compilation, already on the turntable.

"Go and sit down in the armchair." Maybe it would be more educational if he let the mechanoid sit opposite him at the table, but Doyle preferred not to provide entertainment to passers-by. He ate slowly, his chair turned so that he could talk to Grey easily. Without any teaching-plan, he wandered between topics: music, du Prè, serious illnesses, mouth-ulcers among mechanoids, the sense of taste, national cuisines...

He took the tray back to the kitchen himself, put the dishes in to soak. The beer-bottle was still half-full. He topped up his glass, leaving about an inch in the bottle, then carried both over to the coffee-table.

"I want you to turn the record over and play the other side, but I don't suppose you know how to work a record-player, do you?"

"No."

"Well, come over here."

Doyle demonstrated the correct technique for handling a record, then put it back on the turntable and watched critically while Grey turned it over.

"OK. Then just push the arm until the needle's over the outer rim of the record. A bit more. And flick

that needle to lower the arm. That's fine. You can sit down again now."

When Grey was seated, Doyle held out the bottle. It was taken, but the arm remained raised and the gaze shifted several times between the bottle and Doyle's face, finally settling on Doyle's face. Even without the help of an expression, the routine said clearly, "What on earth do I do with this?"

"It's a prop. Like a theatrical prop. I want you to try to behave like a man relaxing with a friend. And with the shape of the bottle, you should actually be able to drink from it.

"Look, slump in the chair, like this. As if you were in low-power. Umm. Try letting your hips slide forwards a bit. Yeah, that looks more natural. And let's have your legs wider apart."

"This position increases stresses on the spine. The normal service-interval should be reduced." The textbook voice. Doyle smiled to himself.

"You'll survive. You're just a youngster. You can start worrying about your back when you get closer to my age. Now, rest the bottle on the arm of the chair and hold it more loosely." Doyle glanced at his glass to check quite how it was done. "Just use the last joints of your fingers. Don't have it touching your palm—that looks far too tense. That's it.

"And now we just sit and listen to the music. And every now and again we drink. And if we feel like it, we talk."

"This is a man relaxing with a friend." Presumably a question.

"That's right."

"Are you my friend?"

"Do you think a machine can have friends?"

"No."

"No, I don't think so either. Though I suppose a Trainer is the closest you can get." Doyle thought for a while about his duties as Trainer and the potential for comparison with human friendship. Absently, he took a mouthful of beer, then realised a few seconds later that Grey was copying him. He turned in time to see the bottle lowered smoothly to the arm of the chair—the level in the bottle was lower.

"Good. That looked fine." His broad smile of encouragement was, of course, not returned. The normal progression for the first evening, though slightly earlier than usual. "OK. The next lesson is 'smiling'. What do you know about smiling?"

"A smile indicates pleasure or amusement."

"Sometimes, yes. But sometimes it just indicates...goodwill. Showing that you're pleased

with someone. It's important between humans. If someone smiles at you and you don't smile back, they will think that you are actively hostile. You have to learn how and when to smile. Can you smile back at me now?"

Grey apparently couldn't. Doyle had expected nothing else—a mechanoid's mouth was controlled by either the speech-system or the ingestion-system, and you had to work with one system or the other to get the appearance of independent movement.

"The muscles you use when you smile like this —" He demonstrated a close-lipped smile, "—are similar to the muscles you use when you say the word 'me'. Just before you open your lips to say the 'ee' sound. Say 'me'."

"Me."

"Now just say the 'm'. Don't let the vowel out."

"M." Tense and quavery, but better than nothing.

"Not bad. Try it again a few times." Doyle watched the lips stretch and relax, stretch and relax. Was that a dimple? Or was it just a shadow from the edge of the helmet? No, not a dimple, but there was definitely something unusual—and appealing—about the way the meat flexed. He'd pin it down sooner or later.

"You've got the idea, but we need to turn the sound off. Now, you may not have used it many times before, but I know you have the ability to change the volume of your speech. I want you to turn the volume right down." He waited for a few seconds. "Have you done that?"

The lips moved silently.

"Good. Now make the 'm' sound again." Much better. Maybe over-eager, but certainly good enough to stop him making enemies. "Now turn the volume back to normal. Say something."

"Something."

Fair enough. "Now we're going to carry on talking as before, and when it's appropriate I'll smile, and I want you to smile back with as little delay as possible. It will take a lot of practice before your response looks at all natural."

Gradually, in stages, Grey improved. Doyle stopped having to remind him to smile, the number of spurious 'm' sounds dropped off, and the delay grew shorter and shorter. Even though it was the third time he'd been through this, it still astonished him the way the feel of the conversation changed. From now on it was going to be even more of a struggle to remember that Grey was just a machine—if you didn't know, you might take him for an over-

polite foreigner stuck in a protective suit.

"You have a nice smile, Grey." Serious, assessing. Pause. "How is a smile nice?"

"Well, tastes vary, but *I* like the way the corners of your mouth seem to be pushed inwards, as if you had a dimple just at each end." He touched the corners of his own mouth with his little fingers. "It gives an attractive curve to your mouth, makes your smile seem particularly...friendly." It reminded him of Bodie, but of course that was just one of those hallucinations. The most persistent hallucination. 5010-12's smile had reminded him of Bodie too, and that was how it had all started. His pulse suddenly speeded up, remembering, anticipating.

"Is your smile nice?"

"I've had no complaints." Brief pause. "Do you like it?"

Pause. "That question requires an aesthetic judgement."

"It does, rather."

"I am not designed to make such judgements."

"I know. I know. It wasn't a fair question. I'm sorry." He stood up, putting his glass on the table. "Grey, come into the bedroom."

He had drawn the curtains before setting off to fetch Grey. He'd never yet seen anyone using the path beside the house next door, but he simply could not take any chances. The living room, which would have been his natural choice, was out of the question.

"You've been taught a bit about human sexuality, haven't you?" Doyle was standing near the bed, Grey a few feet away near the door.

"Yes."

"Do you understand that humans...that men *need* regular sexual release?"

Pause. "I understand."

"I'm going to use you to achieve that release. I'm going to use your mouth." His heart was pounding, his cock swelling. "The formal term is 'fellatio'. Do you understand what I want to do? What I want *you* to do?"

"I understand."

"Describe the act to me." Partly for genuine confirmation. Mostly for the thrill.

"You will put your penis in my mouth. I will stimulate it until you ejaculate."

A flash-flood of sweat on Doyle's face, the least of his symptoms. He fumbled at his belt, shoved his jeans down his thighs, keeping his eyes on that mouth all the while, even as he kicked off the slip-on shoes—bought exclusively for these evenings—and stepped

out of his jeans. Grey's gaze had dropped to his groin almost immediately. There was no visible reaction to the first appearance of Doyle's erect cock—Doyle found excitement in the very indifference. When he sat on the edge of the bed, it was almost a collapse.

"Kneel here. Between my legs." Smooth, cold metal on the inside of his thighs. Oh, God.

"Turn down the volume of your speech system. Now, make the sound 'oh' and keep on making it until I tell you to stop. Good. Come here, Grey." Gently, with a hand on the back of the helmet, Doyle pulled the mouth closer. Closer. Onto his seeping cock. His eyes pressed closed and he made a long, beseeching sound.

Grey had no idea what to do, was exerting very little pressure, hiding his tongue. There would be other lessons. For now this was perfect. Perfect.

Doyle pulled with his hand, pushed with his hips, sliding all the way in. Grey had no gag reflex, no need to breathe—those facts could make Doyle salivate, but he had always tried not to act upon his knowledge, not to spoil himself for humans. Difficult sometimes. Very difficult. He didn't dare open his eyes and look down. His free hand found the edge of the opening in the helmet, then stroked slowly over the short distance of warmth spiked with bristles, wanting to savour the approach of the moment when he would reach the lips—the second, inner opening.

They were soft. Moist. Worth savouring. But that would have to wait, since now the slight brushes of his own fingers through his pubic hair were making him grunt and sweat and jerk his hips uncontrollably. He pulled Grey's head back a few inches, grasped it in both hands, and used the mouth until he came. It was perfect.

Gradually Doyle's breathing quietened until the only sound in the room was the ticking of the alarm clock. He came out of his curl around Grey's head, and pushed the head away.

"You can stop now." There was a trail of semen at the corner of Grey's mouth—as Doyle watched, it met the edge of the jaw-plate, then spread out quickly in both directions along the curved line where steel met flesh. "If there's any semen left in your mouth, swallow it." He thought he saw the throat flex, but it was never easy to tell. "Fetch me a couple of tissues from the bedside table."

He was gentle as he cleaned the mechanoid's mouth, and as thorough as he dared be—it was surely not wise to probe around the join-line. The lips looked swollen—used—even after they had been

dabbed dry. "Can you sense any damage to yourself? Did I use too much force?"

A few silent syllables, then Grey restored the volume of his own accord. "There is no damage."

"Good." He laid a hand briefly on Grey's upper arm. "That was fine. That was what I wanted." *Thank you.* He always had to stop himself from saying that, as if there were any possibility that the machine could have refused him.

"Go into the living room and put another record on. I'll join you in a few minutes."

Once alone, he sank backwards and lay with his eyes closed, sounding his nerves for the remaining echoes of pleasure. So easy to fall asleep. So easy. The muffled bass-line coming from the living room could be a heartbeat. So easy to fall asleep next to someone else's heartbeat.

His eyes snapped open, his own heart clenched. Grey. He daren't fall asleep with a mechanoid in the house. A mechanoid with barely any training. He'd lose his job. And there were some things he had to make clear to Grey immediately.

Less than a minute to clean himself and dress, and he was in the living room. Oh, it was the new Eurythmics album. Grey had been standing by the stereo surveying the shelves around it, as expected. Doyle crossed the room to join him, leaned against the wall.

"Why did you choose this record?"

"It was sticking out. I thought it might be one that you had played recently because you liked it."

Quite right, but Doyle wasn't in the mood for praise. "What did you do with the other one?"

Grey pointed to the floor at the base of the shelves. "I put it by its cover." The record was propped on its edge—it could have been worse but Doyle wasn't going to admit that.

"In future, put it *in* its cover. Like this. And put it back on the shelves with the others." In time, Grey would learn these good habits.

Bodie never had.

A brief but deep stab of pain at the disloyalty, at the memories. Automatically, he lifted his eyes to the snapshot in the cheap perspex holder. It was still his favourite out of all the prints he'd had made from Turner's negatives. Bodie didn't even seem aware of the camera, or of the hilarity a few feet to his right. Some chance of timing and light had recorded him with a look of solemn concentration quite inappropriate to his task of popping open a can of beer. Doyle didn't remember the party, suspected he'd given it a miss for some reason.

When he looked away, he discovered that Grey had also been studying the photograph. He wanted Grey to go away. He'd give him the lecture and take him straight back to his kennel.

"It's a CI5 party," he said impatiently, turning away from the shelves. "A few years ago."

"More than three years ago. Before the sixteenth of July 1985."

Doyle blinked, then stared at the machine. "What makes you say that?"

"William Bodie is in the picture."

"You recognise Bodie?" Doyle's tone was pure astonishment.

The latex-covered finger obscured Bodie's face for a second. "I think this is William Bodie, Agent 3.7. He died on the sixteenth of July 1985. Am I wrong?"

"No. No, you're not wrong." Abstractedly, Doyle wandered over to the settee and sat down. "But my other two mechanoids had never heard of him. What about... Fields? Does that name mean anything to you?"

"Roger Fields. Agent 3.6. Resigned."

"Uh. They must have changed the briefing. Put in agents who had left or died." He picked up the glass, tossed back the mouthful of lager—warm lager, not at all the chill distraction he'd been looking for. "But why? Do you know? Did they say?"

"No."

"Huh. Well, ask next time you see them. Oh, sit down." Grey sat. "Look, Grey, I am going to give you a very important command. You must not tell anyone that I am using mechanoids for sex. You will not volunteer the information, and if anyone asks you directly—even another Trainer or Handler—you will tell them that I have never used you for sex, and that to your knowledge I have never used any other mechanoid for sex. Do you understand?"

"Yes." A pause. "Is using mechanoids for sex like having dry skin?"

That sounded like the beginning of one of Ben Elton's jokes. Doyle bit back his laugh... "*An itch you can always scratch*"...and then realised that Grey had just set him up for the perfect explanation. He must remember that routine with the bath oil.

"Very good. It's exactly like that. Sex is one of the most private areas of a person's life. And CI5—or the great British public—could not possibly benefit from knowing what I do for sexual release. Could they?"

"No."

Doyle was remembering more of what he'd said earlier. "And I can tell you in advance that no one

will have a good reason for wanting that information. So if anyone asks, don't even ask them for their reasons, just deny it the way I told you. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"Good." He stood up. "I'll take you back to your kennel now. We're finished for this evening."

When he got back from HQ it was past eight o'clock but still light. He got another beer, turned the record over and sat in the armchair. But it was difficult for him to settle: he got up to change the record, he got up to pour himself a scotch, he got up to get his book from the bedroom. It affected him like this sometimes.

Finally, he fetched the photograph from the shelf and put it down on the arm of the chair.

It was nearly a year since he'd first fucked a mechanoid's mouth and his foremost doubt still lingered and would, of course, never be stilled: what would Bodie think of him for doing it? Sometimes the Bodie he conjured behind his eyelids was breezy and unconcerned. "*You get it where you can find it, mate. And have one on me.*" Sometimes disappointed and reproachful, the hurt in his eyes not something he would ever have put directly into words.

But if Bodie knew about the mechanoids, then surely he would also know how difficult Doyle had found it to be close to people since...since the 16th of July 1985.

Without any breath behind them, his lips formed familiar words: "You shouldn't have died so easily." A plea. A statement. There should have been a fight, a struggle. For God's sake, *he'd* managed it—it should have been a walkover for Bodie. A simple shot to the lung. Immediate call for help. And a first for CI5: paramedics in a helicopter. How easy could you make it? During his drive to the hospital he'd been wondering how to suggest to Bodie that it was maybe time for them to call it a day, move aside for the youngsters. Any worry he felt was simply habit. But as it turned out Bodie couldn't even manage to hang on for those few extra minutes that would have meant that he could have died with his partner at least in the same building.

It was hard to shake off the notion that Bodie had been in some desperate, headlong rush to get away. To get away from him. Stupid. Self-centred, too, to see the various workings of chance as a message for himself. But he wished—oh, so very much—that he had seen Bodie's body. That Bodie had stayed for long enough to allow him that.

At the time, it had all been the same stupefying disaster. It was only later that it had started to resolve itself into individual, piercing regrets. He shouldn't have let Cowley lead him away from the hospital like that. He should have insisted on waiting. It mattered more and more that he had never had that one last look, knowing it was over. It mattered that his last sight of Bodie—unconscious on a stretcher in the doorway of the helicopter—had been tainted with hope.

But he hadn't known. He hadn't known that Bodie was dying. He hadn't known that Cowley would appear on his doorstep the next morning, speaking of a mistake at the morgue, a cremation during the night.

He'd scattered the ashes immediately after the funeral, and he didn't regret that at all. The idea of the jar on the mantelpiece would have brought out Bodie's blackest, roughest humour—imagining the comments was Doyle's surest way of summoning the sound of his voice, and many of the comments made him smile.

Regrets were only permitted for events following the gunshot. It was his strictest rule. They'd had their time, and it had been a good time. To seek safety, to make promises and declarations... Possible, yes, but not for them.

The next Saturday he started taking Grey through his record collection. As far as he was concerned, understanding the difference between the Beatles and Bananarama was basic general knowledge and he wasn't having anyone laughing at his mechanoids if he could help it. More immediately, he wanted to teach Grey what was and what was not acceptable post-coital music.

In the bedroom he was—initially—calmer than the first time, with the patience to begin some serious training. He taught Grey how an "ooh" sound would tighten his lips, how a "luh" produced pressure from his tongue. He taught Grey the form that the second-by-second instructions would take when the sex was underway, and they practised for a while on Doyle's fingers.

Doyle was very pleased with Grey. When it was over and Doyle pushed his head away, he fetched the tissues and left the room with no fuss, exactly as he'd been taught. And the music which followed was Simon and Garfunkel. Doyle smiled and considered making it twice a week sometimes.

The third Saturday, Doyle fell asleep afterwards. A

light, cool touch on his hand brought him out of a dream that dispersed immediately.

"Agent Doyle. The record has finished." Another part of the previous week's training.

Doyle smiled up at the machine, drowsy and contented. Grey smiled back and Doyle's feeling of warmth increased. "Think you're going to have to carry me through. Don't want to move."

He shouldn't have been surprised really when Grey knelt on the bed beside him and leant forward to slide those big, hard arms under his bare thighs and his shoulders. He knew he should be protesting right now, explaining that he must get dressed first. But it was exciting. And...sweet—in its way.

No one had touched the backs of his thighs in a long time. Three years. The desire to be fucked hit him like a wave, drenched him. There was no strong arousal—he didn't recover quite that quickly—but he wanted so much to be covered, filled. Taken care of for a while.

He thought of Grey's hands, then squeezed his eyes shut and shivered. No. That would be perverse.

They were at the open door. "Stop, Grey. I was joking. Put me down. I have to put my jeans on first. People can see into the living room." It was gentle and clever the way Grey knelt and tilted him onto his feet, making the process no clumsier than stepping out of a chair. Maybe it was a skill they were taught in the labs, but Doyle had never come across it before. The warm feeling had returned, was evaporating that uncomfortable, impossible desire. Another smile for Grey, a pat on the breast-plate—he allowed the machine to stay while he cleaned himself and dressed.

"No, don't. I'll walk." Grey had started to kneel, arms outstretched. "My neighbours just couldn't cope with the sight. Oh, and don't call me 'Agent Doyle'. Call me 'Ray'."

The Wednesday after that, Doyle took Grey home with him after work. The following week, it was the Tuesday, and by that time Doyle had won (or lost) some lengthy arguments with himself.

"You've become very good with your mouth. Very...stimulating. I think you're ready to learn something new." Grey smiled spontaneously—a reaction to praise they'd been working on for about a week. "For a start, undo my shirt. They're poppers, not buttons. Just pull." Face-to-face, this was about as close as he'd ever been to a mechanoid. His nipples were erect—he wondered if Grey had noticed.

“That’s fine.” There was another popper tucked inside his jeans, but he’d deal with that himself. “Now take my jeans off. You’ve seen how I do it.” Grey knelt, and Doyle’s breathing grew rougher as the hands tugged and nudged. The material of his shirt rubbed against his nipples but he refused to give them any attention—there was much more than this to come.

“Please lift your right leg, Ray.” Please. A very recent acquisition, that. “Now your left leg, please.” All smoothly done, then Grey stood up again while Doyle was ripping his shirt open, shrugging it off, and letting it fall to the floor. It was the first time he had been completely naked in front of a mechanoid.

He lay full-length on the bed, his erection throbbing deliciously. “Come here. Kneel here. I want to talk to you first.” He beckoned Grey to his side.

“In your files on human sexual behaviour, was there any mention of anal intercourse?”

“Aaaaaaaa?” Grey’s mouth had dropped open in a good imitation of human astonishment—which he must have picked up from *Brookside* or somewhere. Shame he’d forgotten to turn the volume down first. Next time.

Smiling, Doyle said, “What’s the problem, Grey?”

“It is not possible.”

“Sure it is. People do it all the time.”

“Not with mechanoids. I do not have an anus.”

Doyle truly hadn’t expected that. It had never even been something he’d fantasised about. “No, but I do. And before you say what you were about to say... You’ve got fingers. That’s quite enough for what I want.”

Silence. Circuits melting and reforming?

Doyle took the tube of lubricant from the bedside table and held it out. “You’ll have to put some of this on your fingers before you put them inside me. Otherwise you could hurt me.” He rolled onto his stomach and spread his legs apart. His cock felt huge underneath him.

“Just put your index finger in at first. Go very slowly.” He heard Grey moving along the side of the bed, guessed from the distinctive sounds of hand-movements that the tube was being opened and used. The mattress shifted.

The lightest of cold, wet touches against his hole and a surge of heat into his cock made him gasp and jerk. The touch vanished with a hydraulic-groan.

“Carry on, Grey.” Two long, uneven breaths. “You weren’t hurting me.” Two more. “I’ll tell you if you do.”

The touch returned. A pause, another shift of the mattress, then a hand settled on Doyle’s buttocks and gently pulled the cheeks apart. Doyle clawed at the pillow.

The finger was so hard, so unnaturally cold. Dear Christ, why had he never tried this before? “That’s good. Oh God, that’s good. Keep going. Push it all the way in.” And what did this look like? How much would people pay for a single photograph?

“Now rotate your finger. Slowly.” Within seconds he was panting and shivering, and when something especially hard passed over his prostate, he cried out. The finger carried on turning. “Back the other way.” Urgent and barely articulated, but Grey understood and obeyed. It was nearly too much.

“Let me...” Gasping. “Let me get to my knees.” The few moments of pressure when the hand was slightly too slow in following him made him think that next time he wouldn’t give Grey any warning.

He reached down to grasp his cock—distantly, there was a split-second of surprise at touching warm, supple human flesh. “Now...” A great effort of concentration to get the command right. “Turn it backwards and forwards again. And keep on doing that until I come.”

Maybe Grey had time to see the spurts of semen before Doyle slumped flat. Or maybe by now he could tell from other signs. In the moments when feelings became distinct and before true thought returned, Doyle adored him for the stillness of the finger—it made the presence in his body a comfort to be savoured with the other pleasures, not an annoyance to be stopped.

It was several minutes before Doyle reached back to cover Grey’s hand with his own. “Enough. Pull out slowly.” Once he was empty, he rolled to his side and studied the mechanoid, smiling a smile of satisfaction all the while. Grey smiled back, his usual over-eager version. Doyle wanted to kiss him. But that was silly. Start on that, and before long he’d be thinking of Grey as his ‘lover’. You had watch out for that sort of post-coital nonsense. His smile broadened in amusement at himself.

“That was... That was great. Just what I wanted.” Suddenly curious: “Could you tell that I was liking it? A lot?”

“I?” Unusual for Grey, that false start. “I could tell that it was intense stimulation for you. But at first many of your reactions looked like pain. I know that my hands were not designed for anal intercourse and I do not think that the tissues of the

rectum are very strong.”

“So you were worried.” Was worry an emotion? Not a proper one, anyway. He’d let himself get away with that. “But I knew you’d be careful. You always are. And I knew you’d stop if something went wrong. I wasn’t worried.” He grinned. “It’s not every mechanoid I’d trust to shove his fingers up my bum. Damn-few humans, for that matter.”

“Which humans?”

“No one you know.” He was still happy. He was thinking of Bodie, and he was still happy. He should have done this months ago. “C’mon, let’s clean up and then have a beer or something.” It was the first time he’d let a mechanoid stay for more than half an hour afterwards.

It work, he kept on glancing at Grey’s hands and smiling to himself as his pulse infallibly speeded up. Grey noticed the glances and smiles very quickly, which did nothing to calm Doyle.

On Thursday there was a moment when Grey’s answering smile seemed to be impossibly knowing. Ignoring their location and his own common-sense, Doyle whispered, “Can you guess what I’m thinking about?”

“I think so. I think you’re—”

“Don’t say it. Tell me later. At home.” He’d meant to hold out until Saturday, but it just wasn’t going to be possible.

For the Saturday, he brought the time forward to three o’clock and on top of that arrived at the kennel more than fifteen minutes early. Grey was still in low-power mode—‘asleep’ some people called it. Doyle could have woken him up as he’d done on the first day, but instead he squatted down by the shelves and waited for Grey’s built-in timer to do the job.

At ten to three the humming noise started, and after that Doyle’s eyes were fixed on the protective-plate. He was going to kiss Grey today. He’d decided. Of course, it might not work, but look how he’d dithered about having Grey’s fingers in his arse and that was certainly working. The plate was sliding back.

“Hello, Ray. You’re early.”

“The traffic was better than I expected.” Not true. He’d meant to arrive even earlier. “Don’t mind me. Carry on as if I wasn’t here.”

He’d used to watch 5010-12s grooming sometimes, when he was still getting used to the whole idea. The routine hadn’t changed, but it was as if he was

watching each action for the first time.

“Let’s see that toothbrush. Oh, it’s got a few weeks in it yet.”

Grey made the business with the cotton-wool and the lotions and the lip-salve look quite matter-of-fact, as if there was no incongruity, as if there was no other way of keeping the meat clean and healthy. Which there probably wasn’t, really, but it was the first time Doyle had felt no urge to smile.

“I’ll get it ready. You deal with the old one.” Grey had been reaching for a day-pack. Doyle hefted it off the shelf and rested it on the floor while he broke the seal. Still kneeling, he watched Grey take off his breast-plate and disconnect the used pack.

“No, I’ll do it.” Today he wanted to see inside. It still shocked him slightly how much was exposed to view, how it was all crammed in there. He’d always thought scientists were tidy, that they’d have gone for neat compartments—but Edgely said that chaos was normal for an experimental system. He slid the pack into its cage, waiting for the click that meant that the connection had been made.

“What’s your level now?”

“I’m still on reserve-power. It should switch over in a few seconds. Yes. A hundred percent. Thank you, Ray.”

Doyle conducted the locking-process largely by feel, eyes busy elsewhere. Wires, most obviously. All colours and thicknesses, with great ropes of them coming down from the neck. Enough gaps to give him glimpses of Grey’s huge spine, of the armour-plates behind it. And dull-looking boxes, each in its own cage, each a mystery to him except for the disk-drive under the day-pack—they’d switched to 3.5” disks with the 5020.

“OK. Get dressed and we’ll be off.”

He led the way to the bedroom as soon as they got home. His need wasn’t particularly urgent—barely noticeable compared to Thursday’s—but there was nothing he wanted to do more.

Grey now had standing orders to undress him. Once naked, he pressed himself against the chill hardness of the machine. His fingers did not quite meet around Grey’s back.

“You feel wonderful. Can you feel my cock against the inside of your thigh? Can you feel how it’s getting hard?”

“Yes.”

“Put your arms around me. With your palms flat on my back. Lower. Now squeeze my chest gently,

like I'm doing to you. That's it. That's the right pressure." He closed his eyes and for a while thought only about the way his lungs were working against the still chest, about the way the pressure increased when he breathed in, decreased when he breathed out.

"Let go, Grey. And then kneel." He felt full of gentleness as he leant over the machine. Right hand on the shoulder. Left cupping the edge of the jaw-plate. "I'm going to kiss you, Grey. You should probably turn the volume down."

The mouth opened easily as he pushed at the jaw-plate. It was dryer than a human's but still slick enough to be welcoming, and the lips were moist with salve. The helmet pressed against his face from all sides, and the feeling was as exciting as he'd expected. He opened his mouth wider, and pushed again at the jaw-plate. If he'd thought about it, he should have expected the metallic clunk and the sudden resistance as he reached the plate's limit of movement, but later, when he was in the mood to analyse, he would be glad of his lazy imagination: the jolt of surprise was delicious. Breath coming unevenly, he explored the still tongue, the perfect teeth, the butter-smooth inner surfaces of the lips, wetting them all with his own saliva.

"Put your arms around me again. Around my waist. Yes." Held tight, he shifted his right hand to the back of the helmet, and lowered his head again.

Whispered: "You have a lovely mouth, Grey. I knew you would." Grey smiled and Doyle, sighing with pleasure, pressed close to touch the tip of his tongue to the corner of the smile, wondering vaguely if he was going to get bruises from the helmet.

It was going to work. "Later I'll teach you how to kiss me back." It was going to be wonderful. He ran the backs of his fingers along the edge of lower lip, following the curve of the jaw-plate, and felt Grey's head move slightly—almost as if he was pushing against the fingers like a demanding cat.

"Does it feel..." He paused, frowning. "Is the sense data different from the meat? Than you get from the machine parts of your skin, I mean. I'm wondering if you can understand what I feel—" He laid a finger on his own lips. "—when I kiss you." And then moved it to the machine's lips. "It's probably a stupid question."

"There is no difference in the sense data. The density of sensors is high, though. Higher than all of my machine parts except my fingers. With this density I can sense textures and I guess that you enjoy

the smooth textures."

Despite his best intentions, Doyle was disappointed. "I suppose that's what it comes down to." He wasn't quite sure what he wanted now—he should have kept his questions to himself. Time for a break. "Let go of me." He stepped back and stood for a long time looking down at the machine, a slight corrugation to his brow.

"Is something wrong, Ray? Have I done something wrong?"

"No. Nothing. I was just thinking." His cock was still partially erect. It was only a few minutes since it had been throbbing and eager. Against Grey's inner thigh. A pulse of blood and heat at the memory and he decided that he was in the mood for something. Something slow, with room for detours.

"Grey. I'm going to show you a lot more things that I like. Not all of them can make me come, but I don't always want to come quickly. You'll see.

"For a start, I want you to touch my nipples. This one first. Now, I'll show you just what I like." He turned so that he could place the fingers of his right hand on top of Grey's and then he started the detailed instructions.

They were stretched out side-by-side on the floor and Doyle was just starting to remember how they'd got there. His nerves hadn't had a treat like that in a very long time—they were singing with delight all over his body, half-convinced Grey's fingers were still dancing with them.

Grey was surveying his sticky, relaxed body—or so he guessed from the sounds of neck-movements. The sounds stopped and after a few seconds he opened his eyes, mouth getting wet as he promised himself a kiss.

It was his chest Grey was looking at, not his face. "I'll have a shower in a while. Wash it off then." He could locate the drops of semen by the points of coolness on his skin.

"You cannot wash off scar-tissue. Were you joking?"

He propped himself up on an elbow so he could look down at his chest. "No. I thought you were looking at this." He dabbed at a drop and held up the glistening fingertip. "Hadn't thought about the scars in..." He shrugged. The other mechanoids hadn't seen his chest and it was well over a year since any non-medical human had.

A black finger reached out and slowly traced the path of one of the worst.

"Haven't you seen scars before?"

"I—In my life-histories. Dougal fell off his bicycle and needed stitches. And there was an accident most harvest-times. And—"

"Yeah, OK, that's enough." He dreaded to think how many scars you'd encounter in five people's life-times, even the edited versions. Especially the edited versions. The finger had moved to another path. Doyle waited, shifting his gaze between the finger and Grey's face—the mouth looked unhappy, but he was damned if he knew how.

"You were shot by a girl called Mayli."

"That's right."

"You were in hospital."

"For months, yeah."

"You were in a lot of pain."

"Was that in the briefing?" He was surprised anyone cared.

Pause. "No. These are very bad scars."

"Nearly killed me." He raised his head. "See that bald patch there? And there. Burns from their jumper-leads. When they got my heart going again." Grey's finger stirred the hair without touching the small, shiny marks. Deep concentration. What was its circuitry trying to sort out? "Not a problem you have to worry about, mate. Bet there's not a part of you they can't replace in five minutes. They're probably growing a spare face for you right now."

"It's grown. I've seen it."

"What? Floating in a jar or something?"

"Yes."

"Christ!" His face twisted in revulsion, his body flexed away from the machine's. Theory was *one* thing...

Grey's hand dropped to the carpet and his head moved down and away from Doyle in uneven stages. He looked as if he was about to cry.

Doyle hated feeling manipulated. "Where the fuck did you get that routine from? 'The Martyred Child' as seen in *Brookside*? Or is it *EastEnders*? How often d'you think you're going to get to use *that* with CI5?"

A long pause, and then Grey looked at him. "I don't know."

"Oh, get out. Go to the living room."

Grey went.

Doyle's first plan was to take Grey straight back to his kennel but he started to calm down once under the shower. Of course, being foul to a machine was nothing to feel guilty about, but it went against the spirit of his job as Trainer. And his reaction to the face thing had been downright unprofessional.

Grey was standing in the middle of the room watching the door. He showed no reaction when Doyle came to stand in front of him.

"I'm sorry. You must be very confused. I shouldn't have behaved like that. I don't think you know enough yet to understand *why* I reacted that way but I'll explain as soon as I think you're ready. You didn't do anything wrong."

Grey was silent.

"I'm sorry, Grey. Really." He gave the fingertips of one hand a brief squeeze.

"What do you want me to do, Ray?"

It must be seriously confused. "Sit down. Let's see what's on TV. You haven't seen much sport, have you?" He crossed the room to switch the set on, and when he turned back he saw that Grey was sitting in the armchair stiff as that ancient statue, even worse than on the first Saturday. It didn't seem right to order him to relax—no more commands until the 5020 system had finished processing the last ten minutes. "I'll get us a beer. Can't watch *Grandstand* without a beer." A can for himself, a bottle for Grey.

Grey held the bottle as he'd been taught but didn't drink in all the time that Doyle was explaining the rules, history and culture of football—good thing the season had started since he couldn't have given the same lecture on anything else they covered on *Grandstand*. A lot he'd picked up from Bodie, or maybe 'with' Bodie. Nearly ten years'-worth of boozy Saturday afternoons in front of the box. And of course that was where it had started. Less than romantic, but he couldn't imagine it any other way.

"Come and sit here, Grey." He patted the cushion beside him. A minute later his own cushion tipped dramatically—he hung on to the arm of the settee while he re-distributed his weight. After another ten minutes of commentary he thought that Grey might be slightly more relaxed, but only slightly.

"What are you thinking about? Or are you too busy reprogramming yourself?"

"I must have done something wrong. You wouldn't have shouted at me if I hadn't done something wrong. But I can't analyse it."

"Nothing to analyse. Didn't they tell you in your briefing that I hold the CI5 record for yelling at people for no good reason?"

"No."

"That was a joke. It's not as if anyone keeps a score. But... Well, you said yourself that we're inconsistent, humans. Don't know what we want. I guess I've been on my best behaviour with you until

today.” Previously, he’d managed to keep it up for the full five or six months. “Maybe you should take it as a compliment that I’m treating you more and more like a human.” A wry smile, but who could tell if Grey understood the nuances? Definitely not, if you were judging by his answering smile.

“Oh, Grey,” Doyle sighed. No one had even come close to giving the Trainers guidance in this area, and until now he’d never noticed the lack. “If you were human I’d do something to apologise. Cook you your favourite meal. Drive half-way across town to track down some fancy white rum you’d got a taste for. But there’s absolutely nothing you want. Or I’d tell you not to let me get away with it, to wallop me one. But a clip round the ear from you would probably kill me.”

“Uuuuuu?”

Oh, no. He’d just made it worse. Another crisis in the analysis-software. He covered the potentially-lethal left hand with his own far-from-innocuous right. “Another joke. It’s true that it’s not safe for you to try to pick up humans’ methods of losing their temper. But that wasn’t the right way to introduce the idea for the first time. Let’s just watch the match, eh? I promise I’ll be on my best behaviour.”

“Always. Will you always be on your best behaviour?”

A sigh. “Very unlikely. But don’t worry about it. We’ll both cope better when it happens again. Now just watch the match. Drink your beer.”

Doyle was thinking of converting the storage room into a...well, a sex room. Get one of those futon mattresses. Easier on him than the carpet, and box-spring mattresses didn’t perform well when confronted with Grey. He was probably ruining the bed right now but Doyle couldn’t bring himself to care. And get lots of cushions for the times when he winced at Grey’s lack of padding—not during, never during, but afterwards.

“I wish I didn’t have to take you back to your kennel. I wish you could stay the night. But I’d never get the security clearance for this place.” And what possible reason could he give to CI5 for wanting it?

Grey said nothing. Slowly Doyle dragged the back of his hand down Grey’s lower torso, listening to the small clicking-sounds his nails made on the overlapping plates. When he got to the crotch, he slid his fingers as far around the curve as he could reach. Of course he had fantasies about a great latex-covered cock, rising under his hands. Everyone in the universe had had those fantasies in the past year. He’d

learned how to deal with fantasies since Bodie died—you just swallowed hard and carried on with what you had.

“Are you wishing I had a cock?”

He considered lying. “Well. Yeah. Not that I’ve got any complaints, mind.”

“You could buy a dildo and a harness for me. There are shops for that in Soho, aren’t there?”

Doyle felt sure his blush must have reached his toes and in his shock he yanked his hand away from the crotch. What on earth would Thatcher say if she knew just how thoroughly the scientists had briefed her miracle-machines? He had to clear his throat before he could talk. “Umm. Yes.” Another throat-clearing. “Have to admit I’d thought of that. But it’d be too dangerous. You’re too strong. Maybe if it was part of you so you could feel how hard you were pushing... No, it’s too dangerous. And like I said, I’ve no complaints.”

No argument from Grey. After about a minute Doyle slid his hand back between the massive thighs. They lay in silence. It was gone ten o’clock—long past the time they would normally leave for HQ. Doyle knew he should check the TV-listings, see what film they could have been watching in case Crawford was feeling bored and inquisitive.

“The humans you have sex with, do they please you with their cocks? With what they do with their cocks.”

A mechanoid showing curiosity about his sex-life. Definitely a novelty.

Again, he considered lying, but the truth seemed to bring such interesting responses from Grey.

“You’re the sum total of my sex-life at the moment. It’s been a while since I had sex with a human.”

“When you did, then. Did he please you with his cock?”

It was some seconds before he replied, and then it was slowly. “Yes, he pleased me. Very much. But he’s dead now.”

“It was William Bodie, wasn’t it?”

He had got to his knees and was staring down at the machine. “It *can’t* be in the briefing. Nobody knew. I’m positive nobody knew.”

“It’s not in the briefing. That was my first guess.”

Doyle lay down again, but on his back. He felt suddenly exhausted. “You’re a clever machine, Grey. Maybe too clever for your own good.” He didn’t know what he meant by that. Just something to say. He closed his eyes and turned his head away. Silence again.

The mattress dipped then recovered. Floorboards creaked and pistons sighed.

“I have made you angry again.”

He opened his eyes. Grey was kneeling in front of him. “I’m not angry. I’m sad. Thinking about him makes me sad.” With an effort, he sat up. “It’s time I took you back.”

“Do you wish I was him?”

“I wish everyone was him. But you’ll do for now. Pass me my shirt.”

He should have made sure that Grey understood that their conversation about Bodie came under the privacy rules. It was probably obvious to Grey, but Doyle worried about it during the night and he seriously considered fetching him again on Sunday morning and spelling it out.

But who did he think Grey was going to talk to in the meantime? He was the only person with the code to the door, the only person Grey was authorised to deal with. OK, there were overrides, but it would surely take more than a day to assemble the team that knew them all. He already trusted Grey—Grey’s software—with his career. Why this sudden fit of paranoia?

Because of Bodie, of course. Because he and Bodie had spent years being careful. Because he’d never, ever talked about it before.

He left Grey undisturbed. Monday morning would be soon enough. Besides, he was feeling very subdued—the aftermath of that exhaustion—and it would be better if he didn’t force company on himself.

Not so subdued, however, that he couldn’t plan for the time when he would feel livelier. The only furniture store that he knew would be open on a Sunday was the Habitat in the Kings Road so he drove there after lunch. To his surprise they did have a double-bed futon, and after some serious haggling (what use was the base to him, for God’s sake?) he left with just one mattress, six cushions, and a small standard lamp.

Maybe he should have got a screen to hide the stacks of boxes beside the garden-door. And the doormat looked very odd now the room was being used as more than an extension of the corridor. Still, with the lamp on and the ceiling-light off, you didn’t really notice that part of the room. Doyle was pretty sure it wouldn’t put him off.

The first month was over. Doyle reckoned that Grey

was about 25% reliable at recognising that a joke had been made—better than some humans managed, and good enough for launching him on his social career.

This part of the training took a lot of organisation and diplomacy. Doyle was quite (no, very) proud of the way he’d devised the approach but now the challenge was over and it was 80% slog and he had no one to delegate to. It wasn’t helping that the other Trainers were stealing his idea—unimaginative slugs—and were eating into the supply of potential volunteers. There’d been no actual poaching yet, but it had taken him bloody hours on the ‘phone when the Latchmere School dropped out and it was only going to get worse.

There was a pattern of sorts to their days, or at least to their weeks, but it got complicated. The diary-keeping at least he’d managed to delegate to Grey. Social-secretary to a machine—Bodie would never have let him live it down.

The early part of the morning was usually spent at HQ, starting with an hour or so in the rec room, followed by a session in Doyle’s office where they watched the recording that Grey had just made of events in the rec room. Almost every morning Doyle found himself making a comment along the lines of: “Look. There. Who’s speaking? Freeman. Who are you looking at? Me. You’ve got to show that you’re following the conversation.” Grey had once pointed out that Doyle himself was almost never looking at Freeman (or whoever) at these times: “You’re watching me there.” Doyle had replied crisply that that was his job, and Grey hadn’t argued.

Most of the meetings with the groups were in the afternoon or evening which meant that they had the main part of the day free. Doyle would drive them out to the quiet roads of Morden and beyond, and then hand over the wheel to Grey—the lab’s simulator gave the mechanoids a decent foundation but it only took road-sense so far. If the weather was good they’d stop for Doyle’s version of a nature ramble—“*That’s a bird. That’s another kind of bird.*”—and then Grey would drive them just a bit further back into town each time before Doyle took over.

After the last meeting they’d go back to Doyle’s flat and wrap up the day’s work: reviewing the recordings of the meetings, discussing Grey’s report on the current theme, planning for the next day’s meetings. Then they’d cook Doyle’s supper and spend a while in the living room watching TV, or listening to records, or playing some game (though Grey got too good too quickly at poker),

and talking, talking.

They always moved to the playroom at some point even though they didn't always have sex. Sometimes they'd just kiss lazily and Doyle would drowse for an hour or more in the cushioned circle of Grey's arm. For that, the living room would have done, especially as autumn progressed and he could have drawn the curtains without risk of comment. But for him the playroom had become the centre of his home. The very idea of it could make him hard if he let it, and he spent time there even when Grey was locked away at HQ.

It was becoming a daily ordeal for Doyle, leaving him there, closing the door on the sight of his watching figure. A parting kiss or touch might have eased his feelings of loss and irrational guilt but the security camera made that impossible. He never asked Grey what he did when he was alone in the kennel.

Given the extra time and attention that Doyle was devoting to Grey, it was not surprising that he developed more quickly than Doyle's previous mechanoids. By the end of September he'd passed his driving-test, and a week later Doyle called Cowley and arranged their first visit.

Cowley was living just outside Little Chalfont—at the farthest reach of the Metropolitan Line though that was probably of little direct interest to most of his visitors. It was a Tuesday evening and it took Grey nearly an hour to get them out of central London.

"Yeah, maybe it *would* have been quicker by tube but I'm not coughing up for your ticket, OK? CI5 gives us this car, they want us to use it. And what makes you such an expert on train-times?"

"One of the kids at the Pimlico. His gran lives in Amersham and he told me that—"

"When the hell was this?"

"When you were taking a leak."

"It wasn't on the tape."

"Yes it was but we didn't watch it. Don't you remember you said we didn't need to look at anything after Emma's knock-knock joke?"

"Oh. Well, all right."

A beige Volvo from the opposite lane made a bid for the nearest side-road in marked defiance of common-sense. Grey braked, Doyle leaned out of the window and swore at it. Teamwork. God, it felt good.

"Now, what have I told you about meeting Major Cowley?"

"Call him 'sir'. Accept a scotch if he offers it. Go over to the french-windows and look as if I'm taking

an interest in the garden, but I don't actually have to say anything about it. Don't mention the limp."

"Nothing else?"

Pause. "No." Clipped and definite.

It had been a trick question; Doyle scowled and fell silent.

Cowley had prepared supper for two, although he had not mentioned food over the 'phone.

"Of course, thank you, sir. I just hadn't been expecting anything." Never thought of Cowley as someone who acknowledged meal-times at all, least of all his agents'.

"Will your machine have a glass of wine? 'Grey', you said?" Cowley would speak to Grey eventually—Doyle always got the impression the man was half-convinced the mechanoids were a practical joke and he was resisting being taken in. And of course he was a past-master at ignoring people.

"Ah, he'd better not." The container in Grey's pack had a limited capacity, and Doyle had plans for when they got home. "You see, he *is* driving." The two humans exchanged a smile, Doyle showing his teeth.

Doyle knew more CI5 news than he had realised and it occupied them nearly to the end of the main course.

"He's coming along well, then, this one?" Cowley didn't even glance towards the far end of the table.

Nodding, Doyle said, "He's a gem." A momentary grin at his own choice of words. "Same model as the last, but... *Something's* different. Probably in the software. Or in what they teach them in the labs. For instance, he's not just been taught about CI5 as it is now. He recognised Bodie in a photograph. He knows the history."

Now Cowley looked at Grey, the quick, searching glance that could almost be his trademark. Doyle knew he would see it full-on in the recording later.

"Why do you think they did that, sir? Maybe they came to you when they were putting the history together?"

A Celtic snort of disdain. "You think they're interested in my experience, Doyle? In my advice? The first I knew about these mechanoids coming to CI5 was when I turned on the news. If they *had* asked my opinion..."

"I'd be out of a job." Doyle was smiling. They'd had similar conversations before.

A few minutes later, Doyle paused in the act of lifting his wheat-cracker and brie. "I'm starting to change my mind, though. About mechanoids in CI5."

“Because of this one?”

He nodded. “I think it *could* work like a real partnership. With the right techniques. The right adjustments. After all, the reason Bodie and I made such a good team wasn’t because we were the same. It was because of all the ways we were different. Well, Grey and me, we don’t *both* have to be able to climb walls.” A shrug. “I should have seen it before, but with the others... I didn’t *want* to be teamed with them. Six months was enough.”

They were both looking at Grey. “You remind me of the tram-drivers, lad. Though you won’t remember the stories there were in the papers when they closed down the lines. I thought then...” He shook his head then turned back to Doyle. “People, eh? They can get attached to almost anything.”

Doyle gave a short laugh. “I hadn’t thought of it like that.” Then he continued as if there had been no digression. “But if I do form a team with him, they’ll have to find another Trainer for CI5. Or stop taking any of the new ones. I can see them saying no just to avoid the paperwork. Though I think this team business *is* something that needs to be tested out in the long term. If the mechanoids are here to stay. If they’re not just another Concorde.

“What I’m asking is: will you back me up on this? Because I’m going to argue as hard as I can but... I’ve never seen any sign that they listen to a word I say.”

“Have you spoken to Malcolm Jensen yet?”

“No. I’m not ready yet. I want to walk in and hand him a proposal.” At Cowley’s raised eyebrow, he shrugged. “That’s what he’s like.”

“I’ll do what I can, Doyle. Send me a copy of this proposal. Then if you do need help, call me. But I can’t promise you anything, understand? When people stop paying you, they stop taking your advice seriously.”

Doyle grinned. “Oh, I don’t think you’re *that* easy to forget, sir.”

Not long afterwards, they moved through to Cowley’s study. “Can I offer you a scotch, Grey? You wouldn’t deny him that, would you, Doyle?” Doyle shook his head, smiling.

“Yes, thank you, sir.”

Cowley was aware of the practical problems that mechanoids had with drinking. The shot-glass looked like a toy in Grey’s hand.

“That chair has sat your kind before and survived.”

An implicit command. No problem at all to Grey by now. Doyle suspected that Cowley regarded

computers as a form of magic—the man had no appreciation of what must be going on inside Grey, saw no reason to be surprised or impressed. It must be an age thing.

The conversation finally became almost comfortable when they started on the subject of CI5: what it was there for, how it should be run, what agents needed to understand. Doyle knew that Cowley was perfectly content to conduct this part of the visit as a monologue and hadn’t bothered to prime Grey—the important thing was not to offend, and besides, pleasing Cowley had always been a black art. But Grey was doing beautifully: factual questions built to intelligent questions built to intelligent comment. And Cowley was obviously enjoying himself. Doyle gave a lop-sided smile into his tumbler, wondering how he might go about getting a retraction of that dig about tram-drivers.

“Yes, that Sidcup training-course taught me a great deal. More than it did most of the boys, I’m sure. You’ll have seen the photographs?”

“No.”

“Well, the full set has been archived, of course. Still top-security. But there’s one I kept back from the last day.” Cowley was getting up, limping to the far side of the desk, and Grey followed. Doyle remained seated—he’d see it on the recording. “You know my name for this picture? ‘Healthy Young Animals’. What a pack, eh? No, Doyle’s over there. They weren’t speaking for some reason. Can you remember why, Doyle?”

“No.” And he truly couldn’t.

“No. Anyway, by then I worried more when they *weren’t* glaring at one another.” They studied the photograph for a few seconds and then Grey was tilting his head back in stages. “Regimental photographs, I’m afraid. You’re not required to take an interest.”

“Oh, no, sir. I was in the army. In 2 Para. And this looks like Burma. I grew up in that part of the world.”

Doyle knew he should have cut in immediately. Grey still had an awful lot to learn. “He means—”

“Or I should say that one of the life-histories I was programmed with is a man who was with 2 Para. He died in the Falklands. And another is a man who grew up in Malaysia. His father was running a cocoa plantation there. I know they were just invented in the lab...” He turned to smile at Doyle, who finally smiled and nodded grudgingly in return. “...but I spent months, I think, looking through their eyes. They had to explain to me later that none of it was

real. And I'd be very interested in hearing the experiences of a fellow-soldier."

Smooth bastard. Doyle finished his scotch with a gulp then sighed, reached out for a magazine, and settled himself for a long wait.

"How about a drop more, lad? And what about yourself, Doyle?"

"Just a drop, please, sir. I'll have to drive home after I've settled him in his kennel for the night."

"Surely he wasn't like this from the start?" Grey had taken his glass over to the french-windows, leaving the men standing by the drinks-table, watching him.

Doyle snorted. "He was like... Well, you remember the day you sent Bodie to the Ministry. I know that assistant didn't help, but—"

"You've made your point. And I'll do what I can with Jensen. If it's necessary." He went to join Grey and they stood looking into the garden. The light was fading but the main features were still clear.

"You won't have seen real countryside, Grey. The whole of the island isn't like London, you know."

"No, Ray's started teaching me. See, there's a bird. And that's another kind of bird."

Doyle choked on his whisky. Maybe that waste was the main cause of Cowley's glare, more than the flaws in his teaching or the excesses of his laughter. With a struggle, he got himself under control. "I'm sorry, sir. But I think we've just heard him make his first joke. It's quite an occasion." Narrow-eyed, at Grey. "You can't imagine how pleased I am."

"Oh, I think I can." He took the glass from Doyle. "Now it's time you were off. And your hilarious machine with you."

At the front door, Cowley relinquished his severity. "Send me a copy of that proposal. And good luck, Doyle." Glancing back as they reached the end of the drive, Doyle found that Cowley was still standing on the step, seeing them out of sight—he raised his hand but doubted that it was visible in the dusk.

"How long have you been thinking about forming a team with me?"

"'bout a week."

"That was the first I'd heard about it." Grey's tone was, inevitably, perfectly even. Doyle's conscience imposed on it an accusatory rise and fall.

"And what the fuck's it got to do with you? 'less you've got some career-plans I should hear about?"

By now Grey seldom had trouble recognising a rhetorical question. He remained silent.

To Doyle it was unmistakably a defiant silence. On some level, he'd been rehearsing for this for months. "Say, 'Oh, no, I exist only to serve, Agent Doyle.' Say it."

"Fuck off, Ray."

Seconds of high, blood-surgingly shock. "What did you say?"

"I told you to fuck off."

"You can't *do* that."

No reply.

"You can't. I'm your Trainer. I'm a human. You have to do what I say."

"Not when you're behaving like a prat."

Doyle couldn't think of anything to say. Besides, he was painfully hard inside his tight jeans, heart pumping with anger, apprehension and sheer excitement. He wanted Grey to stop the car right now. He wanted the road and the cars and the houses to disappear so the two of them could fight this out in the only way his cock would accept.

His breathing noisy and rapid, his eyes closed, he arched his back and started to unzip his jeans. A grunt as his hand closed around the ravenous heat, the pressure from each finger a separate line of torment, clear as a welt. The other hand burrowed down to clasp his balls, and then both hands began to work.

"Wait." A light touch on the inside of his elbow. "Let me help, please. Let me pull off the road and find somewhere safe. Don't do that without me."

Raggedly: "I can't wait." His hands had not stopped moving. "And nowhere's safe enough." This was going to be very quick. "But will you say it for me? Please. Say what I asked you to say."

There was no hesitation. "I exist only to serve you, Ray."

Doyle cried out.

They were nearly at Harrow before he opened his eyes and reached into the glove-compartment for a tissue.

"Thank you, Grey." The first time he'd ever said it.

"You're welcome." Grey's way of saying that he'd noticed? "You were behaving like a prat, though."

"Like I said before, you should be flattered that I'm not on my best behaviour with you."

Doyle was half-expecting to discover that Grey had graduated onto sarcasm as well, but there was no reply.

"Are you going to make a habit of disobeying orders?"

"Are you going to make a habit of behaving like

a prat?"

"I'm serious. That's *never* happened before. Are you going to decide to ignore everything I've ever told you?"

"No."

"Then what? What part of your program have I stumbled across? Give me some clues."

"I'll only do it when you deserve it and when it's not important. For instance, I've decided that I'm not making you your coffee every day. Once in a while, but not every day. You're getting too bloody lazy."

Doyle wondered if he should contact the lab. Send Grey back for some tests. But they'd just take that Ph.D.-tone and say, "You mean you weren't expecting him to do that? But surely it's obvious that when you take Program X and Chip Y..." Or they'd tinker with the program. And despite his continuing apprehension, he didn't want anyone else interfering. This was between him and Grey.

"What about...personal privacy? Are you going to decide to tell someone what we do in the playroom? Is that—"

"Of course not. I know that's important. I'd never involve anyone else. And I'll never disobey you when someone else is there."

Doyle had relaxed. He grinned and broached the topic he'd meant to bring up as soon as they'd got on the main road. "No, you'll just make a fool of me in front of Cowley. 'And that's another kind of bird.' You sod."

"I wasn't making a joke, Ray. I can't do jokes. It just seemed the obvious thing to say."

"Well, you couldn't have done better if you'd tried. Take my word for it." Briefly, he cupped his hand around the top of Grey's thigh. "And speaking of best behaviour, you did bloody well back there. With the Cow. I was impressed. Don't think you put a foot wrong." Grey's eyes were on the road so Doyle saw the smile in profile.

"And that was the easiest visit I've had with him by a long road. To be honest, I don't think we've ever really felt comfortable with each other. If we're working on something we're fine, but just talking..." He shuddered. "I always left that to Bodie. Bodie knew how to deal with him, somehow. All that fellow-soldier crap, I suppose. *He* was in the Paras, you know."

"I know."

"So without him we were bound to be in for some awkward silences. And it wasn't helped by... Well, he *must* have been remembering it too. Every time we

met. Not just me."

"Remembering what?"

"The hospital." *The day he told me Bodie was dead.* It had taken a fraction of a second for the memory to wrap itself around him, distance him from his surroundings. When he spoke, it was like speaking to himself. "I don't know how long he'd been there. If he'd seen him brought in. If I'd been— Just from the look on his face, I could've— But no. I think I smiled to show him I wasn't worried. That I didn't need him to reassure me. 'What's the tea like here, sir? Suppose we'll be in for a long wait.' And he said..." The voice trailed off and Doyle sat frowning out at the lights of north London, feeling the bewilderment settle on his skin like a dew.

"There'll be no wait, lad. He's dead."

A slight jolt of surprise, and then relief—not the sense of self-betrayal he'd always expected. Nodding, he turned towards Grey. "Yes, what else could he say? After that. You know, you're the first person— Person? What am I saying?" He paused and searched for a sensible way of putting it. "I've never spoken about this. Never."

"It makes you sad."

Sad? Then Doyle remembered that it was the word he'd used himself. "Yes. Cowley too, I'm sure. So it was...a shock when he showed you the Sidcup picture. And hearing him talk about it like that. He wouldn't have done that before. But I think it was because he really liked you. It stopped him worrying so much about me."

"How could he like me? I'm a machine."

Doyle shrugged. "Well, you heard what he said about the tram-drivers. People quite often become fond of a machine. Read all kinds of personality into it. You'll get used to it. The danger is when they expect you to like them back. I still haven't worked out the best way for you to deal with that."

"Why can't I just tell them that I don't have any emotions?"

"You'll find it very hard to make them believe you. They'll tell you all the things you've done and said that *prove* that you've got emotions. 'You just don't recognise them yet.' I'll probably have to rescue you the first few times. They *do* take another human's word for it eventually."

The journey from the North Circular to Doyle's flat was relatively quick now that the rush-hour was over. They headed straight for the playroom, work and the recording of the visit forgotten.

Afterwards Doyle said, "Would you mind getting us a beer?" He stretched, and smiled up at Grey. "I'd get it myself, but I'm too bloody lazy."

"Just the one?"

"Mmm. We can share."

He was propped up against the cushions when Grey came back. They leaned against one another (or that was how Doyle liked to regard it), the bottle resting between Grey's thighs. Doyle didn't make the obvious comment on the image this presented, but he was feeling talkative enough to voice his subsequent thoughts.

"You know when you asked me if I wished you had a cock..."

"Yes."

"I do think about it sometimes. Can't help myself. But I never find myself wishing you had an anus. Which is odd, isn't it? When it's *me* using *you* for sex."

"Maybe you get enough feeling of power without it."

"I hadn't th—" He pulled away so that he could study Grey's face. Finally he grinned, the discomfort of awe pushed to the side. "Are you *sure* you don't have any emotions? That was..." The grin faded. "...uncanny."

"Power is important in sex for some people. That was included in my data on human sexual behaviour. It's easy to see that it's important for you. I exist only to serve you." Grey's voice could not change its tone to show when he was quoting—Doyle's heart had a few seconds of giddy excitement before his brain caught up.

"Do you... Do you mind any of this? What we do in here. What would be too much for you? What would make you tell me to fuck off?"

"I'll tell you to fuck off when I think you're being unfair to me. And so far I've seen no sign of that when you're using me for sex so I don't think anything would be too much. I excite you very strongly, don't I?"

"Yes."

"More than the others."

"Oh, yes."

"I thought so. I think you only ever used their mouths like you did with me at first. I think that was all you did with them." Doyle was nodding, eyes wide. Grey smiled, a slow, sweet smile. "I can recognise a compliment, Ray. And I do exist to serve you. I enjoy helping to bring you pleasure."

"Enjoy?" Doyle's voice was very soft.

"It's the nearest word I can think of to describe

how my programming works." Another smile, with a perfect rueful twist.

Whispered: "Lie down. I want to lie on top of you. I want to kiss you." His cock was still, exhausted, but his heart felt huge and painful.

"Ray. It's time for us to go."

Doyle sighed and squirmed onto his back. Grey's thigh was warm against his—heat drawn from his body. Then he turned back onto his side. "Oh, fuck 'em. Let Crawford work for his living. I'll tell him you had six billion questions about Cowley." A tug at a cushion and he was comfortable again. "D'you think we should get some music in here?"

"Right now, do you mean?"

"No. Sometime. The weekend. Some kind of tape-deck, I had in mind. Like a ghetto-blaster but with separate speakers. I've seen them but it was a few years ago. You could come shopping with me." He chuckled. "You're probably the only way of getting decent service in Tottenham Court Road. Hey, they might even give you some sort of discount—you're practically family to the stuff they sell. Shall we do that? Saturday morning?"

"What'll you do if I say no?"

"Never let you choose the tapes."

"In that case, there's nothing I'd rather do."

A pat on the stomach in approval. Doyle lay trying to decide how much he was prepared to spend.

"Ray."

"Hmm?"

"What do emotions feel like? Is there anything you can describe to me?"

After a moment, Doyle propped himself up on an elbow. "Well, you've seen what they look like. How they make me behave."

"That's from the outside. What about from the inside? When you're sad about Bodie, what's happening inside you?"

Slowly, Doyle rolled onto his back. He stared at the ceiling, remembering what he'd said in the car, remembering the hospital. "I feel cold. All over, really, but particularly here..." A short sigh from the workings of Grey's neck. Doyle kept his fingers pressed to his abdomen until he was sure Grey had got his head high enough to see. "...and here." His heart. "And in those places it hurts. I mean, a real physical pain. It's like a cold aching feeling. Like a lump of ice inside me. And my breathing usually changes. Becomes deeper but more of an effort. Because the muscles on my ribs tighten up. Maybe you can hear that. Feel it." He

concentrated for the space of five more breaths then made an effort to clear his mind and relax. "I think that's about all I can tell you."

"But what about inside your head? What about your brain? What does that feel?"

"It doesn't feel anything. OK, it's *thinking* about Bodie. But it doesn't feel anything. This—" He clapped his palm onto his sternum. "—is where it hits you. And here." He slid his hand down to just above his navel, then clawed with his fingertips quickly but cruelly.

"And when you're happy. What's that like?"

Doyle snorted in amusement and heaved himself back up onto his elbow. "Same places, but it's a warm feeling. Light. Like having sunshine inside you. And there's no effect on your breathing. And before you ask, your brain doesn't feel a thing. Rage and fear both increase your heartbeat, make your breathing quicker and shallower, but rage is hot and fear's another cold one. Lust I think you can guess. Those are the main ones, really."

"What about love? Or is that just a strong form of being happy?"

Doyle blinked and swallowed hard. "Umm. I think most people would say it isn't. Though there's probably different kinds. There's a...a sort of an ache underneath the warmth. Because of wanting what you love so much, maybe. I don't know. It's a difficult question, Grey. Why are you asking all this, anyway?"

"I was wondering if they could have based part of my programming on human emotions, but it's obviously not possible."

"Nope, you need viscera. 'Darling, the first time I saw you I thought my day-pack would jump out of my chest.' Bit of a problem with translation there, eh?"

"A-a-a-a."

Doyle stared. "Was that a laugh?"

"Supposed to be."

"Good thing you tried it out on me first." More gently: "It needs lungs, Grey. It *really* needs lungs. Give it up. Stick with the smile. D'you fancy a coffee? I've got some small cups you'd be OK with."

"I can't. My pack's nearly full."

"Well, I think I'll make a pot of decaff. Maybe have a shower. What's the time?"

"11.21."

"Oh, loads of time. They shouldn't page us until at least midnight."

When Doyle returned to the playroom with his mug

of coffee, he found that Grey was lying as he'd left him, but with his mouth shielded.

"Grey?"

No answer. He must have switched himself to low-power. Not surprising, really—it had been a long day.

Doyle knelt on the edge of the mattress. Seen like this, Grey could have been any mechanoid, the stencilled serial-number making him seem, if anything, more anonymous.

What was it about Grey? Did it all stem from the day he'd fallen asleep on the bed, from the sensations in his body when Grey had picked him up? Because from that day he'd treated Grey differently. And now...

And now he was in love with him.

Wasn't that a joke? Wasn't that hilarious?

He should be fighting this with all his will. He should have put a stop to the sex as soon as he realised what was happening. He should be giving Grey nothing more (or less) than his best behaviour—the efficient politeness that provoked few surprises—and counting the days until Grey was taken off his hands and assigned to surveillance with some MI5 Handler.

Grey with someone else. As always, his fists clenched at the very idea. But they would take Grey away from him one day, whatever happened. One day he'd have to retire. Of course he'd had wild thoughts of the pair of them running away together. But where? And Grey needed his day-packs and needed them fresh. And once they'd been caught and he was in prison for the theft of over ten million quid's-worth of protected technology, what would happen to Grey then? They'd probably wipe his program and start again. Unbearable.

Maybe the feeling wouldn't last. Maybe he would soon be free. And when that happened he would go back to the real world. No more mechanoids. No more CI5.

A startling thought, or a familiar thought approached from a different direction: maybe if the feeling between him and Bodie had disappeared, then Bodie would still be alive. After all, why had they stayed in CI5 through all that had happened, without even talking about leaving? Because they were afraid that what they had wouldn't survive the move. Wouldn't survive being named and discussed. Wouldn't survive any kind of change, or not in a form they could both accept and live with day after day. Those had been Doyle's reasons, anyway—Bodie's, of

course, he couldn't know. But if the feeling had disappeared of its own accord some day in, say, 1982 ...

A sharp shake of the head as he remembered some moments from 1982, feeling the spreading warmth in his viscera, feeling the sweet tension. Remembering the look on Bodie's face that night when— No. How could the feeling possibly have disappeared in the midst of all that?

He focussed on Grey's shuttered face, feeling the warmth and the tension shift and flex—but the combination still unmistakable. Should he tell Grey? Why? Because he wanted to, because he came closer to it every day. Why not? Because Grey certainly didn't need to hear it. And because he'd never said it to Bodie. But with Bodie it would have mattered too much, and with Grey it didn't matter at all.

One day. He'd probably tell him one day. Or maybe Grey had already guessed.

It must be nearly midnight. He wanted a last, leisurely kiss before HQ started chasing them. Leaning forward, he touched the protective-plate lightly with his fingertips.

<<Back off.>> It wasn't Grey's voice. Doyle leapt back, heading instinctively for the doorway, even as he was recognising it as the voice of the security-system. <<Keep your distance.>> The main systems were starting to power up. Stupid of him to forget about this function, even if he had never provoked it before. <<The technical details of this equipment are covered by the Official Secrets Act of 1971. The equipment is fitted with anti-tampering devices. The equipment is programmed to defend itself. This message is a warning required by law. Keep your distance.>>

Grey was moving, rising smoothly into a crouching position. He looked like a predator about to spring. The head turned in Doyle's direction, tilting backwards and forwards in a methodical scanning movement.

"Ray. What's happened?" Grey was getting rapidly to his feet. "Are you all right?" The mouth was still shielded.

Doyle stepped back into the room. "I'm fine. I just set off your security system by mistake." There was a squelching feeling under his right foot. He looked down. "And spilt my coffee. You took me by surprise."

"I'm sorry. I'll clean it up." The protective-plate was drawing back as he was speaking.

"No, I'll do it. Just prop yourself up in the

corner over there."

Doyle was squeezing the sponge out for the last time (he hoped), when Grey said, "I feel like a sultan."

He looked the part, stretched out among the cushions, relaxed arm resting on raised knee. They smiled at one another. "Bloody strange harem you've got, your highness."

"Bloody strange equipment, too." He cupped his left hand around the smooth curve of his groin.

"More like one of the eunuch guards." They said it simultaneously. Doyle clambered, laughing, onto the mattress, coffee stain instantly forgotten.

A minute or so later, he raised his head and said in a tone of curiosity, "Why did you switch to low-power when I was making the coffee anyway? You should have told me if the level on your pack was low."

"It's not that low. Twenty four percent. But I have a sub-system that monitors activity. If certain circuits have been idle for long enough, it switches me to low-power automatically. It happens quite often when I'm in my kennel."

"In other words, you fell asleep." Doyle was grinning.

"Shagged out, mate. Your fault. You get me so I can't think."

"Oh, you rotten, lying, sexy machine. Come here. I'll—" The pager sounded clearly from the pocket of Doyle's jacket. "Damn. Well, I'll save this till tomorrow."

"It already is tomorrow."

"You're not making things any easier for yourself, you know." Doyle made the threat from the doorway, then headed for the living room and the 'phone, reflecting on how rarely Grey showed his teeth.

[Early the next morning, they were nearly at the top of the basement stairs when Doyle stopped. "I've just remembered. We haven't watched the tape from last night."

"You said I didn't put a foot wrong."

"I know but I'd like to watch it anyway. Come on, let's go back and fit you with a blank."

As it turned out, the rec room was so quiet they left after twenty minutes and there really was nothing worth reviewing. Doyle left the new tape fitted and they used Doyle's adapted VCR to watch the recording of Cowley rather than watching it directly from Grey.

Doyle paused the tape during the cheese course. "I

should have discussed this team business with you first. I'm sorry."

Grey lifted his hands, palms upwards—his version of a shrug in the absence of flexible shoulders. "As you said, it's not as if I've got any career-plans."

"I was still thinking it through then. Meant to tell you in a few days. Then with the way that conversation went—" He gestured at the screen. "—it just seemed that the Cow was the perfect person to bounce the idea off. I am sorry."

"I was surprised."

"Surprised at what? At the idea itself, or that I was behaving like a prat?"

"At the idea, mostly."

"So you *expect* me to ignore you?"

Another shrug. "You had adjusted your behaviour in line with Major Cowley's. I could guess your reasons for doing that. I did not think you were being unfair to me."

"So what surprised you about the idea?"

"The fact that you had changed your mind about the potential of mechanoids. I have seen the reports you wrote on 5010-12 and 5020-1. Your arguments seemed sound."

"So you don't think it can work?"

"I have no experience of teamwork in CI5. I cannot form an opinion."

"Well, from my experience, I think we've got a good chance. We communicate well, don't we? Think how many times you've been able to guess what I'm thinking. And I'm usually on the right lines with you, aren't I?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't happen often between two people. Believe me. And when it does, it's a shame not to use it. That's why I think it can work. For us, at least."

"Is that why it worked with you and Bodie?"

"Yes. Though it took much longer for me and Bodie to get used to it. Not just a couple of months. Even then, we had rough patches. It's gonna be hard work. Might take years." He grinned. "You'll probably be obsolete by the time we're through."

He turned back to the screen and started the tape. Then he stopped it again after a few seconds. "I meant to ask...do you think you'd *enjoy* being partnered with me? What does your programming have to say?"

"Yes, I'd enjoy it. I enjoy having you as my Trainer."

"You do? In what way?"

"I am learning a great deal from you. I am de-

signed to enjoy learning. And you like me. I respond to that. If I was assigned to another Trainer or Handler, I'd..." He shrugged. "I'd miss you."

Doyle wanted to touch him, to kiss him. There was no line of sight into the office, the rest of the floor seemed to be empty... No. He'd put too much effort into cultivating prudence. Tonight. He'd make up for it tonight.

The next day they started putting together the proposal for Jensen, and for the next few weeks that was their main preoccupation. The meetings with the groups continued but Doyle frequently found himself losing track of the assigned theme—be it 'Encounters with the Police Force' or 'My Favourite Toy'—and scrutinising each remark for its potential as material or inspiration for the proposal. It was Grey who was really maintaining the momentum with the meetings-program.

They were so absorbed in the task that their first shopping-trip—which had been a major event with the other mechanoids—approached so quickly that Doyle didn't have a chance to decide on an attitude. He behaved exactly as he felt: like a man who's brought a friend along for advice on a significant purchase, and who hasn't got time for bullshit. It worked perfectly, as he realised later when they watched the recording. The spotty little gits were working *so* hard to pretend there was nothing unusual about Grey. Hilarious. A tape to keep.

Most of the work was done in the playroom, with about half an hour in Doyle's office each morning transferring the latest files from Grey to disk and then getting a printout. The real challenge was to devise a training-program for themselves, one ending in some pass-or-fail tests that had real relevance to the world of CI5 and, ideally, counterparts in the training for the other teams. That would be Jensen's main worry: using a team that couldn't be assessed by the existing techniques. Enough to make him dismiss the proposal out of hand. So the two of them had to think it all through in advance.

Of course, the training-program would only be the first stage. After that, they would need to learn how to work with the other teams, gain the trust of the rest of the squad. Maybe a year of low-grade work before Grey was accepted as just another agent and then they should be assigned to cases on their merits, as 3.7 and 4.5 had been. The proposal made some predictions as to what those merits might be, but they decided to keep the claims modest for the time being.

The proposal also tackled the issue of arming Grey, largely in anticipation of an outcry from the media. In Doyle's opinion, the approach to giving Grey a gun should be little different from the approach to giving him a driving licence: get him to prove that he had the skill and judgement to perform at least as well as a human, and then let him get on with it. The legal aspects of responsibility for the actions of mechanoids had been sorted out fairly smoothly back in 1987, and again, as Doyle read the rulings, it made no difference if the action was driving a car or firing a gun. But they were going to have to handle this one carefully.

When he'd first realised that the proposal was going to be a tactical necessity, Doyle had seen himself putting it together on his own—a chore, without a doubt. He'd involved Grey principally as secretarial support but of course Grey wasn't the type to just sit there and take dictation. During their most productive periods, they averaged three arguments an hour, and Doyle felt himself growing younger by the day.

The final proposal listed them as joint-authors, their names side-by-side on the cover. Doyle had insisted, over-ruling Grey's concerns that the readers would be alarmed at such a sign of a radical change in attitude towards mechanoids. However, they both agreed that Doyle should take the meeting with Jensen on his own.

“So you see there's no need to commit yourself to anything right now, sir. As things stand at the moment, Grey's still booked for another three months of training with me though he's actually well ahead of schedule. I'd just like to switch from the normal training-program to the teamwork-exercises. I've drawn up a time-table for reporting back to you on our progress and you can see from that that I assumed we need to give the other organisations involved in the mechanoid-program about a month's warning. So if in two months' time Grey and I haven't got to the stage shown in the time-table then we just drop the whole idea and no one's been inconvenienced.”

“Hmm. Why did you assume a month's warning?”

“I thought that would be sufficient time for CI5 to recruit a new Trainer if I'm going to be forming a team with Grey. My notice-period's a month, after all.”

“I see. Well, I can't give you an answer immedi-

ately, Doyle. I'll have to study this proposal— Huh. I see you've put the machine's 'name' on the cover. You'll be wanting a salary for it next. And the directors of the mechanoid-program will have to be consulted. They might have their own plans for...uh...'Grey'.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Still, it's an interesting idea. It sounds as if you've put a lot of work into this.” Jensen reached out and tapped the smartly-bound proposal. “I'll try to get back to you before the end of the week.”

“Thank you, sir.” Doyle rose and made for the door.

“6.1. You mentioned your notice-period. Was that your way of telling me that you'll resign if you're not allowed to form this team?”

Doyle was genuinely surprised. He was completely confident that the team would work—the experience of writing the proposal together left him with no doubts—and he never let himself think about the possibility of being separated from Grey. “I hadn't thought about it. I don't know. But I won't pretend that this *isn't* important to me, sir. I expect that will come across in the proposal.”

“Hmm.” Jensen drew the document towards him. “All right. Thank you, Doyle.” He was turning the first page when Doyle closed the door.

“What did he say?” Grey had been waiting in Doyle's office.

A shrug. “He'll get back to us before the end of the week. Probably.” Doyle sat down heavily. “I thought he'd want to meet you, at least. You were probably right about the cover. It seemed to put his back up. Made some crack about a salary for you.”

Silence. Doyle felt very deflated.

“If I had a salary, I'd treat you to lunch.”

“Yeah? Where?”

“Dunno. Somewhere in South Ken. Somewhere quiet.”

There had been a time when Doyle had eaten out a lot in South Kensington. A lot of colleges there. A lot of girls. A few double-dates. “OK, let's go. I know just the place. If it's still going, that is.”

The bistro had changed hands but the stuffed peacock was still there and the food seemed much the same. Grey sat with a bottle of beer and watched Doyle taking his time over his meal.

“Should I call Cowley now, do you think?”

“Are you that sure that Jensen's going to say no?”

“No, but it might be better if the Cow contacts him *before* he's said no. Or anything else. More diplomatic.

So the Cow can say that I just happened to mention that I was putting together this proposal. 'Maybe Mister Jensen would be interested in the opinion of someone who's seen Raymond Doyle working in a successful team before.' It'll look less like we're trying to twist Jensen's arm. Once he's said no, he's *really* not going to want to back down."

"That makes sense."

"Yeah. Why didn't *you* think of that, Grey? Why do I have to do all the work round here?"

"You're the one with the salary, master."

The next few days were tense. They went to their meetings but that was their limit for useful work. Otherwise, the working day was spent in Doyle's office watching videos, playing game upon game of 'Pass the Pigs' (which they both agreed had to be the most stupid game ever devised), and generally making a show of getting on one another's nerves.

The weather was good too. Doyle must have said about ten times, "Look at it. Probably our last chance this year to try out those bird-spotter books without risking you getting a short-circuit and we're stuck in here waiting for the 'phone to ring."

The call finally came shortly past ten on Friday morning. When Doyle returned to the office ten minutes later, his shoulders were slumped, his brows creased, and he was looking anywhere except at Grey. He slumped into his chair.

"I'm not falling for it, Ray. I heard you running up the stairs. When do we start?"

Laughing—well, practically giggling—Doyle launched himself across the room, to be caught by Grey's hands and nearly lifted off his feet. Still laughing, he clutched at Grey's shoulders until the ache in his finger-joints became distracting, then he ran his fingers repeatedly over Grey's chest and arms while he sobered himself enough to speak.

"Whenever we like. We can start whenever we like. I said we'd ease out of the meetings. Give them some warning and let them know that next week'll be the last one. God, I must thank Cowley. I should call him right now. And then let's get the hell out of here. Have lunch in a country pub."

Cowley refused to accept any thanks, said Jensen had been favourable to the idea from the start. "He was always odd about taking credit for things," Doyle said after he'd put the 'phone down. "Some Calvinist thing, I bet." He grinned. "I can't imagine being part of a team that the Cow didn't help put together. I must send him a bottle of malt. Two

bottles. Don't let me forget."

On Saturday they went shopping for malt whisky for Cowley and music and food for Doyle, then spent most of the afternoon at CI5's gym and at the shooting range. It was the most demanding physical exercise Doyle had had in months—apart from sex, of course—and he nodded off twice during that evening's film.

On Sunday morning, Doyle was early in arriving at the kennel. Grey seemed to be used to that by now, but had never asked Doyle if he should move his alarm forward.

"Hi, Ray."

"Morning. Not a *good* morning, mind you."

"What's the matter?" Grey was getting started at the basin.

"The weather's turned. Stormclouds. Nasty wind. D'you still want to go to Norfolk?"

Grey nodded. When his mouth was clear, he said, "Sure. If you do. We weren't planning on doing much walking, were we?"

"Mmm. I thought I'd take a thermos of coffee. Dunno what we'll find open on a Sunday. Don't shave."

Grey stood motionless, razor in his hand. "What? Why not?"

A shrug. "Fancy seeing you looking ruffled for a change. I like the feel of stubble once in a while."

"Fair enough." He put down the razor and started removing his breastplate while Doyle got a fresh day-pack. "Last time I saw your thermos it was in the car."

"Yeah, I found it. Coffee's already on in the rec room."

"You're keen to be off."

"Reckon we're due a holiday." Doyle had become very quick at locking a pack into place—especially since he'd given up ogling.

It still hadn't rained by the time they turned and started making their leisurely way back to town but the threat of it had kept the roads relatively clear. The threat was finally realised when they were about five miles north of Sizewell. "I think I'll stop for a coffee," said Doyle, who was driving. "See if it eases off."

He got them as close to the coast as he could, and they sat with the windscreen-wipers off, listening to the rain drumming on the roof. Doyle gestured with his coffee-cup: "If it wasn't pissing down, you'd be able to see the Sizewell nuclear reactor from here. It's impressive in its way. Huge."

“A nuclear reactor, eh.” A pout, a most definite wistful pout. “Maybe if I went for a swim out there I’d get lucky and grow a cock.”

Doyle sipped hot coffee over his hand and didn’t even notice, he was laughing so hard. Grey reached over and took the cup away from him and he barely noticed that. His ribs were aching sharply when he finally stopped.

“Grey. Oh, Grey.” A flurry of painful gasping. “I haven’t laughed like that for years. Wondered sometimes if I ever would. Since Bodie died.” He lay back for some minutes with his eyes closed, smiling. Something warm and hard nudged at the back of his hand and he turned his palm upwards to receive the cup, eyes still closed. “Thanks.” The rain was getting heavier, if anything.

When he opened his eyes, he turned to meet Grey’s gaze, then put the cup on the dashboard and twisted around so he was half-kneeling on his seat, all in one smooth, continuous movement. He slid his hand around the smooth, cool curve of Grey’s upper arm, seeking the inner surfaces with his fingertips.

“I love you, Grey. I’m in love with you.”

Grey bent forward, mouth opening, and Doyle eased past the steering-wheel and pressed himself to his lover’s chest. He could feel Grey’s stubble against his lips, the inside of Grey’s mouth hotter and softer in comparison.

“Did you know? Had you guessed?” A whisper.

A pause, possibly for reflection, possibly while Grey turned down the volume. “I wondered. Because of the way you looked at me sometimes.”

“What do you think? Do you think it’s strange? Does it worry you?”

“No. You can’t help who...or what you fall in love with, can you?”

“Is that in your programming?” Very soft, with a slight smile.

“No. It’s in all the books and films and songs you’ve shown me.” An answering smile, then another long kiss.

“But I hope that I will not disappoint you. I cannot love you. You know that, of course. And I am not Bodie.”

“I know.” He was sure he’d never told Grey that he’d loved Bodie. But it had probably become obvious. Maybe that meant it had been obvious to Bodie too. For the first time, he really felt hope that it had been. “I know. It’s you I love, Grey. It’s you I want.”

A deep kiss. He curled his arms around the

helmet, loving the feel of it against bare skin—by now, he would have been disconcerted to feel the flowing warmth of hair. Grey’s hands caressed his back, made their sure way down to his buttocks.

“Should we move to the back seat? Your back must be aching.” It was and more so by the second—the roof was too low to allow him to kneel upright.

Doyle only needed to think about it for a second. “No, let’s go home. We deserve better than the back seat of a Capri.” He clambered back into the driver’s seat with far less grace than when he’d left it, then wound the window down sufficiently to dispose of the coffee.

“That sounds like the voice of experience.”

Doyle laughed as he swung the car round. “Ah, but I was young and foolish then.” A pause. “And now of course I’m—”

“Old and foolish.”

“Grey.” A grin and a swift squeeze of an unyielding thigh. “I knew I could count on you.”

The radiator was only a few feet from the mattress and was on the highest setting but Doyle soon started shivering as his sweat cooled in the draught under the door—the rain had stopped well before they reached London, but the wind was high and gusting, and was rattling the fence that ran along the side of the house.

“I’m just getting my dressing-gown.” It was in the bedroom. He made a detour into the kitchen to pour himself a scotch and then turned the tape over before settling himself on the mattress.

After a few more minutes of listening to the wind, an idea struck him and he sat up and touched his fingers to the side of Grey’s mouth, careful to avoid the helmet. “I thought your skin might be cold. But I think you’re warmer than me.”

“Well, I’ve got this thick beard, haven’t I?”

Doyle chuckled and sat up further, running the backs of his fingernails over the stubble, then tracing the same path with his tongue and his lips. The taste of his semen was still to be found in Grey’s mouth.

“You’ve got some grey hairs in your moustache. And in your beard. Here, turn your head towards the light a bit more. Yeah, you have. Huh. How about that?”

“And here you thought you were seducing a minor.”

“My illusions shattered. How old are you, though, Grey? I mean, when were you made?”

“About thirty months ago, I think. That’s when I

was first switched on, anyway.”

“OK, so the meat’s probably not much older than that.”

“Maybe less. They only wired me up to it about fifteen months ago. Some time in August ‘87.”

“So what did you have before that?” Doyle had forgotten about the grey hairs, absorbed in this larger issue.

“Sight. Sound. My unrivalled mental capacity. Some pre-loaded data, but it was pretty basic.”

“But...no body? Nothing like that?”

“No.”

“What were you doing for the first fifteen months, then?”

“Watching videos, what else? I say watching—they fed them straight into my visual system. There were the life-histories and lessons on human culture and so on. General knowledge stuff. It started very simple. See Jack run, you know. Built up in stages.”

“Oh.” Doyle thought about it. “You told Cowley that they had to explain to you that the life-histories weren’t real. Does that mean that there was a time when you thought you were human?”

“I think I was confused for a while. But it wasn’t that long before I’d learned enough about humans to realise that what was happening to me wasn’t something that happened to humans. So when the lessons got round to computers I was pretty-much waiting for it. Not that they spelt it out at that point.”

“So when did they spell it out?”

“When I asked. When I’d been given the mouth and learned to speak well enough, that is. And then they explained the thinking behind the life-histories. How they’d written them, done them with computer graphics.”

Shaking his head, Doyle said, “That seems very cruel. Leaving you to work it out by yourself.”

“Why? Seems a good test to me.” Grey reached up to touch the side of Doyle’s face. “Complaining of cruel treatment to a machine, Ray. You’re getting soft in your old age.”

Doyle turned his head and kissed the latex palm, inhaling the smell of rubber with the pleasure he’d once reserved for Bodie’s lust-hot sweat. “Never been in love with a machine before, have I? I just— Well, it would have driven a human stark staring mad. I wouldn’t put anything through that, not even if it was just a bunch of circuit-boards and a camera stacked on a table. You have to be...missing something to do that.”

Grey was smiling, his sweetest smile. “You tell

’em, love.”

“Love?”

“Was that the wrong thing to say?”

“No. Oh, no.” Doyle felt the first intimations of excitement between his legs and knew that this one was going to be slow. He straddled Grey’s waist—a favourite position for this stage—and sat for a while gazing down, contemplating his good fortune. He’d decided after all not to mention his wilder day-dreams: the ambush in the corridor or the kitchen, his own extravagant protests, the implacable, inhuman demands. Another time, when the mood was more suitable. He took Grey’s hands and guided them to the cord of his dressing-gown.

To begin with, the other agents treated the probationary team as a joke—in public, anyway. In the first week, Doyle was taken aside three times and asked very seriously what point he was trying to make. “That it can be done.” Much shaking of heads and narrowing of eyes. In some faces—Lewis, Lucas, Murphy—he saw glimpses of something that looked very like pity.

Their practice bouts were popular spectator events. Doyle had foreseen this and had booked the Lambeth training hall for every available evening—he had no taste for looking like a fool.

The main challenge was Grey’s lack of speed: being able to reduce a villain’s bones to dust was of little use if you couldn’t catch the bugger. Grey had a talent for reading and using the local topography which meant that Doyle—who had designed and built the sets, goddamit—had to work harder each day. But it wasn’t going to be enough.

Grey really needed a projectile weapon. Ideally, several, giving him some choice on the degree of maiming—the NHS would buckle under the strain if Grey had no option but to use lead on every man who panicked at the prospect of a conversation with 5020-4. It was Macklin who suggested tranquiliser darts (for the street) and a paint-gun (for training). After that, everything started to fall into place. At HQ, they got fewer and fewer volunteers: it wasn’t so much Grey’s accuracy with the paint-gun (which just got boring after a while), but one experience of having Ray Doyle thrown at you seemed to be quite sufficient.

Macklin was intrigued by Grey. He’d stay on into the evenings at the training hall—sometimes joined by Towser and Jones—setting up situations for them, coming at one or the other or both, and always,

always trying to find out what it took to stop Grey. Doyle would watch, wincing at the blows, wondering what Edgely was going to say *this* time (“*Have you forgotten how much one of these panels costs?*”), but still cackling with exhilaration and pride.

“Well, 6.1, you’ve certainly come out of your shell since you palled up with the strongest boy in the class.”

Doyle laughed. “He’s great, isn’t he?”

“Watch you don’t get lazy.” Macklin continued studying him consideringly for some seconds—Doyle could make a guess at what was coming. “You know, I thought you were making a mistake when you came back. Understandable, maybe, but still a mistake. Saw no reason to change my mind until...” He nodded towards Grey, who was busy comparing scars with Towser. “Looks like you *can* step in the same river twice.”

“Yeah, everyone’s been saying that.” Even Murphy, just yesterday. “I think Bodie would have got a kick out of all this, don’t you?”

“Huh. No doubt about that. He’d be even more insufferable than you are these days.”

They’d just finished in the gym, with a free evening ahead for a change, and Doyle was taking a shower.

“Thanks.” He towelled the worst from his hair then glanced round the room. “Oh, Bourne’s gone, then.” Some days it was like having an entourage.

“Just came in to get his squash racquet. He said.”

“You know he’s gearing up to ask you for a date. Let him down gently, won’t you?” Half joke, half not. Poor Bourne.

“Hah. Hah. Fraughtfully amusing, old chap.”

“What?” Doyle had nearly dropped the towel.

A shrug. “Well, you’ve made it clear that I’m not to laugh.”

“Who’s been telling you about Bodie?”

“Everyone recently. What’s that got to do with Bourne?”

“It’s—” Doyle felt chilled. He rubbed vigorously at his damp skin but of course that made no difference. “I’ll tell you at home. This isn’t the place.”

Once in the door, Grey headed for the playroom, but Doyle called him back. “No. In here. Take the armchair.”

“I’m in disgrace, aren’t I? How many strokes, sir?” He held up his wrist like a schoolboy expecting the ruler. Where would he have seen that? Not *Grange Hill* surely. Not these days.

“No jokes, Grey. This is serious. That ‘old chap’

business. Someone must have told you that was a favourite routine of Bodie’s. Who? And how?”

Silence.

“Come on. You can’t have forgotten. Did you think it would be a special...*treat* for me?” His larynx jerked as he spat the word out.

“No one told me. I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t believe you. Was it your idea, then? You’re trying to protect whoever told you?”

“No one told me. Ray, I didn’t know. I am sorry. I’ll never do it again.”

Doyle was shaking his head. “You still think I want you to be Bodie. Well, of course I do. Anyone would. But not like that. Who told you?”

“No one. Ray, please listen to me.” Grey had got out of the armchair and was kneeling in front of the settee, one hand resting tentatively on Doyle’s knee. “I don’t know why I said it. My design uses random-association all the time. I’m sorry.” Doyle didn’t try to push him away, and Grey moved closer. “I’m sorry your Bodie died. I wish I could have met him. I wish I knew what to avoid.”

Doyle sat with his eyes closed for a long time, then let himself slump forward until he could put his arms about Grey’s shoulders and lean his head against the helmet. “So do I.”

They were very subdued for the rest of the evening and Grey was the one who suggested an early night. He apologised once more when they were in the kennel. Doyle said, “No need to go on about it. It’ll be sorted out by tomorrow.”

Random associations. Very neat. Very convenient. Very bloody meaningless.

No one—in Doyle’s experience—had done that mock-posh crap in quite the same way as Bodie. It was infectious, but only when Bodie was around, and since Bodie had died Doyle had never once felt the urge to try out any of those silly voices.

Someone had got to Grey. Somehow.

Maybe Grey really didn’t remember. Doyle was inclined to believe him. Why would he lie?

So did that mean that it was built into his programming, not something he’d been taught?

A machine programmed to behave like Bodie. Absently, he closed his book and pushed it away to the left side of the bed.

The jokes. “*I’m in disgrace, aren’t I?*” “*I feel like a sultan.*”

The showy driving.

The way he’d known so much about CI5.

The charm at work on Cowley.
 The limits to his patience. “*Fuck off, Ray.*”
 The effortless, near-instant communication.
 The thrill of taking on the world together.
 The feeling of falling in love. So quick. Almost
 overnight. So familiar.

Why had he not seen it before?

Because it was crazy. Programming a machine to
 behave like Bodie. Come on, Doyle. You’re just seeing
 what you want to see. OK, you’re sick enough to fall
 for a lump of talking metal, but you’re not so sick you
 need to fool yourself *that* badly. He’s dead. He’s gone.
 I thought you were finally getting over it, getting on
 with your life. Like Macklin said. Like everyone’s
 been saying.

Ah. So that was it. Guilt. Survivor’s guilt. His
 psyche’s attempt at sabotage. He reached for the book
 again, found his place almost immediately.

||o. It was Bodie.

He sat up and switched on the bedside lamp. It
 was gone two in the morning and he hadn’t slept for
 an instant.

But why would they do it? How had they done it?
 And why now?

Cowley must have helped them. Bastard. Lying
 bastard. Doyle suddenly remembered the exact
 expression in Cowley’s eyes the first time he’d really
 looked Grey in the face. Yes. Oh, yes. Cowley and
 Grey went way back. The devious...

He must have talked to them for hours. Days.
 Shown them footage that even Doyle wasn’t allowed
 to see. Sessions with Ross. Every training exercise
 over ten years. Who knows what else. He and Bodie
 had always reckoned the only really safe place for
 them was their flats—and that sense of privacy was
 supported by weekly checks for bugs.

But why had he done it? Because he was told to? It
 was obvious that the mechanoid-program was
 championed by heads way, way above Cowley’s.
 Maybe they’d—oh, so subtly—dropped hints about
 his pension or about the future of CI5. He must have
 put up a fight, though. Bodie had been important to
 him. Everyone had known that.

So why had *they* done it? The mad scientists.

Maybe the program wasn’t going very well.
 Maybe every Trainer had been writing reports like
 Doyle’s. A change of tactic. Create a unit one particu-
 lar Trainer would *want* to work with. Wind him up,
 shove him on, and see what happens. Doyle felt very
 angry, and more than a little frightened. Had they

known about the sex? About him and Bodie, about
 him and the other two? Was that another reason
 they’d chosen him?

No, they couldn’t have. That had started before
 he’d written his first report, before anyone had. And
 if it came to that, Grey had been made *long* before the
 first report, while Doyle was north of Aberdeen
 learning the secrets of damson sauce and mint-and-
 melon sorbet. So unless they had the power of
 clairvoyance along with their other talents...

But programs could be changed, couldn’t they?
 How long would it have taken them to research and
 write the Bodie-program? Well, Doyle had absolutely
 no idea, but compared to the miracle they’d achieved
 with the underlying mechanoid design it had to be a
 piece of piss. A few months? And Grey seemed to
 have a sub-conscious: an area where connections and
 decisions were made that he couldn’t explain. They
 probably added the program to his sub-conscious one
 night when he was on low-power and he didn’t even
 notice.

It made some sort of sense.

Doyle wasn’t sure how he felt about Grey now.
 Used. Obviously the team was finished. If only he
 and Grey *could* run away together. If only there was
 some version of reality that would let them have the
 time he had thought they were going to have. They’d
 barely managed a month—or maybe you could
 stretch it to two. What would Grey say? Poor Grey.
 Would they wipe his program? Make him into
 someone else’s dead partner? Oh, God. Poor Grey.
 Poor Doyle.

Of course, he wanted to expose the scientists. He’d
 been right that night—they had to be people with
 something missing. But what proof did he have? An
 “old chap” and a familiar feeling of having found the
 place he was born to occupy. He’d be laughed out of
 every newspaper editor’s office in the country...if he
 was lucky. These people had powerful, powerful
 friends. He’d worked for these friends—he *knew* his
 life-expectancy would be measurable in hours. Hell,
 even Cowley hadn’t managed to stand up to them.

Cowley. Yes. He wanted a word with Cowley. He
 wanted a confession. An apology. This was worse
 than any fucking Operation Susie. Not that he was
 going to use it as proof—use it for anything. No, he’d
 argued himself out of that. But he wanted someone to
 acknowledge the wreckage of his life. Tomorrow.
 He’d insist on seeing him tomorrow, or rather, later
 today.

And there was a ghastly, compulsive curiosity: just

what had Cowley showed them? Because Grey was such a convincing Bodie. In everything. In aspects of Bodie's behaviour that they'd both thought were private, safe. Maybe this was just the effects of Doyle's tutoring, but by now he even kissed like Bodie. So what the hell had Cowley showed them? You couldn't have done much better if you'd made a recording of Bodie's brainwave patterns—an instant snapshot, say, at the moment of his death.

"Fuck!" The violent jerk of his body sent the headboard thudding against the wall, made the lamp rock on its base. It wasn't the first time his mind had conjured visions of Bodie on the operating table, not by any means. But not like this. Not with all the gowned figures crowded around the head watching their miracle of science. Ignoring the exposed, faltering heart. Not even noticing when the last peak disappeared from the monitor.

Doyle's whole body had started to shake, not as violently as with that first shudder, but continuously and uncontrollably. The lamp moved millimetre by millimetre to the edge of the table and toppled off. Doyle, hands now covering his face, did not even notice the thud or the abrupt change in the lighting. His brain felt as if it was erupting inside him, tearing apart at fault-lines, seething and boiling. He lost control of his bladder and eventually he did notice that.

How long had they imagined they'd get away with it? How had they ever got away with it? How had he worked with the mechanoids for nearly a year and a half and never wondered—not even once—why there were crease-lines around the mouth if the meat was fresh from the vats and had never smiled before he'd taught it how?

They'd wanted to be fooled. He had, the whole nation had. It was such a sexy idea. The "great" put back in Great Britain. And by now they were so used to the idea of Britain's complete inability to make a commercial success of any of its inventions—hell, there was a certain aristocratic charm about it—that no one, not in any newspaper, not anywhere, had asked why they weren't taking this opportunity to hold the entire fucking world to technological ransom, why they were faffing around with these top-secret tin soldiers. Ah. D-Notice. Doyle of all people should not be forgetting who he was dealing with here.

It was all so obvious now. The story about the meat to give an excuse for including a life-support

system in the day-packs. The limited capacity of the packs, making it very awkward to try to use a mechanoid for 24 hours in a day—even now, Doyle was probably the only Trainer who'd ever seen a mechanoid asleep outside his kennel. The fanatical security—it was widely rumoured that there were only twenty people in the country who knew how to get into a mechanoid's helmet without finding themselves blown to pieces.

And the outrageous precocity of the achievement they'd claimed. A computer that could learn and deduce and guess like a human, that could understand slang and crack jokes and demand fair treatment and make perceptive remarks about your sexual quirks. Events in the development of computers: the transistor; the IBM PC; the Apple Macintosh; and four years later, the mechanoid. Outrageous.

Why couldn't they have been happy with their real achievements? Why couldn't they have been content to share those with the world? If you could bear to think about it objectively they were surely impressive, even magnificent: keeping a head alive and healthy, giving it control over a complex artificial body.

He couldn't bear to think about it, not in any way. But he had to. He knew now, and he had to act on that knowledge. Somehow. The images crowded in and he dragged his head from side to side in an effort to escape them which made the bones of his neck grate together. His breathing was long and laboured and he was close to weeping.

His first, partial guess had been right. Cowley had known. Right from the start. Cowley had worked with them, covered up for them. There must have been a medical team on permanent standby—a medical team with a helicopter. An order to route all calls for an ambulance to this team—an order given by Cowley. And Cowley at the hospital to intercept the partner or the family, lead them smoothly away the moment they asked to see the body.

The body.

To them it would have been an unwieldy item of trash. Something to be bundled out of sight then thrown away. Sent for disposal.

Did they make any attempt to save him?

A noisy, forceful exhalation. Doyle would have described it as a laugh—he genuinely had felt a twist of amusement that he was still capable of posing such a naive question. They must have started setting up the life-support the moment they had Bodie in the helicopter. But he'd give them the benefit of the doubt

and assume they'd waited until Bodie's heart had actually stopped beating before they started cutting his head off. Another laugh was torn from his chest, this one close to being a scream.

And Cowley had covered up for them. Cowley had arranged for Bodie to be delivered into the hands of enemies. To spend his last moments among people who wished him only harm.

Doyle's lips relaxed out of their snarl. Suddenly he felt almost calm. Eyes closed, he whispered, "George Cowley, I am going to kill you."

Of course he was. The thought that Cowley could commit such a betrayal and be allowed to live was not to be borne. Doyle didn't want to know what it had taken to persuade him, what arguments, what threats. Maybe almost nothing. He closed his eyes and it was many years ago and Cowley was putting him in his place. "*The department owns you. I own you. I can sell your body to science while you're still alive.*" Oh, yes.

It would be an execution on behalf of all of his men, because he had betrayed all of them. Any one of them could have been taken into that helicopter.

It could have been Doyle himself.

He uttered a small, indrawn gasp, in the grip of sheer terror. Frantic arithmetic and assumptions: Grey... Bodie had been released from the lab a year after the first mechanoids; so the program probably started—or expanded to CI5—some time in 1984. But that assumed that all of their victims were fit to be released. What did they do with the heads that went insane?

Months. He might only have escaped by months.

It was many minutes before he regained his capacity for coherent thought and then the first thing he was aware of was a sense of shame. He would have laid down his life for Bodie without hesitation, yet the glow of relief was unmistakable. It had not been him. If it had to happen to anyone, he was glad above all that it had not happened to him. He curled over his knees, fingers tangled in his hair like claws, and he wept.

He couldn't leave Bodie in that kennel. He couldn't. Not for a minute longer.

"You taking him on a night exercise, Ray?" It was Mason on the desk.

"Yeah. Time to try him out with his photomultiplier."

"Boy. I wish I had a toy with that many gadgets."

"Well, start saving those bottle-tops."

Grey was asleep, of course. Doyle used the password to wake him up. What did he go through when this happened to him? Was he waking up naturally? Or were they giving him a jolt?

The mouth. Well, of course it was Bodie's. "*You have a nice smile, Grey.*" Bodie's smile. They'd messed about with his teeth—so his dentist wouldn't have recognised him?—but then Bodie had hardly ever showed his teeth.

"Ray. What's wrong?" He sounded groggy. "What have I done?"

"Nothing. I thought we'd go out on a night exercise. D'you want to freshen up? I'll get your pack ready." He didn't want to give Bodie any more orders.

"So where are we going?" They were in the car. "Home."

"Oh, that kind of night exercise. You shouldn't have bundled me off so quickly, should you?"

Doyle managed a weak smile. He'd been doing his utmost not to think about the sex.

Again, Grey headed for the playroom, and again Doyle called him back to the living room.

"You want another talk. Please believe me, Ray, no one told me. It just happened. I'm sorry."

"I believe you. But it didn't just happen. You *are* Bodie. You didn't die. Not completely."

A long silence.

"Is this a test, Ray? If it is, I think I must have failed."

"No. It's not a test. You *are* Bodie. You have Bodie's head inside your helmet. You have Bodie's mouth. They let you die and they took your head. I should have seen it...right from the start."

"I'm a machine, Ray. There's nothing inside this helmet except wires and silicon. You know what's inside it. You've seen the pictures from the lab, haven't you? Your Bodie is dead. He's not coming back."

Everyone had seen those pictures when the first mechanoids had been unveiled. Doyle had forgotten about them and for over a minute he said nothing, thinking very hard. Then, decisively, "They were fakes. Think about it. They were just lying on the bench. They didn't speak. They didn't do anything complicated. They didn't do anything you couldn't rig up by remote control. You've not seen inside your *own* helmet, have you?"

Now it was Grey's turn to pause. His lower lip thrust forward: Bodie in intense concentration. Slowly, "But why would they do it? How? It doesn't

make sense, Ray.”

“No, it makes perfect sense. It’s the only proper explanation. Listen.” And he described the process of reasoning that he’d been following in the past hours.

“Are you starting to remember, now? Are you starting to remember being Bodie?”

“No. I’m a machine. That’s all I’ve ever been.”

“How can you say that? Show me. Show me where I’m wrong.”

“I can’t.”

“Is it a...a gut feel, then?”

“It’s just what I know.”

Doyle opened his mouth to argue further, then sat gaping as Grey sagged forward by degrees until his head was hanging in an attitude of utter despair. He’d expected... Well, he wasn’t sure. Anger, probably. Bodie’s white-lipped anger.

He knelt by the armchair, one hand on a metal thigh, the other just above an elbow. Very quietly, “Are you remembering now?”

“No.”

“Nothing?” Expecting the reply: there’s nothing to remember.

“It’s gone. They took it all.”

“You believe me, then?”

“I have to. I know I’m a machine. But I have to.”

Doyle wanted to cradle Bodie’s head, but couldn’t reach. He kept still, aware of the metal growing warm under his touch as if he’d never felt that before, as if the sensation hadn’t been a source of pleasure for months.

“How did they take my mouth away?”

“What?” The sudden utterance had startled Doyle.

“When...they switched me on. I didn’t have a mouth. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t feel. Nothing. And then a year later they brought it in to show me and then they put it back on my face. How did they do that, Ray?”

“Bodie. I don’t know. Did you ever see your face without it?”

“No. I never saw myself until I had the full body.” He raised his head then hit his thigh hard. “Like this.”

“It was probably on your face all the time. It was probably some other poor bastard’s mouth they showed you. They could have kept you pumped full of local anaesthetic. Or cut the nerves and then mended them later. Probably child’s-play for them. They must be geniuses with nerves.”

“Oh, yeah. Shit hot.”

Doyle even found himself smiling, briefly. “But

you still don’t remember? Do you not remember me at all? Even when I was— Even when I was making you suck me off?”

“I felt...I felt glad to be close to you like that. Surprised that first time. But pleased to be allowed into your life like that. Maybe that shows something. But not remembering. No.”

Suddenly Doyle experienced a vivid recollection. Urgently, he said, “When you were looking at the scars on my chest that time. You were transfixed. You were practically stumbling over your words. You *must* have been remembering what they looked like with the stitches in. At *some* level. What we did my first night out of hospital.”

Eventually Bodie said, “I knew they were important for some reason. They upset me. But I thought it was part of my programming. To protect my Trainer. It’s all gone, Ray. Long gone.”

“Could it come back, though? Every day you’ve been behaving more and more like— Like yourself. Maybe soon everything else will come back.”

No reply. Doyle waited, but there was no reply.

“Don’t you want that? Don’t you want to remember...what we had? Who you were?”

“No.”

“Why not? Does it seem so bad?” Doyle’s voice was starting to crack. “I loved you. More even than I loved Grey. You were—”

“Ray. Ray, don’t.” Gentle hands were cupped around his skull, fingertips pressing in a soothing rhythm. “I know what Bodie meant to you. It’s obvious.”

“Then why not?”

The hands released his skull, dropped to his shoulders, then away. “I couldn’t face it. I wouldn’t survive.”

“D’you think they’d kill you? Could they tell what was happening?”

“I don’t know. That wasn’t what I meant. Ray, I think I must have gone mad at some point. Don’t you think? Stark, staring. You said it yourself.”

Doyle’s gaze slid away and then he closed his eyes hard. He didn’t want to imagine it—not for himself, not for Bodie, not for anyone. “You seem all right now.”

“They must’ve had some shit-hot brainwashers on their team along with everything else. They broke me down and built me up again. That’s how it’s done. You know that’s how it’s done. They crammed my head so full with see Jack run and all those fake lives that there wasn’t any space for my old thoughts. Over

the months they must have crawled into a corner and died. And after that everything would have got so much easier for me. Once I'd accepted that I was a machine."

Doyle had been watching the movements of the mouth, throat tight with hatred for the designers of the speech-system—such words...in a machine's droning voice. A touch on his arm, and he lifted his gaze to the eye-slit. "I don't think I can come back, Ray. Not the way you want. I wouldn't survive the journey. I'm sorry."

"But how come there's—" His own tone of voice was all wrong: there was no place here now for arguments, for hope. Maybe he shouldn't even have told Bodie. For long moments, he looked away, trying to gather his thoughts. They did not want to be gathered. "I recognised you. With all they'd done, I recognised you. I don't know what that means, but..."

The hand stroked his arm, as awkward and sincere as Bodie's comfort had always been. "Maybe that's just how I behave when I'm allowed to behave like a human. When I'm with you. It might not have happened with another Trainer."

"Do you think they did do it on purpose? To see how we'd react."

"I doubt it. They probably forgot who I used to be almost immediately. Really thought of me as a machine. It's what you do in a job like that. It's what I'd do. Probably just had a checklist of things to include in my life-histories and my briefing. So there would be an easy answer if a human wondered how I knew so much about life in the Paras."

"They should all burn in hell." Very quiet.

"Well... But don't help put them there, eh. Who'll buy me beers if you're serving a life-sentence?"

"Oh, Bodie." Doyle swallowed hard. "But don't you feel... I thought you'd be bouncing off the walls."

A long pause, and then Bodie placed the back of his hand over Doyle's breastbone. "You need viscera, remember?" Slowly, "I don't think I really feel anything. The need to be near you, to please you. To have you be kind to me. I feel...lost when you're angry with me. But that's all. Everything else is just data. I'm a machine, Ray. A ghost. I can't come back. Forget your Bodie. It's the best way."

"What are we going to do?" A whispered plea, not directed at Bodie.

"What do you want to do? Do you want to kill them?"

"Yes, but— But I won't."

"Good lad. So we'll carry on as a team, then. Were we as good before?"

"Different. Same style, though. My brains, your brawn." An easy smile because he suddenly felt calm again—he'd had a moment's vision of the future, stretching before him, a clear, shining line. And under the calm, a tidal surge of love for this man who had hijacked his life. "Let's go through to the other room. It's about time we slept together, don't you reckon? After all these months."

Bodie knelt on the far side of the mattress. Doyle kicked his shoes off then stepped into the circle of the waiting arms. It was a long, tender embrace, but when Doyle raised his head, it was to say, "Just to sleep. Really. I'm too strung out. And you can't be much better."

He'd meant to be quiet, to let Bodie rest. But lying against him like this... Well, the question kept flexing itself in his mind, getting stronger and stronger.

"I raped you, didn't I? You and the other two."

"I told you, I didn't mind. I liked it."

"You're a special case."

"Not so special at the time. I was just another machine, fresh from the lab. It'd be the same for them. They wouldn't have minded. They'd have been glad of the contact. Glad to do another thing that humans do."

"I can't..." A deep sighing breath. "I can't imagine what it must have been like for them. But what I *can* imagine: what if one of them had a partner still alive? What if he'd found out what I was doing, how I was using his friend? If it had been another Trainer with you, I'd—I'd have killed him."

"Special case, Ray. I've a feeling you always were jealous as hell."

"Christ! That's not what I—" A firm hand on his jaw.

"I know. But it's done. Leave it. Get some sleep. It'll look better in the morning." Doyle nodded and the hand moved to his waist and held him in a loose grip.

A sudden thought. "Is there any way of disabling your security-system? Otherwise I'm likely to set it off when I turn over in my sleep."

"Turn off my self-defence. But I'd better not be holding you. Everything locks solid." The arm was lifted away and lowered to the bed.

"Will you be able to sleep like that? Can you close your eyes?"

"I can't. Don't think I've got any eyelids. I'll be OK if you turn off the light."

Doyle leaned over to see to the lamp then lay down so that their bodies were touching all along their length. "Fifty-twenty four. Guesstimate. Self-defence. Off." The red light must be blinking away, but he didn't raise his head to check. He pressed closer to his lover.

"Bodie?" A whisper.

After about fifteen seconds of waiting for a reply, he realised that he had no way of telling whether Bodie was asleep. If the jaw-plate had locked solid with everything else, then Bodie probably wouldn't be able to reply even if he was awake.

He lay quietly for a while, listening for any sign of life from Bodie, trying hard not to remember the time when the man had had a heartbeat, when he used to sigh eloquently in his sleep. Such thoughts felt like a betrayal of Grey, who so deserved a lover who could accept him as he was.

If he couldn't keep the thoughts away, then he wouldn't have them here, not with Bodie lying trustingly beside him. Carefully and quietly, he rolled away, then got to his feet and left the room. It was a bright night and he could see well enough to fetch a glass from the kitchen—an excuse, if Bodie asked later—and to make his way across the living room to the electric fire. The two bars whined as they started to glow.

Yes, he could think now.

But his mind had emptied, not knowing how to tackle a problem so large.

Have that drink after all? He got to his feet and went to the corner of the room to fetch the bottle of cheap scotch. Once there, his eyes were drawn to the shelf above, and in the dimness he could locate the perspex holder by the gleam of light on its edges.

Sitting cross-legged again by the fire, he slid the photograph out of the holder and studied it in the faint orange light. Bodie. Bodie, as he'd been remembering him for these three years, imagining him safely dead.

"*Safely dead.*" Jesus. How had it come to that?

His previous regrets of events following the gunshot had been burned away—such laughably cosy delusions he'd been allowing himself. It was no simple re-write of history now that would give him his hushed walk to the morgue, his last look. A new regret was emerging, with a new and terrible fantasy in its shadow: he should not have made that emergency-call to HQ. Then he would have been left in peace to kneel beside him on the cracked concrete.

Holding his hand. Stroking his hair. Waiting with him while he died. Their version of paradise.

And the...object lying in the other room? The object he loved, but which now terrified him. Because of what it was, and what it represented, and what it proved. *It could have been me.* Eyes squeezed shut, he mouthed the words, heart racing but icy cold.

It could have been any of them. It still could. That helicopter was waiting, somewhere in the city, right now.

And Doyle was the only one who could stop it claiming another. He should be in HQ right now, not sitting at home while the moments ticked by. But he had to think this through. He had to do it properly because they would make damn sure he had no second chance—they would order his death as soon as they saw his first move against them. And knowing that, everything else fell into place.

With care, he laid the photograph on the carpet by his side, where it became simply a dark rectangle against the lighter wool. Then he laid his palm over the face he could not see, and closed his eyes.

Murder.

That was what he was planning, and in the coldest blood. He was strong enough, brave enough not to hide from the word, not to take refuge behind some euphemism. Two murders, if his luck held out.

If only he could think of some method that could spare Bodie from suspecting, even for the last instant. Something with the day-pack that would make it like falling asleep. But he didn't know enough and was afraid that his enemies knew everything, had thought of everything: reserve power, an alarm signal, and the helicopter again, carrying him off—still alive—to some room that never saw daylight.

Bodie. One of the strongest men on earth, but utterly vulnerable to his enemies—they could paralyse him with a word. And were there other words that would do worse than paralyse? He had to put Bodie beyond all further harm. Simply had to. Even now, with two guns in the house, he couldn't give any real protection. What about tomorrow, or the day after, when they had disposed of Raymond Doyle?

He did not see that he had any choice. He would not allow Bodie to be diminished further. And he would not permit him to die once more among strangers. The jury might not understand—if his case ever got a public trial—but he thought another agent would.

Would the other agents understand the second

murder? Surely even more easily than the first, because few had been bound to a partner as he was to Bodie, whereas they had all trusted Cowley. Cowley had betrayed every one of them, and no jury would bring him to justice for that. Because what he'd done wasn't officially a crime. Yes, he'd lose the odd golf partner if it hit the papers, but he'd keep everything else. That could not be allowed.

He picked up the photograph again, and leant closer to the fire. Bodie's eyes could not be seen, those remarkable eyelashes a clear shadowing between the pallor of eyelid and cheek. Bodie at his most mysterious, when any honest observer must call him beautiful. Doyle willed him to lift his head, to step forward for an instant out of the past.

"Would you do it?" A whisper. "If it had been me, would you do it? Would you kill him?" But of all of them, Bodie was the one who might hesitate. Because he'd liked the old man, he really had. Sheer disbelief might stop him. It would be like himself with Barry Martin—oh, a long time ago, and a very different Ray Doyle. Faced with Cowley, Bodie would ask for an explanation, wanting to be convinced, and George Cowley might just manage to concoct one.

"That makes it worse, though. For me. That he could see this happen to you, and carry on."

Did it deserve the death penalty?

"Yes." Oh, yes. He put the photograph back in the holder, and then back on the shelf, knowing he would probably never look at it again.

Half an inch of scotch while he stared out at the night—possibly his last—and filled in the details of his plan. Cowley might yet escape him, but he was confident of his first two priorities: saving the other agents, and saving Bodie. Cowley depended on luck, and he was shorter on that than he'd thought, say, a week ago. He wouldn't worry about it.

A week ago. Doyle and Grey shaping up as CI5's best team. They could carry on with that. He could keep Grey, have Bodie back, if he could just ignore what he knew.

"Oh, God." Temptation. Such temptation. Things he would give his soul for.

But the only soul he was free to bargain with was his own. He'd known that from the start. So he couldn't buy a second chance for them with other men's lives, though he almost wished he could. He wished he could talk it through with Bodie, with the Bodie from the photograph. But they'd surely agree on this. *Esprit de corps*. It had meant something to Bodie.

That's right, it had. He remembered, now. A loyal man, his partner, and more sensitive to betrayal because of that. Bodie would have seen things the same way. And of course Bodie would have killed Cowley.

He felt calm again, and knew that this calm would last him until it was all over. He could return to Bodie and sleep beside him with a clear conscience. He turned off the fire and retraced his steps, leaving the glass in the kitchen. No sign of awareness as he shut the door, lay down on the mattress, and rolled close. The metal rapidly absorbed heat from him even through his clothes, but that did not keep him from sleep.

He woke around seven, restored Bodie's powers of movement immediately, and found himself pulled into a kiss.

"How you feeling now? Still strung out? 'cos I'm feeling fine."

"Not good enough to waste it on a quickie. I haven't got your stamina these days."

"Who says we have to hurry?"

"I told Mason I'd have you back by eight."

"Oh. Well, after our session with Macklin this evening, then."

"He can't make it. I meant to tell you. There was a message yesterday evening."

"We're not going to bother to go, just the two of us, are we?"

Doyle smiled. "No. Better things to do." He stood up, then picked at his shirt and grimaced. "I'm off for a shower."

In the car, he said, "We can't make a habit of...um...night exercises, you know. If they thought you were in the flat with me asleep they'd throw the book at me."

"Yeah. I know."

"I'm gonna have to leave you in your kennel for most of the day. Come back here saying I'm going to catch up on some sleep. I'm sorry. I hate to shut you in there. I never felt happy about it, but I hate it now."

"You'll get used to it. I'll just switch to low-power and have another kip."

Once on his own, Doyle collected a notepad and pencil from his office and went to the rec room. There were seven agents there, four of whom had known Bodie. After they'd disposed of the comments on Grey's absence, Doyle announced that he was planning on taking Grey on a tour of CI5 residences—part of some exercises they were doing on security

and defence of buildings—and he was making a list of current addresses. CI5 agents have very good memories for that type of information, and within minutes he had the list he wanted.

Macklin was in his office at the training-centre very early and readily accepted Doyle's excuse and suggestion of an indefinite postponement. It was likely that Cowley was still an early-riser, but Doyle thought it best to wait until gone nine before calling. The most difficult part was disagreeing with Cowley when he repeated his statement that he'd done nothing to deserve the scotch, though Doyle had expected that and even planned around it. "But if you feel you need to do something more to earn it, sir, I would appreciate some advice. Grey's test scores are... Well, they look inconsistent to me, but I was hoping you might be able to see some pattern. If I came around with them tonight, would you be able to spare me half an hour?" Cowley would, providing Doyle arrived after eight.

Back home, he composed the letter. It took several hours and the final version was the best report he'd written in all his days in CI5: clear, strictly factual, and (surely) chillingly convincing. The local library was around the corner and had a photocopier, and across the street was a post-office, and the newsagents' next door sold envelopes.

At two o'clock he started writing another letter—a note, really, not to be copied or posted. It was short, but it took a long time for him to write. When it was finished, he got everything ready in the playroom, and that seemed to take no time at all.

There was a post-box at the end of his street: with a collection at 3.45 and first-class stamps, some of his letters would probably get through the next morning. In the end, he'd done a copy for each of the quality newspapers—they might dismiss it as the ravings of a lunatic but he had nothing to lose.

Bodie was awake and waiting for him.

"Good kip?"

"Great. Raring to go. We'll be back to normal tomorrow, though, won't we?"

"Oh, yeah."

Doyle led him by the hand into the playroom, manoeuvred him easily into sitting among the cushions stacked in the corner—his sultan-position, they called it. Doyle knelt over him, caressing his mouth, his shoulders, his chest, concentrating on the heavy, liquid aching that was welling in his chest, spreading along his limbs, flowing from his fingertips as a distillation of worship.

"Oh, Bodie. My Bodie. I'd fall in love with you wherever I met you." He bent to open the smiling mouth with a kiss, his left hand cupped around the chin and the jaw-plate. That hand held the mouth open when he lifted his head away.

"Fifty-Twenty Four. Guesstimate. Self-defence. Off." His right hand was already raising the silenced Browning.

He was surprised to find himself still alive. Either the rumours about the anti-tampering devices were pure propaganda, or he'd found an oversight in the design. Or he'd been lucky.

The helmet had held. Not such a surprise. And he'd been lucky with the ricochet too—the bullet could easily have bounced straight back at his hand.

His hand. He refused to look, refused to let his gaze drop below the top of the visor. He had given a single violent shudder on realising that he had survived, come through to the other side—and his skin could still feel the warm, ticklish sliding, his ears still hear the slow dripping. The direct proof that the mechanoids were not made from silicon.

Without looking down, he placed the gun on the mattress, got to his feet, rubbed his hands together under running water at the kitchen sink for over five minutes. Then he stripped, dropped his clothes in the garbage, showered, and dressed again: a jacket this time, and under it his spare holster and his Walther.

He had put the letter and the note on the coffee-table in the living room, having to hope that they would be safe there from anything the anti-tampering system did to the playroom. The playroom would be better, though, and he found he could return there now, now that he was washed. He knelt to place the two envelopes next to the gun on the blood-spotted mattress, and then raised his head and faced what he had done.

The arms had not moved, and the right hand still showed the contours of Doyle's waist, the left of his knee. Doyle reached out to touch the tip of the right index finger, knowing his touch to be a defilement, knowing that if there was any virtue left in him he should not be permitting himself even this.

"*Please give him a burial. Please mark the place with a stone.*" The start of the note. The words circled in his brain like strangers, given a separate existence now he could see what the world would soon see. "*If you must take him apart, then please put him together again at the end, so that he goes into his grave with a human shape and not as something grotesque.*" Oh, but there would

still be sick, sick jokes—and inside his head it was Bodie’s voice making them—and himself falling in love with that voice over and over again.

He drew his hand back and got to his feet. *Forgive me.* He could not speak. He suspected that he had not begun to understand all that he had done. *Can you forgive me? Will you let me fall in love with you in hell?*

He locked the door of the flat. It would be unlocked again soon enough: when he failed to respond to the paging, Mason would send someone round—send a team, he hoped, since no one should have to walk in upon that sight on their own.

It was just after six when he arrived at Little Chalfont. He parked a few streets away from Cowley’s house—in the opposite direction to the main road, which should reduce the chances of Cowley seeing the car if he was driving home.

There was no car in the driveway. Interesting. Doyle concealed himself in the position he’d chosen in advance, and settled down to watch the house and to think. No sign of movement in there. Well, there wouldn’t be if they were professionals, but would Cowley have access to such services these days? And if he’d asked for police protection, what would he have told them?

No, that was thinking far too far ahead—or to the side. Stick to basics. Assume that Cowley is waiting for something like this, has been ever since he heard that the teaming was going ahead, or maybe even since the visit. But assume also that waiting is going to be his main tactic—anything else would be an admission of guilt. And that should give Doyle the few seconds he needed, even if the house was crammed with agents as good as 3.7 and 4.5 had been.

Just a few seconds. He needed no confession now,

no apology. A few sentences to tell the man why this was happening, and then finish it. Any other assassin might find himself drawn into Cowley’s world of triple-think, might stumble and fall in a battle of words. But not Doyle.

If Cowley was alone in the car, he’d get him then, outside. A blow to the back of the neck, drag him down the side-path out of sight of the house and the road. He’d brought cuffs to prevent a struggle, a dish-cloth to muffle cries for help. He was thorough. Cowley had trained him well.

Cowley’s car pulled into the driveway shortly before half past seven. He was alone.

“This is an execution. This is for your betrayal of all of the men who trusted you, but especially for Bodie, who probably trusted you the most. You did what you said you could do: you sold us all to science while we were still alive. It should be Bodie doing this, but your scientists cut away so much of him that in the end he couldn’t even remember what anger feels like.”

As he returned the gun to its holster he found himself reflecting that, despite everything, he was still capable of the gentler emotions. Satisfaction. Even happiness. He smiled, and warmth flowed over him, then faded slowly to a neutral calm.

He reached into his jacket for the last envelope and placed it by the body, then waited, listening. 3.7 and 4.5 would have been out of the door by now. By now he would have been dead.

Again, he was still alive. Odd. The only thing he had made no plans for.

When would they catch up with him? Before he got back to the flat? In one of the basement-rooms of CI5? In his prison-cell?

Would he fight them? Would he try? Interesting question. He pondered it from time to time as he drove towards London.

—July 1995

SEBASTIAN

PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESS

M. FAE
GLASGOW

IONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS

HELEN
RAVEN

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

Yes, yes, observant reader, the title has been lifted directly from the Fab Four themselves (a musical reference that M. Fae knew I'd understand, while anything from the '70s onward was doubtful), and it is directly relevant to this piece. You may wish to hum the song's closing refrain as you read. Think of it as a mantra: love is all you need, love is all you need, love is all you need... Then apply it to Bodie's and Doyle's situation and ask yourself the question they ask themselves: is it, indeed, all you need?

Well, as she was writing, M. Fae did ask herself just that. She said to me, "You know, I've reached a break point in this story and it's Murphy. Depending on what he says next, the story can go in either of two directions. Which do you want me to write?" Me, she was asking me? Well, not about to let a golden opportunity slip away, I insisted she write both. I've chosen the ending I think fits the story best—but as not everyone agrees with my tastes, I've included the other version afterwards. Read either or both. One is full of regret, the other, determined hope.

THERE WERE EVEN BIRDS TWITTERING IN THE TREES OUTSIDE, AND CHILDREN,

dimly remembered games from his own childhood, the perennial game of football erupting amongst a gaggle of boys, the girls squealing as they put paid to that idea, the street resolving back into the peaceful ebb and flow of a lazy summer's morning, until the boys came back with their water bombs and spitballs, the girls taking off after them in high dudgeon, hurling loud threats of death and destruction at the retreating backs.

Perfectly normal, in other words, so normal it dislocated Doyle's brain. Hands braced on the heated paintwork of the windowsill, he gazed out on the street, this picture-perfect community poster. The kids were back again, war either averted or armistice signed, the group devolving into sets and subsets, intersecting, separating, merging together in a cacophony of play and high-pitched voices. Outside his open window, there was a chaos of flowers in the window box, aromatic, and he wondered, idly, who had planted them: hard to imagine anyone else in the A-Squad taking the time to plant seeds and bulbs. Nearing him from the far end of his street, there were two young mothers walking side by side, one child screaming bloody murder, the other blissfully oblivious and sound asleep, the wheel of one pram squeaking in a rhythm just this side of bloody annoying. He could hear their voices now, discussing something, the words not entirely clear, either the latest scandal amongst the neighbours, or the latest power battle amongst the Tories: all he could hear was the casual familiarity of first names, and those fit either topic equally well. One of the boys booted the ball again, coming within a handspan of the squeaking pram, the mother giving him a right rollicking, the sight and sound of that bringing a nostalgic smile to Doyle's face. What had her name been? Yeh, that was it: Mrs. MacGregor, face as pretty as an angel, and a right cross that had left his ears thoroughly boxed and ringing like the chapel steeple. She was the one who'd caught him, hand in till, guilt all over his face, and made him apologise to old Mr. Gregg—and put the old man up to making him work the rest of

the summer holidays for him, gratis.

The best thing anyone ever did for him, now that he thought about it, looking back on the tearaway he'd been, the petty thief he'd been, back then. Far cry from now, post the Met, and in CI5, Cowley's finest, the Untouchables.

Now it was a pair of teenagers walking along slowly, in a world all their own: shocking, to realise that he was old enough to think teenagers too young to look like that, to dress like that, to behave like that, and in public too. Christ, he'd been nearly 16 before he even chanced his arm like that! And that had been with Peggy—God, he remembered Peggy!—in the back row of the pictures, and they'd been going steady for three or four months by then.

The sun was streaming down, liquid gold, tipping everything with gilt and beauty. The air was that treasured richness of flowers, melting ice-cream, warm ground and sunlight, heady, better even than the foreign glamour of his trips to Paris, Minorca, Athens—even the Côte d'Azur paled in comparison, to this, the glory of a perfect summer's day with all its happy echoes of childhood and contentment.

Oh, to be in England, Doyle thought to himself, misquoting, for all he knew.

Bodie would know the right quote. Would even remember the title and the poet's name, things Doyle had happily forgotten the minute he'd sat his O levels.

Strange, some of the things Bodie remembered. Stranger still, some of the things that were important to Bodie.

Doyle sighed then, and tugged the yellowed lace curtains over the window, the strength of the sun blunted, muted light arcing in wind-shifted patterns across the carpet he hated almost as much as those bloody curtains.

At least the sofa was comfortable, and there was a good nook on the left hand side of the fireplace for his music system. He stuck a tape in, one he'd made himself, one that would last a while before he'd have to get up and turn it over. Nice music, that, something

Bodie had got him listening to. There were built-in shelves over his hi-fi, the chipped paint hidden by the books he'd crammed in there and he ran a lazy finger over them. One he'd bought that day he and Bodie had found themselves let unexpectedly loose by Cowley, and one that Bodie had bought him, an expensive art book shoved casually his way in a tatty carrier bag, the first time either one of them had given the other a Christmas present. Of course, there was the motorcycle maintenance book he'd borrowed from Bodie—must remember to give that back. And another one of Bodie's books, *I, Robot*, a tattered receipt doing duty as bookmark. He really should return them to Bodie. Not, he supposed, that there was really much point, seeing as how much time they spent round each other's flats these days.

That made him sigh, too. He left the books to their own devices, poured himself a glass of whisky, raising it in defiant toast to the clock that read barely eleven in the morning. Hell's bells, if it was good enough for Cowley... Bodie-logic, that. Useful enough, sometimes, to become Doyle-logic.

Sipping slowly, he prowled the perimeter of the living room twice, still new enough to this place that he hadn't had the chance—the mischance—to memorise how many steps it took to pace this room. He counted, absently, forgot the number the minute he sat down, the sofa cradling him in comfort. At least Bodie wouldn't be complaining and walking around doing his hunchback of Notre Dame if he spent the night on *this* sofa. Bit of an improvement on his last place.

Always supposing, of course, that the next time Bodie spent the night, it'd be on the sofa and not in Doyle's bed.

And that made him sigh loudest of all.

Thoughtfully, he looked into his glass of whisky, and found no more answers written there than he usually did. Leaned back, eyes closed, and listened to the music. No answers there, just beautiful sounds washing over him with suggestions of relaxation and bliss.

Which brought him back to the question at hand. Bodie.

And what Doyle was going to do with him. To him. Or what Doyle was not going to do with him or to him or for him. Or what Doyle might do, if Bodie—

It wasn't supposed to be this difficult.

Start again. Look at the situation, start at the beginning, break it down into its component parts—

He was really quite delighted when the phone rang.

But then again, maybe not.

Bodie. Of course.

"You sickening for something?" Bodie, an edge of concern showing through the lightly mocking tone of voice.

"The only thing I'm sickening of is you, mate," Doyle told him tartly. "Told you, needed to take care of a few things—Christ, I've barely even finished moving in here, and you're moaning at me to..."

Pause, Bodie audibly smug even across the phone. "What is it you're moaning at me to do, anyway?"

"Not what, Ray, but *who*. Two lovely birds, and yours has a heart of gold—felt really sorry for you, she did, when I'd finished telling her all about you. She's willing to take pity on you, if you know what I mean."

A deaf, dumb, and blind boy would know what Bodie meant. "Yeh, well, you're a big boy, butch, you run off and play all by yourself."

"Come on, Ray, they're both gorgeous—and her face isn't half bad either. You'll like her—"

"Like that ruddy gymnast you palmed me off with? Or what about that 'lovely bird', the one who was a trainee mortician and looked like one of her own bloody victims?"

"Ah, but they were different," continuing easily over Doyle's predictable 'I'll say they were *different*', Bodie's voice smooth as silk as he poured words down Doyle's ear. "This one is a peach, a pearl, a—"

"A girl without a date tonight, and the only way you could get her sister or her friend—or her daughter, knowing you—to go out with you was by promising a friend for the other one. Well, this time, you'll have to find another mug."

"Ray..."

Wheedling, as only Bodie could be.

"It'll be fun—"

Resolve wavering, the laughter and encouragement in Bodie's voice alluring. "And you'll score, in like Flynn—"

Which changed it all. "I already said no, Bodie, and I meant it. Listen," before the pout he knew was there could be translated into blandishments that would end up in a double-date tonight, "you can come round tomorrow when you surface and I'll make you a proper breakfast and you can tell me all about it, all right?"

A moment's quiet. "Yeh, well, but if you're going into one of your broods..."

"I'm not, I just have to get this tip put in order. So I'll see you in the morning, all right?"

“You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“Oh, come off it, I’m not a virgin.”

Another moment’s quiet, then Bodie’s voice almost as quiet as the silence, Bodie breaking their own tacit rules. Perilously near seductive, Bodie all but whispered: “Oh, yeh, I know you’re not a virgin, Ray.”

Yeh, well, after last Thursday, Bodie *would* know that, wouldn’t he?

“Tomorrow, Bodie,” he said firmly.

“But she’s gorgeous, tall, tits like melons, legs up to—”

“Tomorrow,” he said, and hung up. Stood there for a minute wishing he could solve all his Bodie problems that easily.

Went back, slowly, to the sofa, and his whisky, and the sounds of children playing in the street.

Once upon a time, he’d pictured himself with his own children playing outside, his wife pretty and smiling when he came home, Detective Chief Inspector coming home from solving another major case, and hundreds more solved cases under his belt, his kids happy and healthy and doting on him—

Snapshot reality, that, pretty pictures, bearing only a passing resemblance to real life. Especially now. Especially if he was right. Which he knew he was. Which he feared he was.

Right. Look at it again. Go through it again. Add it all up. Tear it back down again. Look at it from a different angle. Turn it upside down, inside out. Come up with alternative theories. Come up with even more alternative theories.

But for every theory, there was an unexplained incident, an inexplicable look, a suspect word, a revelatory tone of voice.

Outside, the street grew quiet as the children were shouted inside for their lunches, the noise rising like the tide as they came back out again.

Still, Ray Doyle sat and tried to find a different answer, a different way of looking at it. Like a maze, he followed the ideas round and round, but there was no escape. Every hopeful premise would thunk into a dead-end, a baffle-wall pulling him up short. There was always something, something Bodie had done or said or looked. Always. Inescapably.

Silence in the streets now, children gone inside to watch *Blue Peter* and eat fish fingers, footsteps of the people coming home from work, cars, too, the empty kerbs filling with the all the colours of the vehicular rainbow.

And he still couldn’t reinterpret the facts. Still

couldn’t come up with an interpretation that would keep Cowley happy, that would keep the status quo. There was always an incident rocking the boat, Bodie making waves, all those touches and looks and comments and oddnesses. All his searching for answers today had done nothing but block off any avenue but one.

Which meant, it was the truth. Had to be. When all the possibilities are eliminated, then that which remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

Another misquote, he decided, but couldn’t be bothered trying to track down the correct version.

All that was left was the truth.

Which was absurd.

Which was terrifying.

Face it, he told himself. Put it into words. Put it into so many words.

Never do anything by half, that was Bodie’s motto, and Doyle was every inch the man Bodie was. So. Put it into words. Say it out loud.

“Bodie loves me.”

He nearly laughed. It sounded stupid—no, his honesty slapped him, it didn’t sound stupid, he just felt stupid saying it aloud like that. What it actually sounded like was something that he’d known all his life, something that had always been there, waiting patiently to be recognised. Bodie loved him.

That was what it was. Hardly surprising, really, given their lives, the way they lived in each other’s pockets, the job—of course they loved each other, even if they were too damned macho to admit it. That’s all it could possibly be.

Well, there was one more thing it could be.

No, he thought. “No,” he said, and felt stupider saying that than saying Bodie loved him. It wasn’t just that.

There was that one other thing it could be, the one he couldn’t deny any more, the one thing that a hundred small moments made pointed: the difference between him and Bodie loving each other like friends, and the way Bodie looked at him. The way Bodie felt about him. Out loud, again, before the truth could flee.

“Bodie’s in love with me.”

Now *that* was new. But not shocking. Echoed, almost, with familiarity. Resonated, deeply, with truth.

“Fucking hell,” Ray Doyle whispered into the fading sun of summer’s evening, “Bodie’s in love with me.”

After he’d said that, there didn’t seem much else to

do. Except get drunk. Get very, very drunk indeed.

Clawing his eyes open, sun raking him like acid, the pounding in his head separating into two separate rhythms, the sledgehammer inside his brain, and the thumping on his door.

Bodie.

Oh fuck.

Bodie.

The search for his dressing gown abandoned, he struggled into yesterday's jeans, yesterday's T-shirt half-way over his head before the fumes hit him: oh, wouldn't that go down just a treat, opening the front door at—fucking hell, seven o'-bloody-clock—seven on a Tuesday morning smelling like a still. Fine way to avoid Bodie looking at him askance, and Bodie beginning the dig to find out what the hell could be so wrong that Doyle would answer the door at this time in the morning, smelling drunk and looking like a natural disaster.

Of course, it was round about now that it dawned on Doyle that he wasn't actually answering the door, but sitting there on the edge of his tangled bed, jeans cutting into his overly-sensitive stomach, the offending and offensive T-shirt half wrapped round one arm.

Any second now, and that beating Bodie was giving the door would get the neighbours after him with hatchets, always supposing Bodie hadn't decided there was a serious CI5-type problem and brought half the squad round here with guns drawn and—

He still wasn't answering the door, and he could only half blame his slowness on the half-life of the booze still in his system. In the warm light of morning, yesterday's prognostications began to look a bit on the silly side, something conjured up by a mind with nothing else to worry over. That was it, he told himself. Just himself, getting himself worked up into a fine tizz over nothing. He'd let Bodie in and they'd have a good giggle over what Doyle had thought. Nah, better make it a dream: Bodie might take it the wrong way, if he found out just what his partner had been thinking yesterday.

"All right, all right, keep your hair on," he muttered, leaning on the door for a minute, the last thud of Bodie's fist reverberating through his skull, then Bodie's voice getting louder as the door opened wider.

"About time, too, mate. Another minute and I'd've been coming through your window—"

And there it was, ineluctable, right there in Bodie's eyes, that deep hunger fed by Doyle's half-nakedness.

"—with my gun drawn," the expression hidden, the desire masked, Bodie continuing on, verbally and physically, moving on down the hall towards the kitchen, his voice carrying over his shoulder as though he'd never looked at Doyle as if he could joyfully fuck him into next week, "and wouldn't that just give the neighbourhood gossips a field day? Oi, I thought you said you were going to feed me?"

Oh, Christ, so he had. Feed Bodie a proper breakfast, and sit there listening to Bodie go on about last night's sex. Definite proof: he obviously was a closet masochist.

Bodie, bent nearly double, peering in at the wan contents of Doyle's fridge. "Where's the bacon? And there's no sausage. No tomatoes—you haven't even any eggs in!" Straightening, looking at Doyle in mock horror, and under it, well-disguised, barely visible, the desire, Bodie betrayed by the way his glance flickered down to Doyle's chest, then back to his eyes, only to snatch another surreptitious look, this one aimed at where Doyle's waistband didn't quite shut, the button working loose, the zip slowly declining. "Here, you weren't going to feed me that muesli rubbish, were you or—" dramatic gulp, eyes widening in terror, "fruit and yoghurt?"

"Give me a minute," Doyle told him, turning away, unnervingly convinced that he could feel the heat of Bodie's stare against the curve of his bum, "and I'll feed you. All the artery cloggers you can eat."

"Yeah? You and who's army?"

"Me and Joe's caff."

"You paying?"

"I'm paying."

A heavy thud, Doyle turning in time to see Bodie fainting dead away, hand to fevered forehead, lashes fluttering. "Oh, the shock, the shock. It's too much for my poor heart."

"Told you all that muck was making you flabby."

And was that purely professional concern darkening Bodie's expression, or was it dismay that Doyle might think him fat?

Whatever it was, Doyle would think about it later, after he'd had a wash, and a gallon or so of good strong tea. Later would be soon enough. But never would be best of all.

Joe's Transport Café was half empty this late in the morning, the drivers long since on the road, the

builders and navvies already sweating on site, the smartly-suited office workers turning their noses up as they walked past the déclassé establishment.

“Have a nice lie-in, lads?” Joe asked them, the first cup already half-poured for them. “The usual?”

“Please. And can I have an extra slice of fried bread? And how about some mushrooms?”

“Doyle paying then, I take it?”

“Got it in one.”

“Two specials coming right up, then. Got some nice pork chops this morning too, you know.”

Doyle shook his head in resignation. “We’ll take one of the big tables today, give you enough room for all the bloody plates you’ll need to fill the bottomless pit here.”

Then they were settled at the formica table, tea steaming between them, Bodie regaling half the café with lurid details of last night’s highly improbable acts.

Doyle was proud of how normal they both made it seem, really, the backchat and the joking, the over-the-top lewd interlude giving way to the minutiae of daily life, the organising of the sort of details that always crop up when two people work together and socialise together, their turn to put on the next birthday do, looming on Thursday.

“So I’ll get the beer in, you’ll do the food, and we’ll put the word out to the rest of the lads. Sounds fair enough.”

“And if any of them want something harder than beer, then they can bring their own. You goin’ round the cash’n’carry?”

“Where else? What’re you going to cook for the starving horde?”

Doyle shrugged, grinned at the inroads Bodie had made in his massive breakfast. “Dunno. Probably a bolognese. And I’ll make something for the rest of the lads as well.”

Bodie was too busy stuffing half a sausage, a chunk of fried tomato, a wedge of fried bread and the dripping of a yolk into his mouth to get his own back for that comment, but did a good job of looking daggers at Doyle who, of course, just smiled.

Timing it just right, Bodie still manfully trying to chew, Doyle asked, “So what d’you fancy then?”

And horrified at the change knowledge had wrought between them, found himself adding, too quickly, “To eat that night, I mean.” Saw suspicion dawning. Covered his tracks with Bodiean deftness. “After sitting here putting up with you going on and on about last night, I already know what you fancy.”

Huge swallow, gulp of tea, Bodie relaxed as always. And Doyle didn’t believe it for a second. Oh, what he wouldn’t give for this to be some book, so that he could turn to the end and read the pages that would explain everything—and tell him what the hell he should do. But this wasn’t a story, so all he could do was look at his partner and friend and the man who loved him, and pretend to believe that pose of relaxation as much as Bodie had apparently believed Doyle’s own little fibs.

“Lasagne,” Bodie was saying, as if he hadn’t noticed the odd expression on Doyle’s face. “An’ a gâteau for afters.”

“Think I’m made of money, do you?” Doyle asked, predictably, but with no heat, his mind back in that maze of Bodie’s reactions, and Bodie’s motives, and what Bodie so blissfully thought he was hiding from Doyle. “I’ll get the gâteau from that bakery round from my last flat—”

“Two flats ago,” Bodie managed round the last of his bacon, eyes warm.

“Two flats ago,” absently, focussing all his attention on the remnants of his own breakfast. Not quite the artery-clogging masterpiece currently disappearing down Bodie’s gullet, but eating the rest of it was better than looking at Bodie, and at an expression that would have Bodie dying of embarrassment.

An amiable bit of arguing over whether or not an agreement to pay for breakfast was valid if extracted by the undue duress of Bodie’s moaning, and then they were strolling down towards Bodie’s car, sunshine heating their shoulders, a day merely on-call stretching gloriously in front of them. Until their RTs went, anyway.

“Christ, Lucas and McCabe pick a fine time to bugger off on holiday, don’t they?” Bodie, muttering, the tyres squealing as he hurtled them off to meet Cowley. “Lazy bastards.”

Doyle just gave him a look, and went on listening to the stream of information pouring from the radio link.

A montage of work, no time for that ‘later’ he’d promised himself to think about Bodie.

And half-ashamed, Doyle wasn’t entirely sorry.

All good things must pass, so the mad race to trace the weapons smuggler was over, and the attempting bombing had been averted, and the kidnapping had been satisfactorily solved, with lots of loss of life on the baddies’ side. Another round of CI5 successes, in other words, and Cowley happy enough to lengthen

their leash.

So now he was sitting in his flat again, thinking, again, with the voices of children providing distraction—again. The fridge was packed with food, the cooking was already started, nothing at all for him to do for at least an hour. Which meant that he'd run out of excuses. Time to think about it. Again.

Right. So he knew Bodie was in love with him. Theory proved, evidence amassing, he could get a conviction in any court in the land.

Bodie was in love with him.

Fine. Terrific.

But now what?

He was drinking PLJ today, remembering Bodie ribbing him about 'caring for that delicate, English-rose complexion, are you then, petal?'. He was on call, technically, too risky to have too much to drink, though it was tempting.

What the fuck was he going to do?

The choices prostrated themselves in front of him.

Do nothing. He could do that. But Bodie wasn't stupid, and despite the oft-evinced opinion otherwise, Bodie didn't think Doyle was stupid either. And just to make sure Doyle didn't simply ignore the whole thing until it conveniently went away, Bodie had been slipping up more and more recently, as if he—at least subconsciously—wanted Doyle to click. So doing nothing was a temporary option, stopgap at best.

Have a heart-to-heart with Bodie about it. Yeah, and if he wanted a heart-to-heart with Bodie, he'd have to arrange them a nice new Parsali situation, the only time Bodie'd come close to actually putting things into so many words. Any other time, and it was all jokes and misdirections, or if pushed enough, he'd end up with Bodie's fist in his mouth. Oh, yeh, a heart-to-heart was just the ticket.

Make it clear he was straight—as if Bodie didn't know that already. The number of times they'd double-dated, it was bloody obvious he was straight—straight as...well, straight as Bodie, who'd been on just as many double dates. Cue the next solution.

Make it clear he wasn't interested.

That was the best, yes, make sure Bodie knew Doyle knew, make sure he got the message that—

That what? That Doyle wasn't interested, didn't care about him?

Which wasn't, strictly speaking, true. He did care about Bodie. A lot. More than anyone else, really, and he certainly got on better with the stupid bastard than

with anyone else. Who had been there to pick up the pieces when Ann realised he just wasn't up to snuff? Bodie, of course, and here he was thinking about doing just that to Bodie. Except there'd be no-one to pick up Bodie's pieces afterwards, would there?

Cue the next solution.

He could leave, just walk away—but that would mean leaving CI5, and Bodie, which just went to prove how desperate he was. He turned that desperation round and round in his head until he could look at it straight on, unflinching. Interesting, the root of his desperation, considering he'd always thought of himself as being open-minded, adventurous, even.

Which led to the crux of the matter, of course: was he avoiding the thought because it turned his stomach or did it just scare the hell out of him because he needed it too much?

Unblinking, he conjured the image up in his mind, looking at himself and Bodie the way he knew Bodie wanted him—them.

Bodie. And him. In bed. Naked.

Didn't make him throw up. So far so good.

Kissing. Touching. Hard. Rubbing against each other—

Definite possibilities there, judging by the way his body was reacting. No actual erection, but at least he hadn't shrivelled to nothing and he wasn't running screaming from the room into the arms of the first woman he could grab.

He could picture Bodie's face more clearly than their bodies, the way Bodie looked at him, the way Bodie had looked at him a dozen or a hundred times before, as if he wanted to hold Doyle forever, keep him safe, kiss him all over.

Love. Gorgeous sight, that, Bodie in love. The trust involved was enough to make anyone's head spin, and add to that the loyalty Doyle knew was in Bodie, and it was hardly surprising the idea had its temptations.

So, think about it, he told himself. The two of them, in bed, having sex, because there was no way on God's green earth that Bodie would settle for platonic hand-holding, and he'd better be bloody sure he wouldn't humiliate either one of them before he laid a finger on Bodie.

He leaned against the back of the sofa, and tried to imagine what sex with a man—sex with Bodie—would feel like. How long it would take for Bodie to want to fuck him. And how the hell he would react to *that*.

Bloody doorbell. Muttering some very choice

phrases picked up from one or two of Bodie's ex-Service mates, Doyle went to the door, not entirely surprised that his partner should be standing cluttering the doormat, an army of carrier bags hanging from his person like ballast.

For a second, Doyle knew, just knew, that what he'd been thinking was written all over his face. In neon. Three feet high. But then the desire and the warmth faded from Bodie's eyes, and a line appeared between those quizzical brows, and no-one, not even Ray Doyle, could convince himself that he really had seen what he'd thought he'd seen.

"Yes? Can I help you?" Doyle asked politely, hoarding his grin as Bodie stood there wilting.

"You can fucking let me in." Flat, no twinkle in those blue eyes at all, not now, just shuttered distance and coolness to hide pain.

"Give me a couple of those bags," Doyle said, actually taking some of them, shocking Bodie no end. Going towards the kitchen, aware of Bodie following behind him, not quite at ease with the knowledge that Bodie would be looking at his bum, wanting to be inside him.

Easily enough, they sorted the drinks out, some on the table, the rest stacked neatly on the floor for easy access—especially later in the night, when not everyone would still be able to walk and drink at the same time. It didn't take long at all, and all through it, Bodie said not a single word.

"Christ, it must be bad."

"What must?" from Bodie, fishing through the pockets of his jacket for something.

"The sauce. Must be bad. If you haven't tried to pinch some."

"Oh." Blank look towards the pot simmering away to itself. Shrug. "Just not hungry."

"That's never stopped you before."

"Well, it's stopping me today. Right, I'm off, I'll see you tonight, probably not 'til about half nine though."

Bodie was half-way out the door before Doyle stopped him, Doyle's comments tossed ever-so-casually over his shoulder. "You sickening for something?"

Pause. "No more'n you were the other night."

Then the door was closed, gently, and Doyle was left to his own devices, and his ponderings over Bodie's vices.

"Christ, I've seen more room in sardine cans!" Bodie yelled into Doyle's left ear. "When the fuck did the squad get this big?"

Doyle took another long drink of lager, mind half on what Bodie was saying, the rest of his attention on the music, the beat going through him. "Always been this big, just not used to seeing everyone all together, that's all."

"And since when've the blokes started bringing their birds to these things?"

Since Cowley started looking funny at certain blokes, Doyle thought, catching the words on the tip of his tongue before they could escape. Another mouthful of lager, can shoved into Bodie's hand, and he was off, moving easily through the crowd, neatly separating Murphy from his blonde, Doyle grinning as he stole Murphy's partner away.

It was hot in the living room, the crowd a terrific excuse for dancing too close, the changing music a better excuse yet, the slow rhythm an invitation to take her in his arms and hold her close.

"Having a nice night, Susan?" he asked her, taking liberties she'd normally castrate him for, his groin pressing close against her.

"I've had better," she told him, her thigh pushing his groin farther away from her, her left hand grabbing his backside. "Much better."

"Tsk, tsk, you should wash your mouth out with soap, telling lies like that."

"Give over, Doyle, you're not God's gift to women and I'm not Bodie."

Tinglings of unease replaced the tinglings of arousal. There were probably a million things she could have meant by that, but with Bodie dancing not two inches away from his arse, Doyle couldn't think of anything but the one, single reason burning in his own mind.

Susan pulled him in closer to her again, angling him so that he was sandwiched neatly between her front and Betty's back; watched, with an expression bordering on lust as Betty manoeuvred Bodie in his turn, the two women grinning at each other over masculine shoulders now that they finally had Bodie and Doyle precisely where they wanted them.

Susan's breasts pressing softly against his chest, Doyle knew that the arse currently moving against his own was male. And it didn't take a genius to work out whose arse it was. The words almost got away from him, but he swallowed them instead, nearly choking on them. *Christ, had everyone but him known?*

Hot on their heels: *and what was Cowley going to do about it?*

"You've gone pale, Ray," Susan asked, amusement

leavening her over-done expression of sympathy.

“Do you want to sit down?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” he lied, grinning at her, distracting her with an unlawful hand on the swell of her buttocks. “It was just the fear of you not spending the night with me—”

“Trying to land me for the night, Ray—and in front of Bodie?” she muttered, applying a none-too-gentle and well-developed thigh to his tenderest spot. “Don’t be any more of a creep than you have to be, Doyle, or you’ll be singing soprano.”

“Oh yeh? You and whose army?”

“Me,” she whispered, strong fingers slowly threatening to crush his left kidney, “and George Cowley’s army.”

“For fuck’s sake—”

“Not a chance, petal,” she said, smiling ever so sweetly as she patted him on the cheek. “That’s Bodie’s department, anyway, isn’t it?”

And he was left trying not to look like a complete wally, standing there suddenly alone in the middle of the room.

“Here,” Bodie, of course, doing yet another impersonation of the 7th Cavalry, Betty thrust into his arms, “take care of Betty for me while I get us a drink, will you, mate? And—” the usual swipe of hand over arse, Bodie ending this one with a distinct pinch, “you keep your hands to yourself, mate, she’s mine, aren’t you, Betty love?”

“Chance would be a fine thing,” she laughed, walking away from CI5’s finest, leaving the Doyle with nothing much else to do but follow behind as Bodie led the way to the drinks.

The party was quieter now, much quieter—especially after the police had been round that second time—far fewer people around, lights dimmed, slow, dreamy music on the hi-fi, couples kissing on the sofa, friends talking in small enclaves around the devastation that had been two huge lasagnes.

Doyle sipped his lager, knowing himself to be drunk, knowing Bodie was probably drunk too. His partner was over by the door, laughing like a drain over something Susan had said. Definitely drunk, Doyle decided, having a good look at Bodie. Dishevelled, tie long gone, sleeves rolled up, first three buttons undone—the man was showing more skin than he did when he went swimming, near enough. Wondered, not entirely idly, if it was merest coincidence that Bodie was looking more like Doyle than himself, or if it was a case of what they said about old married couples, growing to look like each other over

time. Definitely drunk, he repeated to himself, mind beginning to loop on itself, thoughts clouding as he stared at his partner, at the man who would be his lover, given half the chance.

A dunt in his ribs, Murphy winking lewdly at him in passing, on his way to let Susan sweep him from the room and leave Bodie with nothing luscious or blonde to occupy him.

Christ, but he was surrounded by a bunch of drunken bloody matchmakers!

He wandered over and told Bodie so, expecting a reassuringly devastating assessment of the Doyle clan’s combined intelligence compared to the size of a thimble.

“Nah,” Bodie said dismissively, dragging Doyle with him so Bodie could sit himself down in the comfort of an armchair. “My feet are killing me. Our Betty’s lovely, but I swear she has two left feet. Size 12s.”

“Never mind your feet, what d’you mean Murphy and Susan weren’t matchmaking? They bloody were!”

“No they weren’t,” Bodie, patient, eyes fond as he looked up at Doyle who’d perched, unthinkingly, on the arm of Bodie’s chair. “They can’t be matchmaking because they think we’re already attached at the hip.”

Doyle opened his mouth to answer, shut it again, teeth clicking.

“This is like a fucking Fellini film,” he muttered, running his hand through his hair, aborting the gesture when he saw the way Bodie was looking at him. “C’mon, Bodie, there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell that those two—anyone in the squad—would think that and be that all right about it.”

“Oh, yeh, *Dixon of Dock Green*, that’s us.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, Ray, think about it. We *kill* people for a living. We go undercover as every kind of scum the ‘man in the street’ couldn’t ever imagine, we run around risking our lives every single day—and you think the Squad’s going to care who we’re fucking? Listen,” words slightly slurred now, temper combining with alcohol, “compared to what half this Squad does to get its jollies, fucking a fella’s dead fucking natural.”

“I’m not saying it’s not—”

“But just that ‘cos you’ve got a poker up your arse, you think everyone else should be the same.”

“I’m—”

“Oh, it gave me a bit of a laugh, it really did, Mr. Open-Minded here turning puce ‘cos he realised a

bloke fancied him. An' of course, if Mr. I've-been-to-art-school Man Of The World can't handle one bloke wanting another bloke, then everyone else in the world has to be as narrow minded as him. Now am I right or am I right?"

"Yeh, but the rest of the world isn't the one with someone panting to shove a prick up his arse, are they?"

Bodie laughed at that: either that, or a nasty, cruel sound, torn from an open wound. "That's what this is all about for you, isn't it? Christ, Doyle—"

Bright, bright blue eyes, staring up at him, and then Bodie was stumbling to his feet, lurching to loom over Doyle.

"This is what it's all about," Bodie muttered. "This is what it's *all* about."

He had been so sure he was expecting that kiss. He literally saw it coming, Bodie's face coming closer, completely filling his field of vision, his own eyes refusing to close even when Bodie's expression was a mere blur of blue eyes and dark eyebrows. He felt the first touch of lips against his own, the first pressure, the first wetness of tongue against him. He opened his mouth, giving Bodie entry, letting Bodie kiss him. No different, he thought, from a lot of women he'd kissed: strong, demanding, tongue exploring him, tempting him to follow and make explorations of his own. The taste was different, and the texture of skin against his was—distracting. Roughness, where he'd only known softness before, the very faint beginnings of stubble against his own. Need to make sure we shave before we fuck, he thought abstractedly, filing that away along with all the sensations. Bodie left his mouth for a moment, then was back inside him, and under the simmerings of lust were the glimmerings of just how much Bodie adored him, of just how tenderly Bodie loved him.

And that, that was so very different from anything he'd known before.

Bodie's hands—Christ, such big hands!—were stroking his face now, brief, fluttering touches as if Bodie, even now, expected to be punched for his temerity, Bodie touching and kissing him with all the passion of Lancelot finally finding the Holy Grail.

And then Bodie was pushing him away, voice raw with emotion, words indecipherable, but the pain was speaking.

"Bodie—"

"'scuse me, too much beer, have to piss," Bodie said loudly, face averted, Bodie tense as he all but bolted, forgetting his excuse half-way across the

room, the hands that had barely touched Doyle suddenly busy gathering empty cans up, spilling ashtrays, making the room more of a disaster than it had been. Then, Bodie, standing up straight, stock still for a moment, just a heartbeat, and the smile was back, and Bodie was Bodie, no different from the way he was any other time.

It was enough to break a heart far harder than Doyle's. The kiss had lasted what, thirty seconds, a minute, two? A lifetime, more like. Painful to think of how many times he'd seen this side of Bodie, all machismo and mouth, now that he knew what that half-obnoxious façade hid.

All that love, for him.

Unconditional, too—Bodie understood the job, understood the pressures and the humour and the thrill and the everything. Understood all the things that civilians could never be expected to really grasp, no matter how intelligent nor how hard they tried.

Not many people in this world could know what it was like but Bodie, though, knew what it felt like to be a hairsbreadth away from dying. Or from killing.

Across the room, Bodie was telling one of his infamous tall tales to a McCabe who was well on his way from plastered to unconscious.

"C'mon," Doyle said, heaving McCabe up off the sofa, "you can sleep it off in your own bed. I'm not having you puking all over my good covers."

"Never get sick," McCabe declared, cross-eyed, trying to work out when Bodie had developed curls. "Never been sick in my life. Never, never even been the teensiest bit sick."

"There's a minicab on its way," Lucas put in. "I'll see him home." Adding, longsufferingly, as he hoisted McCabe's arm over his shoulders and began the delicate task of guiding his partner down Doyle's stairs to the taxi, "Yes, yes, I know all about it. You never get sick. Unless you drink lager. Or wine or whisky. Or unless you get in a car or a taxi or walk home..."

Voices fading, covered up by the rest of the stragglers yelling or muttering their farewells.

The door closed, the last voice making a last disparaging remark, the distinctive sound of a taxi's diesel engine fading fast.

Just the two of them, now, and the mess, and the memory of that kiss.

"I'll start cleaning up this lot, then," Bodie said briskly. The cans and bottles made an awful racket as he threw them into the bin bag, his forehead frowning as he made his way round the room. "This bloody

shower—born in pigsties, the lot of them, never mind bloody barns. God, I hate mucky ashtrays, and it'll take a week's soaking to get these pans clean, Doyle. Should have lined them with tin foil, made it all a hell of a lot easier—"

A pause there, the spate abating. When finally he spoke again, Bodie's back was turned to Doyle, his voice very calm, steady as his hands even in the worst of firefights. "It's all right, you know. I'm not going to make a pass at you or anything."

"Limit yourself to one a night, do you?"

Not quite a laugh for that. "If I did, you'd be in trouble, mate—after the number of nights I've never made a pass at you, I'd have a mountain of passes by now. No, cross my heart, I won't make a pass at you."

"But you did tonight."

"Yes," resignedly, almost on a sigh, "I did tonight. And I'm sorry, it'll never happen again and can we please just forget it?"

"What? Forget that my partner just kissed me in front of everyone?"

"Wasn't in front of everyone, most of them'd already gone home or were so far gone Cowley could've shagged a sheep in front of them and they wouldn't've noticed."

A long pause then, Doyle's demons nipping at his heels until the words came out his mouth. "We could get fired for what you did."

Another heavy sigh, another clunk as another can joined the army in the plastic bag. "Not if you said I did it against your will. Then it'd just be me who got the sack."

Oh, would some power the giftie gi'e us, to see ourselves as others see us. Trust a bloody Scot to turn a blessing into a curse. "You really think I'd do that, do you?"

Not looking at Doyle now. "Sometimes."

"If you think that...then why the fuck do you love me?"

Facing him suddenly, a beatific smile lighting Bodie's face. "Bugged if I know." Two seconds Bodie allowed himself, and then the smile was tucked neatly away along with the love that had so briefly showed. Back to normal, no different from any other day. "Here, if you're not going to do a hand's turn to clean this place up, it can stay like this till morning. I'm off, see you later."

No different from any other day: apart from what Bodie had done. "Wait a minute, you. You kiss me, you don't deny it when I say you love me, and then you just up and off?"

"What else d'you expect? A nice heart-to-heart straight from the pages of *Women's Own*?" Shoulder- ing into his jacket now, keys gathered into his hands, devil-take-the-hindmost smile pasted firmly in place. "So I'll see you tomorrow, give you a hand with the rest of this, fair enough?"

He could have argued the point, could have insisted that Bodie stay and sort this out right now. Could have, would have, if only he hadn't seen the pain in Bodie's eyes.

Not even his own coven of demons could make him that cruel, not to Bodie. "Nah, it's all right, you've done your bit. I'll do the rest. See you at work then."

"Fine. Right, I'm off now."

"Right."

One last look, one last shuttered expression, then Bodie took a deep breath and walked out the door, no different from any other night or any other day.

Except that Bodie had kissed him.

And Bodie hadn't denied loving him.

Doyle kicked the nearest can and headed for bed.

"He's got to be joking. He can't be serious, not this. For fu—"

"Yes, Bodie?"

"Ah, nothing, sir. Just applauding your brilliant decision to send Doyle and me in to guard Her Royal Highness."

"Aye, well, given who it is, even your mouth shouldn't get you into trouble there. But I want none of your blaspheming, and if there's a single complaint about that foul mouth of yours, you'll be counting trawlers off the Hebrides."

Bodie drew his boss' retreating back a filthy look.

"The *Outer* Hebrides, Bodie."

"Yes, sir, no sir, three bags full sir," he mouthed, making sure not even Cowley could hear him. But three weeks guarding Princess Anne. They'd be up to their knees in manure half the time. Wonderful. Just bloody wonderful.

"Pet parrot died then?" Doyle asked pleasantly.

"Worse than that. Read this and weep."

Doyle read it, and while he didn't weep, his eyes did grow suspiciously bright. "That bastard. That conniving, vengeful old bastard! He did this because of that last expense chit, you do realise that, don't you? This is his idea of revenge. Three weeks trailing round Anne at horse shows and garden parties and opening children's wards—he did this on bloody purpose."

“Better than counting trawlers.”

“You’ve never had Royal duty before, have you?”

With careful condescension, Bodie’s incredulous stare took Doyle in, from the roots of his untamed hair to the toes of his decidedly scuffed trainers.

“No, I haven’t either, but I was on the sharp-shooting security detail for one of the Princes, once. It’s a fate worse than death, that’s what this is.”

“Can’t be that bad.”

“Just you wait: ten minutes after we get there, I’ll be saying, ‘told you so’.”

With an adjutant breathing down their necks every second, it took two and a half hours and a bathroom break before Doyle’s prediction came true.

“Told you so,” he said.

“Told me what?” Bodie asked, distractedly, his expression very odd indeed.

“Told you guarding a Royal was a fate worse than death.”

“Nah. Marrying George Cowley’s a fate worse than death.”

“Only if you consummated it.” He nearly bit his tongue trying to take the words back before Bodie heard them.

“Oh, God, yeh,” Bodie replied, drying his hands. “Fucking Our George—”

“Oh, hello, sir,” Doyle said loudly, covering up whatever the hell Bodie had been about to hang them both with. “Didn’t expect to see you for another hour.”

“Aye, at which point you pair would have this place tighter than an Aberdonian’s sporrán. No point in checking when you know it’s coming, is there?”

“No sir,” they chorused, edging hastily towards the door. “No point at all.”

The door swung shut, Bodie wiping his brow with exaggerated relief, turning the near disaster into just another pantomime, all personal details forgotten in the pressure to do the job and to do it right.

In fact, it was only long after dark and long after he’d out-wrestled yet another ancient spring hell-bent on murder that Doyle had time to actually think about how off Bodie had been—how odd he’d been in the loo before Cowley walked in and caught them. Embarrassingly enough, fatigue and overwork immediately blamed, it was nearly ten minutes later before it even dawned on Doyle just what that expression on Bodie’s face had been. And how much it had had to do with Doyle’s own state of undress at the moment.

Bodie, lusting after him, Bodie needing him, and

doing everything in his power not to let it show on his face.

Lovely. Just lovely. Terrific feeling, this, knowing he was responsible for hurting his best friend, the one person in the entire universe he never got tired of, the only person who mattered more than himself. The only person he’d actually gladly die for, if it meant Bodie would keep on living. Not some abstract ideal where defending that brought the risk of death. No, the personal sort of risk, a very personal death. He could, he knew, walk coldly into a room where people were waiting to kill him if it so much as gave Bodie a chance of living.

No greater love hath a man...

Doyle punched his pillow did his damndest to sleep.

There either wasn’t enough time to breathe, or there was far too much time to think. And all the time, there was Bodie, at his side, at his back, in his head.

Bodie, in love with him. Bodie, doing a nigh-perfect job of concealing his emotions. Bodie, turning away that time, but not before Doyle had seen the bulge in his trousers, the pale fabric revealing Bodie’s arousal in a long line down his thigh.

And just what the hell was he supposed to do about *that*?

Entangled in starched sheets, sweat curling lazily down his spine, the last throb of passion shuddering through him.

Must have been some wet dream, he said to himself, stretching out full length in the bed, grinning as the old memories of puberty thrust themselves into his mind.

He couldn’t quite remember who he’d been dreaming about, but... Oh, Bodie, of course. And somewhere, Ann. And then himself and Bodie, Ann disapproving, jealous, demanding that he stop kissing Bodie and come back to her, she needed him, needed him so very much...

So what was it that had given him that sweet wet-dream now so quickly souring: was it lust for Bodie, or power at having Ann, of all people, being weak and needing him?

No greater love hath a man that he should lay down his life. Or no greater love hath a man than he should lay down his body, spread his legs and say, go on, mate, take what you need, it’s all yours.

Maybe not like that. But that night, at the party, when Bodie had kissed him... What would it have

been like, if Bodie had been kissing him, and that erection Doyle had seen straining the seam of Bodie's cream cords had ended up pressing against Doyle, rubbing against him, so full of need and love and—

Not the sort of thing you could phone a mate up and say, listen, I think I might be starting to fancy you, fancy a shag? Well, he could have done that with Bodie, once. Before he'd realised that Bodie loved him.

What a mess. He should do a painting of this and call it *Life*. Be easy, just paint the most tangled Gordian Knot ever imagined. That would just about do it.

He was going to have to do something about this. Soon.

He pictured Bodie's face if they did the 'something' that they were, eventually, ineluctably, going to have to do.

Pictured Bodie's face if it didn't work out.

Could he really take the chance of hurting Bodie that much?

Oh, yes, he really needed to do something about this untidy unravelment of a situation. Just...not right this second.

Yet another headache building at the base of his neck, every last trace of pleasure from his dream destroyed, Doyle forced himself back to sleep, where he was haunted by Bodie's face as Doyle failed him.

Down time, the quiet days that were publicly complained about so bitterly, but which were privately so cherished. Nothing to do but file work and playing catch-up, time to let half-healed strains and bruises finally fade.

No children outside now, just out-dated businessmen clinging to tradition and holding their hats on as the wind threatened to catch them up and swirl them off to dance amongst the dead leaves spinning from trees. The sounds today were traffic noises, and the voices coming from the typists' room, muttered invectives from the computer room as a so-called expert resorted to using clubs and stones to thump modern technology into thick skulls.

Doyle smiled at his reflection in the window: they were still alive, he and Bodie, still in one piece—well, two, but everyone thought of them as a single functioning unit. Even that nasty bullet crease on Bodie's neck had healed, barely a hint of a scar, too.

All the reports were done, expense chits were in and for once, reimbursed with all due speed. They had done their weapons refresher course, physicals,

the lot, and now all they had to do was savour this time—and have lunch.

And sort out this morass with Bodie. But later, maybe, after that Ministerial assessment that was coming in November.

His footsteps echoed behind him like spies as he set off for the rest room. Stopped, a fraction after him, as he stood framed in the doorway. There was, really, nothing wrong with the scene.

Nothing at all. Just the ravening of sudden jealousy and his fingers itched, suddenly, hungrily, for the weight of his gun.

Bodie, lazing on the decrepit old sofa, Murphy sitting beside him, the two dark heads bent close together over the newspaper spread on the coffee table in front of them. The Page 3 girl was all but leaping off the page at them, all breasts and white, grinning teeth.

Murphy was saying something about Everton, and Bodie, predictably, was counterstriking with praise for Liverpool's centre forward.

All perfectly normal. Nothing to get worked up about.

But he still craved the feel of his gun.

Bodie hadn't even looked up at him yet, sitting there with Murphy, wrapped up in his newspaper bird and his football.

"Having a nice time are we?" he said nastily.

"Well, we are," Bodie said lightly, "dunno about you, mate."

"Glad to hear that. Especially since I've just spent two fucking hours sorting out the mess you made of the Connery file."

Very still now, Murphy looking from one partner to the other, Bodie dangerously relaxed, the deceptive ease before the attack. "You volunteered to do the Connery file because I'd done the York paperwork."

"So now it's *my* fault I ended up with all the work? Oh, that's nice, that is. Very decent of you, Bodie—Where d'you think you're going?"

"Anywhere where you're *not*." Snarled, in passing, Bodie's shoulder hard as it shoved him out of place.

"You know," laconically, as Murphy came gracefully to his feet, "I can't understand what he sees in you."

"Maybe he gets tired of the intellectual challenge of talking football and birds."

"Oh, that's what you think we've spent the last couple of hours discussing, do you?" That lazy smile, so heavily laced with slow, hot anger. "Just you keep this in mind, Ray Doyle," standing tall now, a telling

few inches taller than Doyle, nothing lazy about that smile now. "Bodie's a friend of mine. You don't think it matters that we did our SAS training together, do you? Well it does. He's my mate too, you stupid bastard. And one other thing, before I go and see to my mate: you just remember that if you don't want him," an ungentle punch against Doyle's upper arm, "there are plenty who do."

Then the rest room was empty, apart from Doyle standing on the threshold, and then Doyle was racing away too, and the room was left, bereft.

Running hard, he was half way to the car before he allowed himself to identify why he'd craved his gun. Jealousy. Ugly, nasty, pathetic jealousy.

And it was only after the most liquid of lunches that he dared admit what had fuelled all that jealousy and anger. Bodie, sitting there on the sofa, with Murphy there, where Doyle belonged.

Maybe it was time to admit something else to himself.

Maybe it was time to admit he was as much in love with Bodie as Bodie was with him.

And it hurt.

The day before a sodden blur, the phone ringing off the hook threatened to knock his head off his shoulders. Hangover pounding through his head and searing through his stomach, they were halfway through Cowley's diatribe over the sins of taking an unauthorised afternoon off work, when Doyle was unceremoniously and loudly sick all over the place.

At least it had the benefit of shutting Cowley up.

And the even greater benefit of driving any last faint memories of yesterday right out of his head.

It's amazing what a man can forget when he needs to.

Himself, in love with Bodie? Nah, whoever would think a thing like that?

Sitting in the car, bored to tiredness by the routine of slow-paced enquiries, headache still lingering to keep his sour stomach company. There was a thought running circles in his head, like a half-remembered song he couldn't get rid of. The differences between love and in love, one so acceptable, the other acceptable only under carefully licensed situations. Not that he was going to ask, but he wondered when it had changed for Bodie, when it had gone from loving his partner, the man who guarded his back, to being in love with the individual man, Raymond Doyle. For that matter, he wondered if it had been a transition, or

if all that macho hostility at the start had been Bodie trying desperately not to fall in love with him.

There were times Doyle felt like a heel: today, he felt like a heel on a pair of clapped-out old work boots that had never been worth anything in the first place.

Christ, but what the hell was he going to do about Bodie?

"Scintillating, isn't it?"

"What is?" Doyle asked, scarcely paying attention.

"One firm trying to steal another firm's secrets, and Cowley's finest called in to save the day. And what for? The secret of softer toilet paper. I mean, who the hell cares about bog paper?"

"People with piles?" Not caring, too lazy to point out that softening toilet paper was the least of this chemical compound's attributes, too tied up with what Bodie had gone through to have much patience for meaningless prattle.

"Wouldn't mind if it was something important—like a nuclear power plant. Now *that's* something worth protecting."

Doyle couldn't even be bothered to stir himself for their usual pro/anti nuclear power battle. "S'pose so."

Silence.

Silence, and Bodie glancing at him.

Silence, and Bodie looking at him.

"Might be nice if you'd look at the road, once in a while," Doyle said easily, slumped down in his seat, eyes half closed, sure that Bodie had no idea what Doyle was thinking.

"Oh, I can see exactly where I'm going."

Doyle looked at him then, taking in the tight set of jaw, the clench of knuckles bleached white by the steering wheel.

Bits of yesterday came back to him in a nauseating flood.

Just what had Bodie and Murphy been talking about yesterday?

"How long've you known Murphy?"

That got a raised eyebrow, but at least Bodie was willing to answer him for once. "God knows. I'd met him a couple of times when I was still with the Paras, but it wasn't until we were paired off in the SAS that we started being mates."

Doyle could have kicked himself: he really should have expected that unfurling of jealousy in the pit of his stomach.

"Good mate, is he, then?"

Bodie took a look at him for a moment, face unreadable. "Nearly the best."

Nearly the best. Two months ago, and no-one could have come within a country mile of Doyle's being best.

Nearly the best.

And: if you don't want him, there's plenty who do.

Doyle subsided against the window, staring out as the countryside gave way to suburbs and then to city proper, and all the while, he nursed his jealousy to keep him warm.

Not much later, Bodie having taken off in a clash of gears and a cloud of exhaust fumes, Doyle was alone. Foul tempered and with a face like fizz, he bent to the odiousness of doing housework.

Even cleaning the toilet was better than sitting brooding over the emotion curdling his belly.

Fear.

Hands on hips, Doyle stood and glared at the poor defenceless telephone, its last outraged 'ping' fading. "Fine, see if I fucking care!" Doyle near enough yelled. "Too good to go anywhere with me, mate, well you just wait and see how long it is before I fucking come crawling to you, *mate*."

He took a long, deep breath, made himself calm down. Nothing to get angry about: just Bodie going off with Murphy for a bit of rock climbing this weekend.

Just Bodie and Murphy, in a tent, alone.

Nearly the best mate Bodie had.

Just the two of them.

Doyle was getting very, very tired of his old friend jealousy.

Of course, he told himself, there was a solution to all this. Sleep with Bodie. Let himself love Bodie the way Bodie loved him. How much different could it be? They'd do pretty much the same sort of things they did with women, with a few pertinent differences, of course. And queers seemed to enjoy being buggered, and sucking other blokes off, and given the number of queers there were around, there had to be *something* going for it.

For the millionth time, he reminded himself that all it boiled down to was how he felt about Bodie.

Yes. He could have sex with Bodie.

Yes. He could love Bodie. It should have been an epiphany, felt instead like defeat. If he could have sex with Bodie, if he could love Bodie, then what the hell was his excuse for dithering like a maiden aunt?

Just what the bloody hell was his problem?

Some time after midnight, he gave up in disgust,

went to bed, and spent the night dreaming of Bodie, with Murphy, and not him.

Looking at himself, in the mirror of his dreams, he couldn't find it in his heart to blame Bodie. Given a choice, Doyle would rather he was Murphy himself.

Tuesday morning. Dank, dark, miserable. Suited Doyle to a T.

"Morning, sunshine," Bodie said cheerfully, slapping Doyle on the back. "Have a nice weekend?"

"Oh, just peachy, thanks."

"That nurse of yours, what's her name, Sadie?, she come across then?"

Words too quick to catch, wounds too deep to bind. "Did Murphy?"

Silence spread around them like an abyss, threatening to swallow them whole.

"I don't think I heard you properly," Bodie said coldly.

Some perverse demon controlled his tongue, his jealousy so thick he could taste it like bile. "Yeh you did. I asked you, did Murphy come across?"

"What me and Murphy did or did not do, Doyle, is none of your fucking business. Got that?"

"I know what I've got, Bodie."

"And you think it's me? Christ, Doyle, is that what this is all about? You don't want me, but you don't want anyone else to have me? What am I supposed to do, eh? I get to stand around, waiting for someone to pick me up, is that it? But only if you're not looking because you don't want me yourself, but you like having your own little puppet to dangle. Charming, Doyle, absolutely fucking charming."

"It's not that—"

"Then what is it? You've decided you do want me after all?"

And facing that grim expression, looking at those eyes, what else was he supposed to say?

"Yes. Yeh, I've decided I want you for myself after all."

Blue eyes narrowing, shadowed almost to black. "What brought this on? Feeling randy are we? Or just a bit curious and who better to have a go with than good old loyal Bodie. He won't mind, have a bit of a fling, have a bit of a go, see how the other half live—and then once the novelty's worn off, dump good old Bodie, he won't mind, he'll still be hanging around with his tongue dragging along the ground ready to pick up your crumbs. Well, guess what, mate. Not me, not this time. You want a toy, you go out and fucking buy yourself one."

Stomping now, wrenching the door open, voice raw as it whipped Doyle. "In fact, you don't even have to buy one. Go to the right street corner and you can rent them by the hour. For that matter, go down the cottages. With your looks, you could satisfy your curiosity in ten seconds flat. Just leave me out of it."

Bodie almost out the door, his words dripping down Doyle like acid, stinging him to speech again. "So much for you loving me, then."

Bodie turned quickly then, laughter sounding more like tears. "You think about it, Ray. You take your time, and you have a good think about it."

And then Bodie was gone.

[Even the job was going wrong, things souring between them, their timing off. Concerned noises were being made, refresher courses booked, Dr. Ross' name lobbed like a grenade, ten-second warning to sort themselves out before she did it for them.

In the car together again, tension sharding between them as Bodie drove Doyle home. They were lucky to both be driving home, and they both knew it. One more second, one more mis-step, and one or both of them would have been in the hospital or the cemetery. They'd come *that* close. So close that Cowley hadn't even given them a bollocksing, just stood there, looking pale, snapping orders at them, giving them 72 hours off.

Doyle could hear the bullet going past him, missing him by a foot, missing Bodie by a millimetre.

They'd nearly died today. Both of them.

They were going to have to sort it out. Now.

Doyle, looking at Bodie; Bodie, looking at Doyle. Catching each other mid-glance, looking away quickly.

If he'd died today, and Bodie had been left alive, how long would it take the poor bastard to fall into Murphy's waiting arms? Or Susan's, or anyone else's, for that matter? And how long would it take him to get over the knowing that he hadn't been good enough for Doyle, that he hadn't been worth Doyle loving, or taking one small step forward.

How long does that sort of scar take to fade?

They had to sort this out. Now.

Tempting, still, to wait for Bodie to start it, but then, Bodie had already started it, with the touches and the looks and the comments. And the kiss, and admitting to love.

But it was hard, taking that final step into the unknown. Harder than killing, harder than anything else.

If he failed Bodie, if he hurt Bodie—

Then at least they'd have tried, at least they'd have had a chance. At least Bodie would know the fault wasn't his.

"It's your fault, you know," Doyle said, his tone of voice bearing no resemblance to the accusation of his words, suffused instead with the sort of open affection they hadn't allowed themselves in months. "If you'd shagged me when I offered—"

The car swerved, Bodie recovering so quickly it looked like no more than a good driver avoiding a pothole, rather than a good driver shocked into nearly killing them. "If I'd shagged you when you offered," Bodie said carefully, "then I'd've probably killed you by now."

Doyle slanted a glance in Bodie's direction. "I didn't know you were a black widow. Does that mean you'll say to me, come into my parlour?"

"It means I've got a fly swatter with your name on it."

A longish pause, the traffic light redly interminable. "You think I haven't sussed you out, don't you."

"If you'd sussed me, Ray, you'd've been announcing it in the paper."

"Or making a pass at you."

Bodie didn't even so much as flicker an eyelash. "You haven't the faintest idea." Confidently, stridently, even, but still not enough cover up how much this was eating away at him.

"I know, Bodie," Doyle said softly. "I know."

A quick glance from sharp blue eyes then, Bodie's smile a shadow of itself.

"You can't know. Cos you're still here."

"C'mon, Bodie, you all but admitted you loved me—"

"And?"

"And? And I put two and two together."

"Oooh, tire yourself out, did you?"

"Don't you start playing the prat, you."

"Then if you're such a fucking know-it-all," hard, bitter, jolting Doyle, "then why the fuck are we in this mess? It's all falling down round our ears—"

Audible click of teeth as Bodie closed his mouth to keep the words damned inside.

"We're in this mess," Doyle said, measuredly, "because..." Look out the window. Fidget with a shoelace, jiggle keys in his pocket. "Because I didn't know if I could do it or not."

No reply, Bodie grimly steering them towards Doyle's flat.

“Did you hear me?”

“I heard you.”

“And you’ve nothing to say?”

“What d’you expect? Sorry I’m so repulsive, hang on a tick while I run off to Denmark and have the operation?”

“I was expecting more of a fist in the face.”

“Two hands on the steering wheel at all times,” Bodie parroted, doing an excellent Police driving instructor.

They were at Doyle’s place, too soon or too late, Doyle wasn’t entirely sure. “Come up for a drink?”

Bodie sat there for a moment.

“Take all the time in the world,” Doyle said, “as long as it’s ten seconds or less, I’m freezing my bollocks off out here.”

But he didn’t move, made no real indication that he had any intention of rushing Bodie.

“This is the offer, then?” Bodie asked the steering wheel.

“For what it’s worth.”

“And what’s that?”

“A nice shiny fifty pence piece. C’mon, we can’t discuss this out here in the street. Come up for drink.”

A shrug, a deprecating grin, a self-mocking shake of his head. “Yeh, but a drink of what?” Bodie muttered then more loudly, “Glutton for punishment, that’s me.”

“Makes a change from swiss rolls, I suppose,”

Doyle said to him, leading the way into the kitchen.

“Fancy a coffee?”

Of course, they both knew it wasn’t a coffee Bodie fancied.

“Wouldn’t say no.”

Now they both knew that as well.

“How d’you like it?”

The heels of his hands rubbing his eyes, Bodie collapsed into the kitchen chair. “Thought you already had everything all sussed.”

Doyle made the coffee, dug out the new packet of chocolate digestives and offered them up, sacrificial virgin at the altar.

“If I’m right—” going on quickly over a Bodiean interruption that never came, “if I’m right, then it’s not the sex you want.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, Ray. You can tell I’m not a monk—wrong haircut.”

Doyle gave him a look for that, but at least Bodie was making those puerile comments, a distinct improvement on the last couple of weeks. “It’s the emotion, isn’t it?”

Bodie toyed with his mug. “I’m not Ann Holly,” Bodie said quietly.

“Yeh, I’d noticed—wrong haircut. Sorry. You mean you wouldn’t walk out on me?”

“I mean I wouldn’t stand for you pretending and lying to me, using me like a guide dog to take you for a walk on the wild side. She took you to literary wine and cheese dos, introduced you to people called Pippa and Cecil and then what did you do when you were tired of all that?”

“Now hang on just a minute, mate. I didn’t get tired of her, she dumped *me*.”

“But you didn’t exactly fight for her, did you? Didn’t so much as ring her up to give it another go. She beat you to the punch, that’s all.”

Doyle stirred his coffee again, an excuse not to look at Bodie. “You don’t think very highly of me, do you?”

“I’m just realistic. Even you’ve the occasional fault, Ray. Only thing is, they all seem to be aimed right at me.”

Doyle kept on fidgeting, unable to look up and expose himself in Bodie’s eyes. “This commitment you’re after...”

Bristling from across the table. “Who said anything—”

“Oh, give over, Bodie. Who is it who signs on with the Army, the Paras, the SAS, CI5—anyone waves a contract under your nose, and you’re salivating like Oliver bloody Twist.”

“Yeh, well, don’t see what that has to do with anything.” Pause. Quick look at where Doyle’s hands were slowly shredding a bit of kitchen roll.

“It’s not just me being curious either.”

“No? Then what took you so long to make up your mind?”

Shrug, confusion written in every line of his body. “It’s not that I don’t love you, it’s just... Christ, Bodie, you’re asking me to change what I am.”

“When have I ever tried to get you to change a single fucking thing about you, Ray? Go on, tell me just one. I even put up with your bloody tea slurping.”

Elbows on the table, Doyle ran his fingers through his hair. “We’re both still stalling, aren’t we?”

“Which isn’t going to get us anywhere.”

Bet your old C.O. would recognise that expression, Doyle thought at Bodie, watching as the back straightened, the jaw thrust forward and the eyes hardened. Nice to be thought of as facing a bloody battle.

“Right,” Bodie was saying, all briskness and brashness, not that it fooled Doyle any more. “Cards on the table. There’s no point me denying it: if you’re willing to go to bed with me, then I’m not going to turn you down, not this time.”

“Mind if I ask why not?”

Unreadable smile, eyes even less communicative. There were times when Doyle would give his eye-teeth to know what was going on inside Bodie’s head. “Oh, you could always say I’m overcome with your manly charms.” Charming, disarming grin defusing the truth. “Or you could say that I’ve been kicking myself since last time. I’ve always believed you should take what you can get. So whatever’s on offer, I’m taking. But—”

A longish pause, Doyle waiting for the rest of it.

“But if you mess me about,” flat, threatening, as friendly as Cowley during an interrogation, “then I’m leaving. I won’t hang around to be your punching bag, Ray.”

He couldn’t help but push, clear footing and certainly a rare treasure in this situation. “So you’re not going to insist on the till-death-us-do-part bit?”

“Be stupid if I did. I mean, look at us. We nearly got our heads blown off today, because we were so busy not letting our guard down round each other to keep our guard up against that bastard.”

No denying that, and he’d tried hard enough. “Funny how nearly dying can change how you look at things.”

“That why you’ve suddenly decided to let me have—”

Breaking in before Bodie could say the wrong thing. “No suddenly about it. I’ve been stewing over this for months. Bodie—” Deep breath, gulp, screwing his courage up: easier to face a firing squad than some of this. “It’s a lot for me, Bodie. I’ve never been with a fella before, never even thought about actually, you know, doing it till I realised what you were after. I’m still not sure...”

Bodie was tracing patterns in the spilled droplets of coffee. “Did it turn your stomach that last time, when I kissed you? Is that why you just sat there?”

Who said honesty was the best policy? He should be able to say, oh, it was just the shock of it it being so wonderful: instead, all he could offer was a truth that would hurt no matter how he dressed it up. So he left it plain, the less to draw attention to it. “More surprise than anything else, I suppose—not every night your best mate kisses you in front of the colleagues.” Taking the pressure off, admitting to his own blind-

ness in lieu of his fears. “Oh, and I did a bit of digging. You’re right about our lot—especially Susan.”

He was rewarded with a wicked smile, just the right touch of salaciousness. “Not to mention McCabe.”

Doyle matched him sour face for sour face, both of them degenerating into puerile smiles at exactly the same moment, the resonance of their old rapport both balm and bane. “I’d rather not, if you don’t mind.”

“Yeh, it is a bit disgusting, isn’t it? Well, as long as he’s not asking us to partake, I suppose.” Outflanking Doyle, hitting him simultaneously with both question and sharp blue stare. “So did me kissing you sicken you then?”

Second time round didn’t make it any prettier. “It was just...different. Not what I’d expected. You’re a bit bigger than the average blonde, Bodie.”

“Knew I shouldn’t’ve left me handbag at home. Seriously, though, Ray, what made you change your mind?”

“A lot of things.”

“Yeh? Such as? I mean, I’d given up on anything but friendship from you.”

Doyle stretched, body reminding him of the day, and of all the days and months and years before. “You said it yourself: it’s all falling apart round our ears. And then when I thought about it, well, I don’t know... It’s easier to take what we’ve already got to the next level than give it all up completely.”

“Taking the easy way out, Ray? Tsk tsk, what would Nanny say?”

“Probably dose me with cod-liver oil.”

Almost out of the blue: “I won’t try to fuck you. But—” Bodie looking away then, for the first time in years, the fairness of his skin yielding to a blush. “You can fuck me if you like.”

Doyle was looking everywhere but at Bodie. “There’s no rush, is there? I mean, it’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just...”

“Yeh.”

“Yeh.”

Silence.

Sitting there, round Doyle’s kitchen table, it slowly dawning on them that yes, they really had just agreed to have a relationship with each other. They really had just agreed to have sex.

They were going to have sex. Doyle wondered if gibbering was considered good etiquette in situations like these.

More silence, stretching taut as rubber, a band wound tightly enough to snap.

It was Bodie who finally found words. “You didn’t throw up when I kissed you that time. Want to see what happens if I try it again?”

Doyle looked around the enamelled sterility of this utilitarian kitchen. “Oh, you’re ever so romantic.”

“Bedroom?”

Deep breath. Steadying himself. “Bedroom.”

“Right behind you, all the way.”

“You’ve a real thing for my bum, haven’t you?”

The quick press of warm palm against him was all the answer he got, and all the answer he needed.

All that hunger, and Bodie had still managed to make it clear that Doyle’s bum was safe unless—until? don’t think about that, not yet—unless it was offered. Christ, small wonder he loved the bastard.

In the bedroom now, more awkwardness, overhead light too painfully revealing, fumbling now to turn on the bedside lamp so they wouldn’t trip and break something on their way to bed. Bodie stripping quickly, efficient in this too. Doyle, more slowly, tidy for once, skin prickling with awareness as he bared it to Bodie’s gaze.

Turning now, slowly, to look at Bodie.

Stupid of him not to expect Bodie to be fully erect already. Stupider to be embarrassed that he himself was still flaccid and small.

“Pleased to see me, are you, then?” Doyle asked, covering his embarrassment even as he conquered the urge to cover his genitals.

No one should sound like that, warm as lips on skin. “Very pleased to see you.”

Bodie coming towards him again, looming larger, just like at the party, only now Bodie was naked, and it wasn’t going to stop at just a kiss.

All cats are grey in the dark, Doyle reminded himself. I love him, that should be enough. And as Bodie’s large hands came up to frame Doyle’s face, as Bodie’s lips touched his, as Bodie’s tongue entered his mouth, it was enough. It was exhilarating, to feel how much Bodie loved him. Astonishing, like a living looking glass, to feel an erection against himself, an erection that was both familiar and utterly alien.

Stroking up and down the length of his back, Bodie’s hands were warm against his skin, and touchingly, endearingly, those strong hands were trembling, just a fraction.

“This okay?” Bodie was asking him quietly, giving him time. Doyle could have laughed at this, Bodie treating him like a scared virgin, but he was too busy being grateful and trying not to behave like the scared virgin he was. Pathetic, he told himself. Stupid, to be

scared—for God’s sake, this was *Bodie*, not some sick stranger picked up down the local cottages.

Bodie was stroking him, rubbing against him, Bodie’s chest too flat, muscles too big, and the need in him, drowning—

It was only sex, he told himself.

Ah, if only it were. Sex was easy, roll on, roll off, have a bit of fun in the middle, easy. But with Bodie, it was making love. It wasn’t just bodies, it was *them*, all of them, no more hidden places, no more safe havens.

He, and Bodie.

The thought steadied him. This was Bodie. His Bodie. Just the two of them, no one and nothing else.

It was right everywhere else, why shouldn’t it be right, here?

For the first time, Doyle kissed Bodie, his tongue going inside Bodie, feeling him, tasting him, entering him, Bodie’s own words echoing.

You can fuck me.

Not so different from all his times with women then, not so different at all. Doyle thrust his tongue hard into Bodie, felt the pleasure of that convulse Bodie’s hands. There was a pulse, down there, where Bodie’s cock was pressing against him, Doyle’s every caress marked by a throb in that hotness, a minute movement of the hardness against Doyle’s leg. Moistness, at the tip, sliding against the hairs on his leg, as Bodie held him so tightly, Bodie wrapping himself around Doyle, and Doyle kissing him, tongue inside Bodie’s mouth, hands stroking Bodie’s soft hair, moving lower, down Bodie’s back, lower still, all the way to there, where the buttocks flared out like a woman’s, the sweet, familiar cleft—and pulling back suddenly at the eruption of wetness against his leg and the limpness of his own cock.

Bodie, body betraying him, a reaction so precipitous as to be shameful and humiliating beyond words.

“Sorry,” Bodie was gasping even as the whiteness fled his body, “sorry, God, I’m sorry,” fingers bruising Doyle’s arms as Bodie held on as knees went weak, “didn’t mean to—”

Standing up straight now, not looking at Doyle, looking around instead, either for something to wipe them off with or for a nice big hole in the ground that would swallow him up, Doyle wasn’t sure which.

Trying very hard to cover his humiliation, trying so hard to sound ever so casual. “I’m sorry, didn’t mean to come like that. Supposed to be the big moment, not—”

But it was exciting to be wanted that much, amazingly persuasive to be on the receiving end of so much passion and love. The first stirrings of heat, the first flush of desire lifting his cock, lengthening it under Bodie's gaze, his body returning the compliment Bodie's had just given him. "So you wish you weren't so excited by me, is that it? Wish I didn't turn you on so much?" Doyle approaching Bodie now, his own awkwardness taken care of by Bodie's embarrassment. He knew he was smiling, couldn't help it, an absurdly intense wave of love washing over him as he looked at his poor Bodie, standing there like a naughty schoolboy, and for what? For loving him to distraction, that was what.

He'd known it before, but now he had seen just how much Bodie had wanted him, and for how desperately long. He wanted to hold Bodie close, kiss him forever, and take away the self-immolation of coming as quickly as a spotty teenager with his first dirty magazine. "Tell you something for nothing, I've done the same thing myself, more than once. At least you got your clothes off first."

"Yeh, it's no fun if you—"

Words breaking off there, as Doyle took Bodie's hand, thumb caressing Bodie's palm. "Didn't your mum teach you that if you make a mess, you have to clean it up?" Stopping Bodie's reply by kissing him, a small, affectionate kiss. "You could lick it off, couldn't you?"

Bodie groaned, then grinned, one hand ruffling through Doyle's hair. "I could, couldn't I? In fact, I think I shall."

Doyle was backed up against the bed, manoeuvred until he was flat on his back, legs slightly spread, just far enough to give Bodie access.

"Christ, but you're fucking gorgeous."

Doyle stroked Bodie's hair as Bodie lowered his head to Doyle's body, that first wet caress of tongue on thigh making Doyle gasp.

"Think I'm gorgeous, do you? Is that why you love me?"

A long, wet lave the length of his thigh, breath warm against his cock, but nothing else, just the temptation of a mouth so close to him, and then Bodie's words were being breathed, all wetness and warmth, between the lingering attentions of tongue on flesh.

"How do I love thee, let me count the ways, is that what you want?" Bodie said, his lips brushing against Doyle, the words stirring the hair that pointed, so needfully, towards his groin. "That's one of the things

that I love most about you," Bodie was saying round the flesh in his mouth, Doyle's nipple a hard little nub against stroking tongue. "You're the cock of the north, don't-you-all-wish-you-were-good-enough-to-fuck-me, that's you. But underneath all that," the sudden nip of teeth on nipple made Doyle jump, almost missing Bodie's next, soothing comment, "you haven't the faintest notion why anyone would ever love you. But you don't let it show, not you, too tough and too fucking strong for that."

Doyle knew he should say something then: denial, agreement, something clever or deprecating, anything, really. Instead, he tangled his fingers in the short softness of Bodie's hair, and pressed Bodie, beggingly, towards his cock.

"Always in a rush. Love that about you too: always trying to get every last bit out of life, never let a second pass you by." The angular thrust of hipbone was mouthed attentively. "It'd be dead easy to give up on people and life and all that, but you don't—and you won't let me either."

"Love that about me too, do you?"

"Oh, yes. And the way you walk, fuckin' hell, Ray, the way you move your arse..."

"Poetic bastard, aren't you?"

"Not me, no, pure poetry in motion, that's you."

"Turn you on, does it?" Doyle asked, even though they both knew the answer, knew the answer even before this moment, this act of carnal worship.

"You've no idea how many times you've nearly been raped, mate."

"Ah, but would it be rape?" Doyle asked, closing his eyes, fingers tracing the nearly feminine smoothness of Bodie's skin. "If I was willing..."

"This is what it's like when you're willing, Ray. This," fingers touching Doyle just perfectly, stimulating him just so, "and this," mouth moving against skin, tongue tasting the faintest traces of salt on skin, "and this..."

And then Bodie was kissing him again. Doyle kept his eyes shut, nerve-ends noting whether or not Bodie had shaved recently—he had—and mouth noting just how good Bodie was at kissing.

He moved restlessly, Bodie on top of him, not as heavy as he'd feared, but so big, almost smothering, smooth planes of muscle, too few curves, in all the wrong places—but I'll get used to that, Doyle told himself, stroking his hands over Bodie's back, fingertips lingering in the deep scar that was never explained, never mentioned. He reached lower, seeking out the delectable cleft of Bodie's arse—

—*you can fuck me*—

—as Bodie shifted, rolling them over, taking his weight off Doyle, putting Doyle back on top, and Doyle would have thanked him for that, but he was too busy kissing Bodie, thrusting into that welcoming mouth, the mouth that was so large, so...accommodating.

Bodie had obviously taken up mind-reading. He felt Bodie's hands on his buttocks, and couldn't stop the reaction in time, guilt flooding him as Bodie moved his caress up to the small of Doyle's back, the hands urging Doyle upwards and forwards, ever forward, until he was astride Bodie, canopied over him, back arching as he looked down into eyes that promised him everything. The sun, the moon, the stars. On a silver platter, if that's what he wanted.

Everything.

—*you can fuck me*—

Too soon for that, surely, too soon.

Bodie's hands were on his backside again, fingertips careful not to threaten his centre, as Bodie's strength—so different, to feel that strength used against him not in a training bout or a game, but here, in bed, and for his pleasure—urged him on that last little bit. Doyle gasped, wordless, as Bodie's mouth opened and took him inside, lips stretching wetly round his hardness, tongue caressing him, mouth and throat sucking him in, consuming him, consuming him with passion, and it was wonderful and glorious and—

He pulled out, struggling for breath, grabbing for the words that would erase the horrible doubt in Bodie's eyes.

"S all right," he managed, grinning, fatuously, he expected. "More than all right, fucking fantastic. But if you keep on doing that, it'll be all over in a second. Want it to last."

"Want it to last forever?"

And of course, it wasn't the sex they were talking about, not now. No hint now of Bodie coolly saying he'd take what was on offer. Primal need, primal hunger, and Doyle as main course.

Forever?

Till death do us part.

He stared down at Bodie, his own cock against Bodie's throat like a blade.

Forever?

What kind of fool would have ever thought it could be anything else?

"That's all right then," he said, and recognised the truth when he heard it. It was all right. And it was

forever. He and Bodie.

When had it ever been anything else?

He edged forward, his cock rising over the bump of Bodie's Adam's apple, up over his chin, there, to rest on the lips that were still wet from sucking him.

"No," Bodie whispered. "Next time."

—*you can fuck me*—

And he was being manoeuvred again, that strength turned to his pleasure again, and later, much later, his own eagerness would shock him. But right now, this instant, there was only the immediacy of it all, the suppleness of Bodie's flesh, the way the smoothness of Bodie's skin lent a sheen of femininity to the most well-developed of muscles. There was a faint dusting of hair on Bodie's chest, a constant presence against Doyle's cheek, but he focused on the feel of the nipple in his mouth, sucked on it, made it hard, made it stand out from the curve of chest, bit it as the shock of Bodie's movements hit him.

He'd known, of course. But to feel it, for it to actually happen... Bodie was spreading his legs, lifting them, wrapping them around Doyle's hips, canting himself to fit against Doyle.

"How d'you want me?"

"Willing," Doyle answered, coming up for another kiss, tongue claiming Bodie's mouth and breath and heart. "And any way that you like."

"This way, then," and for a second, Doyle thought that meant that he was to take Bodie on his back like a woman, legs spread, and there was a part of him that recoiled, was repressed, brought back to the fold by the thought of how much Bodie must love him to do that. Then Bodie was moving out from under him, going on to his knees, presenting himself for Doyle.

"Christ," Doyle muttered, knees weakening as he stared at that pale flesh and the shadowed valley he would plough, "oh Christ on a crutch."

"Yeh, well, I'm no martyr. Em..."

Ludicrous for either of them to be embarrassed at this late stage, but Doyle could feel a blush stain him and Bodie was all but squirming.

"Listen, Ray, d'you have..."

"Oh. Yeh, I think so— Something, at any rate."

Scrabbling around, feeling like an idiot with his erection pointing the way, feeling like the King of the World with Bodie kneeling on his bed, twisting round to stare at him with love and lust. Finding, eventually, a bottle of lotion, left behind by some girlfriend who'd complained of dry skin.

Seemed almost unfaithful, to use that on Bodie. Should have gone out and bought something special

for him. Something appropriate, something really butch. Would do, for the next time.

God, there was going to be a next time, and a time after that.

Forever, Bodie had said.

Doyle's hands were trembling as he put the first dab of moisturiser on Bodie's skin.

"Thought you had better aim than that," Bodie said, and Doyle supposed the comment was supposed to sound amused and worldly, rather than nervous and anxious and wanting.

He put more cream onto his fingers, used the other hand to spread Bodie's buttocks, felt a huge throb of desire as Bodie was exposed to him. Carefully, so carefully, he stroked the cream on and in, just the tip of his finger at first, then to the knuckle, then all the way, and he didn't know how to feel about his own reaction, the way he was pushing his finger in, thrusting it so hard, pushing a second finger in, watching as Bodie took the fingers inside, the small opening widening like a woman. He'd done this sort of thing before, hundreds of times, giving pleasure, making sure his partner was wet and ready for him. But not like this. Not ever like this.

Bodie groaned, and Doyle felt the sound against his fingers.

"C'mon, Ray," Bodie was saying, over and over again, and it hurt to hear him nearly begging like that.

His fault, taking too long, hesitating, when Bodie was already lost to passion. "All right," he said, benediction, prayer, supplication, "all right."

He got up on his knees, between Bodie's legs, felt the hair of Bodie's legs against him. Different, again, even the German gymnast hadn't had such hairy thighs. Cock poised at the small opening, slickness against him, flesh yielding to him, and it was the most exquisite, perfect difference of all. He sank into Bodie, and every inch of him that went inside pushed another sound out of Bodie. Small sounds, piling one on top of each other, until Doyle was all the way in, and Bodie was clutching every inch of him, different and the same, and all of it a moot point because this was Bodie, and he loved Bodie, and that was all that mattered. That, and the way his cock felt buried in flesh, buried in Bodie, milked and stroked and welcomed as he thrust in, again and again.

There was a roundness, a smoothness, and a mere touch against it shuddered through Bodie, and a long, deep stroke along it made Bodie all but moan in pleasure. A roundness, a smoothness, amidst moistness—perhaps size didn't count after all, and this was

another difference that wasn't truly different. He angled himself to give Bodie as much pleasure as he could, relishing this opportunity to take care of Bodie, to give to him. He pressed home, felt Bodie shiver under him, leant forward and licked the sweat from his nape and kissed him, at the gentle curve where neck met shoulder, the skin so soft and so smooth against his tongue.

They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions: Doyle was surely on the road to heaven, paved with his good intentions of making this wonderful for both of them, and of making it last forever. He could barely hold out another a minute, thrusting into Bodie, caressing that nub of flesh deep inside him, needing Bodie to come first, to know that he'd given Bodie his pleasure.

He grabbed hold of Bodie, fingers sinking into the indentation of Bodie's flanks as Bodie moved under him, thrusting back upwards to meet Doyle's every move. Breathing faster, he stroked Bodie's back, the roundness of his shoulders, reached round to the flatness of his chest, wrapped his arm around Bodie's waist, the slight softness of belly against his forearm, his other arm bracing them against the bed, although Bodie's strength was holding them up, holding them both up as Doyle thrust into him.

—*you can fuck me*—

And he did, and it was wonderful. Bodie's arm was moving against his, quickly, quickly, and then Bodie was arching up powerfully, almost throwing Doyle off even as he clenched his body tightly around the cock that was so deep inside. Surreal, to feel ejaculation from the outside, to feel someone else come, to feel the surge from deep inside someone else's body, to feel it against the outside of his own flesh. Disorientating, but then Bodie was moving again, undulating, demanding Doyle get on with it, that he move, that he come.

Holding on tightly now, burying himself inside Bodie, Doyle finally surrendered himself to nothing but his own pleasure and his own sensations. The moment built, pleasure crescendoing inside him, drawn and demanded from him by Bodie, and then he was there, pouring himself into Bodie's depths, feeling his lifeseed erupt inside this man who had gone from friend to lover, this man who was big enough to let Doyle take him. Over and over again, he pulsed, the sensations so intense he had to close his eyes, hold completely still, breath held, every muscle tense and motionless as the pleasure peaked and left him, until he was drained, and limp, and

collapsed across the strong expanse of Bodie's back.

A few seconds, the urge to sleep creeping up on him, until Bodie moved, Doyle sliding off to the side, eyes somewhat dazed.

So many things exactly the same as with a woman, so many things so very different. The moment, just then, when his softened cock had slipped free from Bodie's body—completely different, ineradicably different, and he couldn't tell if it was his body that marked the difference or only his mind.

"You all right?"

"Shouldn't it be me asking *you* that?"

"Nah." Wonderful, glorious grin, those blue eyes sparkling, laughter lurking. "You were gentle."

If he hadn't been so exhausted, he'd have laughed himself. "S'pose this is where I thank you for making my first time so special."

"Did I?"

He looked sharply at Bodie then—well, as sharply as he could, given that he was completely sated, drunk on love and well and truly shagged out. "You've got nothing to worry about on that score, Bodie. You could've made Casanova feel like that was the first time ever, and the best as well."

Nice, to see Bodie preen like that. Could become quite addictive, really, watching Bodie being happy because of something he, Doyle, had said. Very addictive indeed.

"Good, was I?"

"Fan-fucking-tastic."

"Told you."

Doyle did laugh at that, but only a little, and only as he rolled onto his side and draped as much of himself over as much of Bodie as he could.

There were marks all over Bodie's body, from little bites barely visible on the crest of one shoulder, to the clear delineation of fingerprints marking one very white hip.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Did you hear me complaining?"

"No, but—"

"Did you notice me shoving you off me and beating you black and blue?"

A grin for that, Bodie no victim, Bodie no wilting flower. "So I shouldn't bring the whips and chains over then, should I?"

"Not unless you want to be on the receiving end of them yourself."

"Nah, not my cup of tea." A sudden speculative gleam brightened his eyes. "Mind you, that's what I used to say about shagging blokes an' all, and

now look at me."

"Well," Bodie whispered against Doyle's neck as he kissed the pulse that traced its way to Doyle's heart, "they say converts are the biggest zealots," a hand snaking down to cup the small, moist softness at Doyle's groin, "and if I give you a couple of hours, I think you just might prove them right. But in the meantime—"

In the meantime there was Bodie going off to the bathroom, coming back with a cloth, Doyle looking away as Bodie cleaned him, grateful for yet another example of how wonderful Bodie could be.

"I'll add that to my list, I think," he said out loud.

Bodie canted an enquiring brow.

"...let me count the ways."

The sun after weeks of rain couldn't compete for the radiance that transfused Bodie. "Got a list going? Really?"

"Yeh. Up to Volume 8 now. Britannica's getting jealous."

Bodie was climbing back into bed with him now, doing an excellent impersonation of an octopus, enveloping Doyle with his affection.

"You've wanted to do this for a long time, haven't you?"

"You've no idea. Christ, all those times we've been on oppos or stuck together in some titchy little place doing an obbo—keeping my hands to myself has been murder."

And before Doyle could comment: "Thought you'd murder me for kissing you."

"Too taken aback. I mean, Bodie, what the fuck possessed you to kiss me in front of people like that?"

It might have been a shrug, but Bodie was wrapped too firmly round Doyle to move that much. "Everyone already thought we were shagging each other, so they weren't going to be shocked or anything. And if I did it in front of other people, there wasn't much chance of you taking your gun out and twepping me, was there?"

Drily, in the indulgent tone of someone who knows Bodie only too well. "Gave it that much thought, did you?"

"Only after."

"I suppose," Doyle said lightly knowing perfectly well he was setting himself up for a thumping, "that's another fine example of you going off half-cocked..."

A heartfelt groan was all he got. "I'm going to get you back for that," Bodie said to him, pulling him in even closer. "But when I'm awake and can do justice to pummelling you. In the morning..."

Tension, Bodie's embrace stiffening round him. "You and whose army?" was all Doyle said, all he needed to say.

All around him, Bodie relaxed, settling down, making Doyle's pillow more comfortable for his head, normal, routine things, but there was a glow to him, a sheen of happiness, as Bodie kissed him gently, almost without passion, and said: "In the morning then. I'll have breakfast in bed."

"Dead right you will," Doyle replied, not following their usual script. He shoved his hips forward, intention unmistakable. "Sausages, I think."

Bodie could have made any number of sharp comebacks, from references to skinless to queries as to whether said sausage should be grilled or fried—or whether said sausage was a banger or a teeny-weeny little cocktail sausage.

But all that happened was that Doyle was cradled close, his hair stroked in a way that spoke of years of denial, and Bodie's whispered promise to eat everything Doyle could feed him.

Ray Doyle fell asleep ensconced in warmth and love, and the muted haze of dreams where Bodie knelt before him and everything was all right.

Morning did not go according to plan, not at all. First off, those damned birds started making a hellish racket just as dawn was thinking about showing up, the tom cat next door decided that if it couldn't eat the birds, then it would caterwaul them to death, and the dog on the other side of the cat obviously didn't see why it shouldn't sing harmony.

Doyle, gradually getting used to this suburban nightmare, slept through it, at least until the idiot at Number 27 decided to rev his car to death before actually starting off, and the spotted loon in Number 24 started his drum practice, complete with the accompaniment of his father threatening death and mutilation if said racket didn't stop *right now*.

Doyle groaned, and stretched, and rolled over to pull the pillow up over his head.

And stopped, very still, as he realised he wasn't alone.

For an instant, he couldn't remember. Couldn't remember if this was one of the flats CI5 stuck him in, or if it was someone else's, and who that someone else might be.

Then his memory woke up to join the rest of him, and everything was all right. In fact, everything was positively coming up roses.

"Morning," he said, opening his eyes to the

wonderfully reassuring sight of Bodie, propped on an elbow, gazing at him with what was perilously close to fatuous adoration.

"Breakfast time," Bodie said, and slid down his body, shoving the covers aside as he moved, his mouth tracing every curve and plane of Doyle's body on his way down to his arcing target.

Doyle watched him, loving the way Bodie's cheeks hollowed as he sucked, the way his eyelashes were so long and dark, everything about the intensity of his friend's expression.

Noticed, then, that Bodie's hand was on his own cock.

"You should let me do that," he said.

Bodie, lifting his head, Doyle's cock wet and chilled in the early morning air, "No rush."

Doyle was ashamed of the relief that ambushed him, ashamed enough that he almost spread his legs for Bodie then and there.

"Don't push it, Ray, when you're ready. For the time being..." Then Bodie lowered his head again, and Doyle was flying high on the sensation of his cock being sucked, of the expert attentions of Bodie's tongue, of the sweet pleasure of Bodie's hand caressing his balls.

Perfect.

And on the heels of that: who taught him? How many people taught him?

For better and for worse, he thought, the love and the jealousy, all the good and bad commingling, this biting, corrosive jealousy not something he'd ever considered himself prone to. Until Bodie.

But then, everything was different this time round. Everything.

Bodie was sucking him just so, bringing him to the very peak, holding him there, teetering, on the brink of pleasure, and then, finally, when Ray thought he'd surely scream, finally letting him erupt, Bodie sucking on him still, swallowing every drop.

"Told you I'd eat everything you'd feed me," Bodie said, sliding back up Doyle's body, his blue eyes very bright as he came in closer, mouth opening for a kiss.

Nothing else entered Doyle's mind, but the idea of tasting himself in Bodie's mouth, of tasting what Bodie had just done for him, out of love.

Wasn't prepared, then, for the shock of stubble against his own, or for the sudden intimidation of lying flat on his back with this big man half on top of him, mouth open deep and wide, kissing him demandingly, tasting of semen, smelling of sex and

sweat and masculinity, that stubble scraping at his, the hard push of cock digging into his thigh, Bodie thrusting against him, dry-fucking him, cock so huge and hard, and the stubble and the taste of semen—

It was over incredibly quickly, Bodie smiling at him, half-embarrassed, half-proud, after what Ray had said to him the night before.

“Did it again,” he said. “It’s your fault for being so gorgeous.”

And before Doyle had to come up with an answer, before he had to find a path out of the strange swamp of feelings pulling at him, the alarm clock was going off, the phone was ringing, the gas bill was coming through the letter box and the day had begun.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, listening to Bodie clattering around in the kitchen, while his mum chatted on to him about Lindsay’s wedding, and Margie’s pregnancy test, and his Uncle Steve’s new job.

Talking to his mum about where she and dad were going on holiday, as Bodie came in with mug of tea and a kiss for him, that big cock swinging gently as he moved, the unmistakable smell of sex on him.

“Yes, Mum,” Doyle said, as Bodie sat beside him for a minute, arm snaking round Doyle’s waist, “I’ll nip in to *Liberty’s* today, see if they’ve got what Lindsay’s looking for.”

Bodie started sucking on his left nipple, dabbled his tongue into the curves and dips of his ribcage, nipped at one prominent hip bone, threatened to start on his cock.

“Listen,” Doyle broke in on another description of his sister’s choice of china patterns and upholstery, “I’ll be late for work. Better get going—”

Waited, squirming, through a short but thorough diatribe on that ‘nasty Mr. Cowley’ who was surely working him too hard.

Nearly blushed when she said hard. Nearly killed Bodie for choosing that moment to do something quite magical with his tongue.

“Right, talk to you tonight then, Mum.”

“You stupid bastard—”

Then Bodie leaned back, looked up at him, and smiled.

“Christ on a crutch,” Doyle muttered, “you’re mad, you know that, don’t you, you lunatic.”

Unnaturally cheerful given the time of day, Bodie just smiled all the more widely, flicked an extremely gentle finger against Doyle’s even more extremely limp penis, and said: “Completely doolally, if I thought I was going to get a rise out of that!” Then the

familiar, achingly unchanged, slap to the back, that grin, and Bodie was yelling over his shoulder, “Last one into the shower gets shrivelled balls!”

“You use all the hot water—” The bathroom door shut, complete with the sound of snicking lock, and it was a measure of his affection that Doyle didn’t even run the hot water in the kitchen. Well, not for long, anyway. Just long enough for Bodie’s squeal to be music to his ears.

It had taken them a surprisingly long time to get ready: lingering over newspapers, lingering over cups of tea, lingering over just sitting around together, knowing.

Every time Bodie bent over, Doyle couldn’t help but look at him and think, I’ve fucked that arse.

Or, the crossword being particularly obstreperous, every time Bodie’s tongue showed at the corner of his mouth, Doyle thinking that that tongue had been in his mouth and on his cock.

They did all the usual things, breakfast, washing dishes, shaving, brushing teeth, reading papers, listening to the radio, making faces at the news, everything exactly the same as before.

And profoundly, irretrievably different.

Doyle found himself grinning for no good reason at all. If one didn’t count being happy, that was.

“So what was that you were saying to your mum about *Liberty’s*?”

“Oh, shite,” Doyle muttered, jumping up from the sofa. “I’m supposed to go in and have a look at the china for her—” He rolled his eyes, made a face. “Wants some sort of server thing in a particular pattern, and there’s some fabric she needs for the bridesmaids’ dresses—or is it the ring carriers?”

“Ring bearer,” Bodie said, sounding amused. “So our first day off in ages, and we get to go into the centre of town, and traipse round *Liberty’s* like bloody—” Pause. “Tourists.”

“Or,” Doyle said, being quite deliberate, standing staring at Bodie so he could feast on the moment when it dawned on Bodie what he’d said, “like two blokes setting up house together.”

It was worth it.

“Like that, is it?”

“Could be.”

“So you weren’t lying then?”

“Of all the bloody— Look, I’ve never had to lie to a bird to get her to spread her legs before, so where do you get off acting as if I had to lie to you to get

you to spread your legs—”

Heard the words tumble from his mouth, anger fading as quickly as it had come, knowing he'd said the wrong, wrong thing. “I didn't mean it like that—”

“No? So does that mean you think I'm so fucking desperate for you you wouldn't have to say anything to get me to, as you so charmingly put it, spread my legs for you, or is this just your subtle way of reminding me I'd already said I'd let you fuck me, I didn't even hold out for the promises—”

“Bodie—”

Breaking off, then, thinking before he opened his big mouth and put his foot right in it. “Look, everything I said last night, I meant. Okay?” Trying to lighten it then, Bodie always on at him for taking everything too seriously. “It's morning and I still respect you...”

“That supposed to be funny, Doyle?”

“Yeh, and I know, I won't give up my real job.”

Held his breath as he watched Bodie thinking about, praying that he hadn't screwed things up already. “C'mon, Bodie, you know how rotten I am at all this stuff. And look on the bright side, you've always said I should take lessons from you, now's the perfect opportunity...”

Sighed, as he was let off the hook.

“Lesson Number One,” Bodie intoned, nasally, “never imply that all you were interested in was a quick fuck.”

Well, as far as Doyle was concerned, he hadn't implied that, not until Bodie had taken it that way. But this probably wasn't precisely the best moment to get into an argument over it.

“Yes, sir,” he replied in his best schoolboy voice. “I won't be interested in any quick fucks, sir.”

“I wouldn't go that far, Ray,” arms going round Doyle, pulling him in close, kissing him again. “There's a lot to be said for quick fucks.”

Doyle decided to wait a couple of years before he started teasing Bodie about just how quick a fuck their first one had been.

And felt the beginnings of excitement again, as he remembered how desperately Bodie had wanted him last night. Leaned forward, his tongue going into Bodie's mouth, fucking him again, fingers scrabbling at cloth, stopping, dead, as his hands filled with Bodie's hard flesh, the erection burning into his palm like a brand.

No different, he told himself. Just the same as his own, only this one was attached to Bodie.

Not a prick, then, but Bodie. Just Bodie, who loved

him, and whom he loved, and who must be standing there hurt beyond words by this reaction.

Slowly, he stroked Bodie, trying not to think about how different it was, trying to think only about how lovely that would feel if someone were doing it to his cock, how much he liked that particular touch, that way of pulling the foreskin back—

Bodie's hands on his, interrupting, Bodie whispering in his ear, “Not like that, too sensitive for that, slower, like this, press me just here...”

Different from his own cock, very different, although still the same. He did what Bodie wanted, was rewarded by a gusting sigh into his mouth, and then Bodie kissing him, Bodie's clever hands at Doyle's own belt, freeing Doyle, doing to Doyle what Doyle had done to him. Doing it just hard enough, just fast enough, just differently enough from what Doyle was doing to Bodie.

Pressed together, as urgent as teenagers, they kissed each other, their hands busy, stroking, caressing, neither of them able to hold back, both coming too soon, too quickly for pride.

As they clung together, each holding the other up, small, lingering kisses punctuating the aftermath, Bodie murmured, “Bad as a pair of newlyweds.”

The pause might well have been described as pregnant.

Doyle eased himself out of Bodie's arms, looked down them both, ruefully. “What we are is a pair of messy buggers.”

Another one of those pauses that might well have been called pregnant.

Doyle swore he could see what Bodie was thinking: they weren't a pair of buggers, because he hadn't given in to Bodie yet, hadn't let him fuck...

He knew he'd have to, even though Bodie had said he wouldn't try. Didn't mean he wouldn't want to. Had to want to, given the way Bodie stared at his arse all the time, touched it every chance he got.

No, Bodie was man enough to give him time, to let him come round to the idea on his own. But still...

But maybe Bodie wasn't any more ready to push than Doyle was, the only response being Bodie's giving Doyle a playful thump, and the comment, “C'mon, Professor, it's only a bit of sex, not the origin of the universe.”

“I was thinking more on the lines of the Big Bang Theory myself.”

Bodie winced theatrically. “Definitely going to have to kill you.”

“Or give me something else to do with my

mouth.”

And why the hell had he said that?

Maybe because of the way Bodie’s face lit up when he said it. Maybe because he saw the sudden flare of hunger in Bodie’s eyes.

Or maybe just because if he didn’t say it now, he might never find the courage to say it.

Or maybe, just maybe, a nasty little voice in the back of his head said, you said it now because there’s not a snowball’s chance of Bodie taking you up on it, not right now.

He hoped to hell that nasty little voice was wrong.

Sitting downstairs in *Liberty’s*, Bodie interspersing bites of cake with wickedly funny comments on everyone around them, and all Doyle could think about was what it would feel like to have Bodie’s cock in his mouth, come spurting down his throat like cream.

Would he gag? Or would he take to it like a pro?

Of course, his personal demon, Jealousy, sneered, he could always ask Bodie for some pointers, Bodie obviously not short of an experience or two. Jealousy, thy name is legion, he thought. But the words were out of his mouth before caution could recall them.

“Have there been a lot of blokes before me?”

Bodie swallowed a huge chunk of cake whole. Looked at Doyle. Drank some coffee. “Billions, I’d say—Adam was a long time ago.”

He should take that warning, let it go. Did.

Changed the subject. “Sorry, none of my business. Here, did you honestly like that godawful pattern my sister’s picked out?”

“Oh, yes, Ray, her taste’s almost as good as yours.”

“Oh. Hated it that much, did you?”

“Let’s just say, I’m glad I’m not the sort you’d bring home to meet the family.”

The words were there on the tip of his tongue: of course I’ll bring you home to meet the family.

Like a pair of newlyweds, Bodie had said.

Christ. He could just imagine his mum and dad, sitting in the parlour, the good dishes out, tea-cakes and salmon sandwiches, and in he walks with Bodie.

Bodie, very quietly, was concentrating on demolishing his cake into a mountain of tiny crumbs.

He wished he could say something to make it all better, to take away the hurt Bodie was trying so hard not to show, but he couldn’t. It would only be worse if—

Bodie smiled at him then, a sad, slow smile, his hand reaching out to touch briefly, almost invisibly,

the very tips of Doyle’s fingers. “It’s one of the best things about you, one of the worst, too. The way you won’t lie to me.”

“Still feel like a creep.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I wouldn’t take you home to meet my family either,” Bodie whispered, leaning forward conspiratorially, “the zoo frowns on feeding the great apes.”

And they slid easily into their usual banter then, but Doyle couldn’t quite escape the memory of how Bodie had covered up the hurt with a joke.

It made him wonder how many other times there’d been.

Later that evening, streetlights still glowing yellow, neither one of them in the mood to make anything to eat. They went to Doyle’s new local, stuffed themselves on pie and chips and peas, Bodie drowning everything in brown sauce, Doyle laughing as Bodie half-inched chips from his plate.

“Well, well, well, look who’s here.”

Murphy.

He really should be used to the acid burn of jealousy by now. “Murph,” Doyle said curtly, not looking at the other man, staring down at the remains of his dinner.

“Hello, mate,” Bodie, of course, much more enthusiastic, positively beaming.

Doyle felt his own frown deepen.

“Fancy a pint?” Bodie was saying.

Say no, Doyle thought, just say no and fucking-well leave us alone.

“Who’s buying?”

“Doyle.”

“Then I’m drinking. I’ll have a pint of bitter, please, Ray.”

Oh, no, Doyle thought, I’ve got all the bitter there is. He should at least look at Murphy, he thought, should at least pretend, but all he could think about was Bodie and Murphy sitting on that sofa together, Bodie and Murphy off for the weekend together, Bodie and Murphy in the SAS together, Christ alone knew what else, but Doyle had a few ideas, Murphy telling Bodie how to suck him, how to open up to let a man fuck him—

Bodie’s hand on his arm, fingers digging into him, himself looking at Bodie, a snarl lurking, jealousy eating at him.

And Bodie just nodded, half smiled, let go of him with the tenderest of squeezes and sat there, cat got the cream.

Murphy, on the other hand, was looking from each to the other. He let out a crow of laughter, slapped them both on the back. "Pint of bitter? It'll be doubles all round—on me! Bodie, you should've told me."

Christ, was it tattooed on their foreheads or something?

Or was that something just an ex-lover's surety, an ex-lover's insight—and who said he was an ex-lover?

He sat there, ignoring Bodie, ignoring Murphy. Well, that wasn't strictly true, he admitted to himself. He just wasn't responding to them, but he wasn't ignoring them, oh, no, he couldn't take his eyes off them, couldn't listen hard enough, couldn't tame the jealousy that gnawed deep in his belly.

Had Murphy seen Bodie in that most private of moments? Did Murphy know what it was like to be inside Bodie, to feel the pulse in Bodie's prostate as orgasm took him?

Did Murphy know what it was like to hear Bodie confess to love?

The first double burned as he downed it too fast, the second one merely warmed him, the third fed the heat in his stomach as his anger burned.

Then he caught sight of something in the mirror over the bar: Bodie, looking at him out of the corner of his eye as he laughed over something Murphy had said.

The bastard was doing it on purpose.

The unmitigated bastard was deliberately flirting with Murphy to—

Of course. That look of satisfaction, of reassurance, when Bodie'd caught him being jealous.

Bastard.

But part of him, darkly lit, rarely acknowledged, conceded that it was quite something to matter so much that jealousy was to be welcomed in like spring.

Well, he could rain on Bodie's parade: April showers had nothing on him.

"So Murphy," he said, pleasure curling in him as the other two men stopped dead, one glass frozen partway to a half open mouth, another hand arrested mid-gesture, "did you enjoy that climbing thing you and Bodie went on?"

"Yes, it was great. Good weather, great climbing."

"So it was," artful, meaningful pause, "good, then, was it?"

Murphy, looking at Bodie—for what? Asking which answer to give, asking what effect Bodie wanted? Or just checking to see if Bodie really had told Doyle all about the sexual athletics that had been

the whole point of the trip?

"Best trip we'd had in ages," was what Murphy finally said.

He had the perfect reply honed and ready, bared his teeth as he started to deliver it, perfectly aimed—and let it turn to mush on the tip of his tongue.

He'd seen Bodie again, in that bloody mirror, bracing himself against whatever Doyle was going to say.

Christ, and he'd promised himself he wasn't going to hurt Bodie, and now look at him! Worm, he was nothing but a pathetic little worm. "That's nice," he said, "it's great that Bodie has a good mate he can go climbing with. Won't catch me up on one of those ruddy great rocks."

For the briefest of moments, the backs of Bodie's fingers brushed his cheek, then they were all just mates again, nothing for the outside world to see, just mates. Nothing for the world to see, unless they could have peeled back Doyle's jacket and shirt to see the hammering of his heart under the thinness of his skin.

He managed to keep his end of the conversation up after that, even managed civility to Murphy, which was quite an accomplishment, really.

You see, he'd known jealousy, before, and doubt. Worry, that he might hurt Bodie. Horror, that he could drive Bodie away. Fear, even. But this was the first time, the very, very first time, that it had hit him. He might not lose Bodie. Because maybe, just maybe, Bodie already belonged to someone else.

Murphy had long since taken himself off: ever tactful, that was Murphy. Leaving them alone like the newlyweds Bodie had joked them to be.

Well, Doyle certainly had enough wedding-night nervousness to be a first-time groom. Or bride, he thought, an image searing his mind. Himself, open, spread, impaled, Bodie over him, fucking him, Doyle under him like a woman.

Oh, yes, open-minded, that's me, he sneered at himself. So open minded, so adventurous. That must be why he was sitting there, literally cross-legged, trying to come up with another excuse not to leave the pub.

"Time, gentlemen, please!"

The barman had been shouting that for what felt like eons, the crowd finally shifting, dispersing, he and Bodie sitting at their table like a wet weekend in Largs.

Bodie was the one to find the words again.

"See you at work, then?"

That brought Doyle's gaze front and centre. "What?"

Bodie shrugged. "Don't know where we stand either. But it's obvious you don't want me with you tonight—"

Hearing that cleared at least one thing in his mind. "Oh, yes, I do. I'm not having you go off tonight on your own—"

Just what they'd need: Bodie alone for two days solid, convinced Doyle didn't want him, didn't love him, didn't anything.

Cards on the table, Bodie had said—God, was it only last night? Couldn't be, surely, not for the way his world had turned upside down, the way he'd changed, the things he'd done—the whisper of skin on palm as he'd unhooded Bodie's cock, Bodie's tongue in his mouth, his cock inside Bodie, all of it, every second of every thing they'd done filling his mind until there was no room left for anything but telling Bodie the truth.

"I don't think—I mean, I want you there, I know I want you there, but—"

"But what? Ray, don't start messing me about—"

"I'm not. Yeh, I am, but I don't mean to, it's just—"
Take a deep breath. Hold it. Let it go. Now tell him. Just tell him. "It's about the fucking..." Saw at once that he'd said it wrong, that Bodie was jumping to all the wrong conclusions. "Not that—"

"Gentlemen," an avuncular voice said, casting huge aspersions on the appropriateness of the address given the men sitting at the table, "this establishment is now closed. If you'd care to leave..."

And just in case they didn't care to leave, there was a very impressive billy-club being passed, effortlessly, from one hand to the other.

Perfect bloody timing, Doyle thought, nearly running to keep up with Bodie, grabbing his friend at the corner of the street, the streetlamp leaching all colour from them.

"Bodie, come home with me."

"To do what? Sit and have tea? Planning on giving me fairy cakes, were you?"

"Stop being such a fucking prat and shut and listen, will you? What I'm trying to say is I like what we've been doin', all right? But the fucking part, you fucking me—" He couldn't say it, couldn't bring himself to hurt Bodie that much.

Bodie, drawing himself to his full height, face impassive. "Does the idea disgust you or does it just scare the willies out of you?"

Doyle smiled at him, inviting Bodie to share the

joke at Doyle's expense. "Frightens me so much my willie's likely to run away."

"Think I'd hurt you?"

"D'you think I'd let that stop me?"

"Why wouldn't it?"

"If it'd hurt me a bit, but give you something you want that much—well, goes without saying, doesn't it."

Saw Bodie digest that. Saw it hit home.

Knew the moment when Bodie saw him for the coward he was: unafraid of physical pain if it would give Bodie what he needed, but too much of a damned coward to surrender that much to another person. To another man.

Even Bodie.

"Stupid, isn't it?" he said. "I trust you on the street, no problem. But I can't trust myself enough to let you..."

Couldn't even say it. Probably for the best: this wasn't the most private of street corners, after all.

"Right, then," said Bodie, "your place it is."

And, Doyle thought in bemusement, people had the cheek to say that *he* was the incomprehensible one!

His place. Their place, maybe. Found that the small kernel of hope had become a huge lump of need. Their place. Not openly, not much chance of that—sheer stupidity, for them to set up house together. Would put paid to any chance of promotion—certainly put paid to that proposed liaison job that would suit them down to a T once they were too slow for the street. No, not publicly, no Cowley presenting them with a silver tray, or half the squad giving them sets of towels. But they could come back here, always know to look for the other one here, always know that this was where they belonged.

It wouldn't even matter when CI5 shifted them again: they'd just pick whichever flat they liked best, and that would become 'theirs' too. He could leave his favourite books there, Bodie could leave his music there, the gun collection, the lead soldier collection—bloody hell, he thought, at this rate, he *would* have them picking out curtains together and putting a formal notice in the paper.

Bodie was making them tea, by the sounds of it. Also by the sounds of it, Bodie had found the packets of crisps and was demolishing them with all due haste.

Weird, how fond of certain noises a person could become. What was that Bodie had said, something

about even putting up with the way Doyle slurped his tea. Not that he did, of course. Well, no more than the next man.

Bodie came through the living room door, filling the doorway, not as tall as Murphy, but broader, much broader than Doyle. Shoulders not really that much wider, but the rest of him, that heavy layer of muscle, those big bones: a powerful man, more so when his face was visible, when those eyes were fixed on someone or something. Strength of character, that's what Bodie had, something Doyle admired, something Doyle envied just a little bit: all of that certainty, all of those opinions and stands already made, already taken, no floundering in varying shades of grey for Bodie.

For a moment, Doyle was almost tempted to want to know how Bodie truly saw him. Tempted, but only for a moment, and then Bodie's blue eyes were smiling at him, the pupils growing larger, desire dilating them, those eyes feasting on the sight of Ray Doyle spread out on the sofa for him.

And all Bodie did, bless him, was offer him tea and ginger creams, and apologies for having finished all the chocolate biscuits off the last time.

Doyle shrugged, didn't say much. Held his mug in both hands, drinking out of it, hearing himself slurp, rather taken by the fact that the sound hadn't put Bodie off him for life.

Then wondered if Bodie had other things on his mind when he heard Doyle sucking his tea up like that.

Did Bodie lie awake at night thinking about Doyle sucking him? Was that one of the images that stroked his fantasy life?

Or did Bodie lie naked in his bed at night, hand fisted round his cock, to the technicolour glory of himself fucking Doyle?

"What do you think about?" Ray asked.

"When?"

"When you wank."

Easy smile, pantomime waggle of eyebrows, the evil villain hissing at the crowd to make them laugh in glee. "Well, if you really want to know the truth..."

Course he did. Had to. Had to know just how important it was to Bodie. "Confess all, my son, Father Doyle is listening."

"If you really must know... It's...well..." Pious expression, angels beside him would all look like Lucifer. "If you're sure you really need to know... It's Cowley."

Doyle spluttered.

"In his kilt. With his wee socks pulled up and his dirk drawn."

Doyle collapsed into hysterics.

"And his sporran loosened—"

"God, I wish I had a tape recorder, I'd blackmail you for everything you've got."

"It's already yours."

With all my worldly goods, I thee endow. For better and for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer.

Doyle was across the room before either of them had taken another breath, his mouth affixed to Bodie's, his arms wound too tightly round Bodie. He'd never meant to hurt Bodie, but what the poor bastard must've gone through—

Didn't bear thinking about.

So do something about it instead, he told himself.

Do something that would mean a lot to Bodie, show Bodie that it wasn't all one sided.

Let Bodie fuck him.

No.

Not yet.

But there was something else he could do, something that would matter to Bodie. Symbolic, even.

Unhurriedly, Doyle drew down Bodie's zip, the sound drowned out by the sudden intake of Bodie's breath. He disentangled himself from Bodie, sliding down onto the floor, Bodie's legs spreading automatically, making things awkward, cords refusing to lower properly, Bodie fumbling and hurried and over-hasty as he yanked at his trousers, standing up, stumbling, falling back into the chair as Doyle grinned up at him in impurest affection. Knowingly, Doyle reached out, ran his hands up the hairiness of Bodie's thighs, narrowed in towards Bodie's groin.

"Never been with anyone as hairy as you," he said: not the most romantic of things, but a compliment of a sort.

"Not even the German gymnast?"

"Thought you'd had her?"

"Did I say that? Me? Surely not."

"Lying little bandit," Doyle murmured, enjoying the way Bodie's breathing was becoming erratic, his nipples showing through the light fabric of his shirt. "Like this, do you?"

"Oh yes."

"Shall I go on, then?"

"Don't stop, oh, fuck it, don't stop—"

"So you don't want me to suck you after all?"

Everything went very, very still. Bodie closed his eyes, swallowed, hard, once, his cock throbbled, and

jolted, just once, and then Bodie opened his eyes again. They were very bright, and very hungry, and their gaze never wavered. “You don’t have to.”

“Don’t I?” was all Doyle said, and then he leaned forward, until he was scant inches from the pulse and throb that betrayed Bodie’s desire. He could smell Bodie: not unpleasant, but—there was that word again. Different. Closer to himself than the way he expected a woman to smell. But still, different. Not unpleasant. Just masculine, nothing of the feminine here, just the brute thrust of masculine need.

Well, he could understand that well enough. No difference there.

He took a deep breath, wondered if he should try to make his mouth wet before he touched Bodie, if he should lick first or—

Do what he liked done himself, first. Do what Bodie had done to him.

Hesitantly, he took the tip into his mouth. Choked, as Bodie thrust forward, caught his breath as Bodie pulled out immediately. Leaned forward again, mouth opening, Bodie’s flesh against his lips, Bodie’s voice loud in his ears. Bodie was hunched over, arms wrapped around his own middle, as if in agony—an agony of anticipation?—or to stop himself, perhaps, from grabbing Doyle’s head and forcing his cock all the way in, deep into the unprepared throat, holding Doyle still as he fucked his face.

But whatever it was, Bodie wasn’t touching him with anything but the moans torn from his throat or the need seeping from the head of his cock.

It wasn’t unpleasant, and it was exciting—powerful—to hear Bodie’s wordless cries of pleasure as he took Bodie inside.

My God, he thought, he’s in me, I’m not separate any more, he’s in me—

Panic, swallowed down, and in swallowing that down, he took more of Bodie inside himself. Interesting taste, not what he’d expected, and the texture of Bodie’s cock—fascinating, intriguing, making his tongue want to explore it more. Soft, like the inside of a woman’s thigh, but rippled with a vein, a pulse so heavy on his tongue.

More noises, as if Bodie were being torn apart.

At that moment, Doyle loved Bodie more than ever. How many men would hold back like that? How many men *could*?

Letting go of Bodie’s cock, just for a minute, Doyle reached out and unfolded Bodie’s arms, guided them to his back, where Bodie could stroke his flesh and caress his skin, something, anything, to stop Bodie

folding in on himself like that.

Doyle bent his head back to Bodie’s cock, captured the bobbing head with his lips, sucked it in like a sweetie, using his tongue the way Bodie had, trying to play with the withdrawn foreskin as Bodie had, but couldn’t manage it, not yet.

Not that it seemed to matter to Bodie.

Under Doyle’s chin, Bodie’s balls were drawing up tight, and Bodie’s hands had come round to pull and stroke Ray’s nipples, the fingertips running through the hair on Doyle’s chest.

Was this what it was like, Doyle thought, as the flesh in his mouth surged and grew: impossible, he knew, but it *felt* as if Bodie were getting bigger, as if every breath Doyle took filled his mouth more and more with Bodie. The head of Bodie’s cock was threatening the back of his throat, and he edged backwards, bringing his hand up to pleasure Bodie the way he’d had girlfriends do for him.

But Bodie could take him completely, could swallow him all the way down: who the hell had taught him, who the hell had he practised on?

He felt a throb against his tongue, heard Bodie’s breath catch. Used his hand to stroke harder on the flesh that couldn’t fit inside him, used his mouth to suck as hard as he could, aware that he was dismally inadequate, compared to what Bodie had done for him. Bodie was saying things now, incomprehensible, words started, never finished, sounds only of pleasure, of passion.

I’m doing that, Doyle thought, and laughed at himself for being so proud. But he was doing that, giving pleasure to Bodie, making Bodie happy. This one was for Bodie, that’s all. That’s why he wasn’t aroused himself, that’s why his body hadn’t reacted to this. But Bodie had reacted, was arching now, heels pressed hard into the carpet as he lifted himself up off the chair, obviously trying desperately not to thrust all the way down Doyle’s throat.

Ray wished he could do that, for Bodie. Would, one day, he promised his friend. Sucked him hard again, one hand on the shaft of Bodie’s cock, one hand caressing his balls, the skin so tight, all that tension waiting to explode in a burst of sweet, sweet ecstasy.

Under his hands, Doyle felt it, felt the pulse along his tongue, heard Bodie’s half-shouted warning—knew what all the signals meant, but from the inside, not the outside like this. Different, to feel someone else pulse against your palm: too little warning, too late, and then there it was in his mouth, Bodie,

flooding him, Bodie, inside him, filling him, drowning him.

His first impulse was to pull away, spit it out, wipe his hand across his mouth: but God, that would hurt Bodie. One thing that didn't change whether one was the giver or the receiver: there was something symbolic in swallowing, and something very telling in spitting it out in disgust.

Doyle swallowed, fought back the urge to gag, made himself go back and lick, tenderly, at the shrivelling flesh, nursing at it with all the love in him.

Bodie had better bloody appreciate this, came the thought before he could stifle it. Bodie had better bloody well fucking appreciate this.

Bodie, of course, did, if the way he gathered Doyle into his arms was anything to go by, or if the words he murmured meant anything, if the tender kisses he pressed to Doyle's lips meant anything at all.

"Oh, Christ, I can taste myself in you," Bodie whispered, mouth pressed against the wild tumble he'd made of Doyle's hair.

Doyle opened his mouth, pulled Bodie down for another kiss, deeper, longer, letting Bodie wallow in the taste of his body inside Doyle.

One day, he promised himself, he'd give Bodie what he really wanted. But for now, this was all he could do, and all he could give, and thank God it was enough.

Bodie's hand was caressing him, toying with his nipples, dappling through the hair on his chest, reaching lower, lower, to the gusset of Doyle's ubiquitous jeans.

Doyle moved aside, but not quite quickly enough. Looked away, but not before he caught that glimmer of...something he didn't want to name, lingering in Bodie's eyes.

"I was going to say 'I'll take care of that for you'," Bodie said very, very quietly.

"Next time," Doyle said, trying to make it all sound light and easy, no big deal. "This time I was just so busy concentrating on not biting you—"

Bodie looked at him steadily, then let it, and Doyle, go. "Fair enough, mate," he said. "Rome wasn't built in a day, was it?"

Doyle seriously considered heaving a sigh of relief, but that would have Bodie looking at him again, and wondering again. Not a good thing, not right now.

After all, hadn't he promised himself he wouldn't hurt Bodie?

He looked down at his trousers, and thought of all the times he'd been embarrassed by a certain few

inches having a mind of its own. "Where were you when I needed you, eh?" he muttered, climbing to his feet. God, but his knees hurt—and his jaw, now that he stopped to take stock. And there was still that taste in his mouth, a distillation of masculinity, suffusing him.

He went to brush his teeth.

In bed, Bodie asleep beside him, the luminous hands of the bedside clock moving in slow motion, ticking off the sleepless hours.

He told himself he was being stupid. Told himself it didn't matter. Men did that sort of thing all the time.

That nasty little voice corrected him: poofs did it all the time.

Come on, he snapped at himself, when've you ever had anything against queers?

Since you started snuggling up to Bodie.

It did have a point.

No. There was nothing wrong about what they did, nothing wrong with what queers did, either. And he didn't care what people said—as long as it didn't interfere with the job. All that mattered was that he had finally found someone he loved, and who loved him back, warts, slurring tea and all.

He moved, and thought of it, lying in his stomach. Bodie's semen. Sperm, thousands, millions of tiny, wriggling sperm, in his stomach, because he'd gone down on his knees and sucked cock. All that whiteness, inside him, becoming part of him, blending into him, uniting with his own cells.

Wonder if this is how women feel.

Imagined all those little sperm wriggling around, and was fervently glad that he'd never be pregnant, if this was what a mouthful or two of come made him feel.

He looked over at the solid bulk of Bodie, face down as always, that scar limned with shadow and dark. It was sorely tempting, to thump the bugger and wake him up, give him a bit of company while he lay here stewing like this. Unfair, maybe, but at least now he understood why his girlfriends got so pissed off when he fell asleep after sex.

There were things he wanted to ask, things he needed to know. Did Bodie go through this the first time he'd sucked cock? Or had he taken to it like a duck takes to water, with nary a thought for the passing of his masculinity.

You're being stupid again, he scolded himself. Doesn't make you any less a man. Definitely true. Unquestionably true.

Pity he didn't believe it.

Morning again, erupting again with its usual gentleness: the birds, the cat, the dog, phone bill instead of gas bill, someone's car radio too loud, and Doyle didn't mind a bit.

He awoke to the wonderful sensation of hands soothing him, of a mouth tasting him, Bodie, making love to him.

There could be no better start to the day, surely, than this. He stretched languidly under the tender ministrations, the rise to orgasm slow and sweet, the pleasure a sure and steady thing, pulsing through him until his whole body was alive, and his heart was beating fast, and his breath was catching in his throat as Bodie brought him to a perfect climax.

Time passed, and he finally opened his eyes, to Bodie gazing down at him. "Cat got the cream?" Doyle said.

"Meow."

"Puss want his tummy rubbed?"

Quick kiss pressed to his forehead. "Nah. That was for you—for last night. Bacon and eggs all right?"

"Fine. And toast too, if you're that keen."

He thought he heard 'will do' waft into the room, but couldn't be sure, Bodie having taken off like a bat out of hell.

Listening to the sounds from the kitchen, the sounds from the street outside. Domestic routine already, he realised, half-annoyed. More annoyed, because it wasn't their usual pattern: when had Bodie ever been quick to get into the kitchen and do the work—any kitchen, but particularly Doyle's. Something going on there, and it was all too obvious what.

Reluctantly, Doyle dragged himself out of bed, shoved on a pair of tatty track suit bottoms, and shuffled into the kitchen, where a steaming mug of tea was pushed into his hands.

"Should've stayed in bed, I was going to bring it through."

Breakfast in bed? "Hope you're going to clean this muck up after," Doyle said, watching Bodie carefully out of the corner of his eye.

"Course." A glance flickered in Doyle's direction, and then Bodie bent down to stick his head in the fridge. "How many slices of bacon d'you want?"

"Two."

"Middle or back?"

"Streaky."

"Shit," came the reply, slightly muffled by the fridge door. "Don't have any in, but if you hang on

just a tick, I'll nick round the pakis and get a packet."

"Bodie," Doyle said with enormous patience, "you are being a complete prat. You think I'm going to go off you if you don't do your Jeeves for me? Christ, did you think I went to bed with you because you'd skivvy for me?"

Shamefaced, or at least that's what the expression looked like, sitting so unfamiliarly on Bodie's features. "Just trying to..."

"To what?"

"You'll laugh."

"And?"

"And when have you not, right, yeh, I get it."

"Bodie, you're not getting off the hook. If you're not planning on going into service, then what the bloody hell *are* you doing?"

Mumble.

Doyle kicked him, hard, on the shin.

"Ow! All right, all right, bloody coppers, torturing people to get confessions."

Doyle glowered.

Bodie finally spoke up. "All right, so I'm sort of trying to sort of well woo you."

For a stupid moment, Doyle thought Bodie had stuck in railway sound effects, then separated it out into real words. Woo him?

"But Bodie," he said, meaning it, hoping it showed, "you've already got me."

"Have I?"

He could make fancy speeches, great protestations, but Bodie always liked to keep it simple. "Yes," was all he said. "Yes."

A long moment then, threatening to turn maudlin and sappy, then Bodie was grinning like a Pools winner and shoving the tea towel into Doyle's hands along with two packets of bacon, a carton of eggs and what looked like a small mountain of tomatoes. "Well, if I've already got you then, you can make the breakfast."

Pause at the door, serious voice. "You serious, Ray? You're not having me on, are you?"

"Oh, no, Bodie, I'm just kidding. I mean, I go down on my knees for every bloke I meet."

And was rewarded by the return of that smile, and the sound of Bodie whistling cheerfully.

He found himself literally counting the hours. Incredible. By the way he felt, years should have passed, but it wasn't even their whole leave. The world stood on end, his life completely rearranged, and if people found out, he'd find his sexuality rearranged too, for

that matter. And it hadn't even been forty eight hours yet. Not even two full days to upturn three decades of living.

They should slow down, he knew, but how the hell could they? Look at Bodie, sprawled out on the sofa, pretending to read the newspaper, but thinking about other things, according to the very speaking bulge in his cream cords. None of this was new for Bodie: Bodie, who was being the very paragon of patience, by anyone's standards, including Doyle's.

But it was still too fast.

He'd gone from never having touched a bloke to having a cock in his mouth, to having a belly-full of come.

He'd fucked Bodie.

That reverberated through him. He'd fucked Bodie. His friend, his partner, his mate—his lover. Boyfriend. Fuck it. He was still Bodie, just Bodie.

Wonder how his other men had introduced him. Meet my mate, Bodie, just Bodie? Did Bodie start calling himself that because he got tired of being introduced as 'meet my Willie'?

How many men had there been? And when—right off, on the merchant navy ship, when Bodie would have been a beautiful teenager with those eyes and that skin and a mouth Doyle knew just begged to be fucked? Had they forced him, or was knowing that about himself what made Bodie run away to sea in the first place? Everyone knew about sailors, right?

He had no right to ask. But he needed to know.

"Have you had a lot of men?"

He heard Bodie nearly choke on that one.

"My fair share."

The next question. The one that mattered more than it ought. "Have many had you?"

Long pause. "No. Not many at all."

"But a few."

"Some."

"What's the difference between 'some' and 'a few'? Ten? Twenty?"

Bodie was coming over to him now, frowning, but not as angry as Doyle had expected. "Does it really matter?"

"Every time you suck me, or when you let me fuck you," that still having impact, bringing him up short, the memory flashing full-fleshed into his mind, "I can't stop wondering who taught you, who you practised on..."

"Can you name and number every girl who ever taught you anything, Ray? And what makes you so sure everything I learned I got from men? The first

arse I ever fucked was a good Catholic girl who wouldn't go on the Pill."

For some pathetic reason, that made him feel better.

"You've got nothing to worry about," Bodie was saying, very close now, and Doyle knew that the reassurances were about to become physical, knew that the ultimate reassurance would be offered him again. "I'm not comparing you to anyone, and even if I did, it's different with you anyway, isn't it?"

How? he almost asked, then saw the answer for himself, saw it right there in Bodie's eyes. Wondered if it showed in his eyes just as much.

"So it's not just because this is my first time with a bloke then?"

"Not even close. Believe me, Ray, this is different from anything else we'll ever know."

And then Bodie was kissing him again, enveloping him in love once more, stroking and touching him with all the skill and devotion at his command, and Doyle succumbed, willingly, to the pleasure and the security of being with someone he loved. Bodie's back was so broad, as he put his arms around him, but his waist was narrower, fitting Doyle's arms much better. And the arse, oh, yes, that luscious curve of buttocks, the cleavage that hid the secret heart of Bodie, the hole that yielded so tenderly.

He could really get hooked on this.

Newlyweds, Bodie had called them: keep going at this rate and he'd end up down the doctor's surgery with the worst case of bridegroom's prick anyone had ever seen. And it would be worth every chafed millimetre, he decided, unresisting as Bodie pulled him to his feet, as Bodie kissed him all the clumsy way to the bedroom.

It was...different, again, to have Bodie take the lead like this, but it was a relief, too, and a pleasure, to have someone else being responsible for making things go well, someone else taking the lead. Wonderful, too, to see Bodie lose some of that tentativeness, as if his friend was finally beginning to realise Doyle was neither going to faint dead away in moral outrage nor knock his block off.

Very nice, he thought, letting Bodie lay him down on the bed, letting Bodie strip him. Ann had done that for him: one of the things he'd liked best about her, that demanding, dominant streak. Lovely, lying here, with Bodie's mouth on him, with Bodie's hands touching him all over with reverence and lust. And listening to Bodie—pure heaven, hearing all those words, the stupid, silly words that they'd both deny

in the light of day or the publicness of a crowd.

But wonderful, to know Bodie trusted him that much, that Bodie loved him that much.

And to think he'd almost not given this a go! Christ, what sort of fool would he have been then? Complete wally, that's what. To miss out on Bodie's mouth sucking on his balls like that, Bodie's hands along the inside of his thighs, hands moving up him, to his nipples, his chest, lower, to his stomach, his cock, that gifted mouth wrapping him in heat and wetness and suction. Glorious. Heaven. Perfection. And if he wanted it, Bodie would let him fuck him. Not quite as good as fucking a woman, he admitted, but what the hell: no one's perfect, right? He'd settle for back-door fucking if it meant he got Bodie the rest of the time too. Small price to pay, very small price.

Bodie's teeth caught him with delicate deliberation, just where the head of his cock flared out from the shaft, an intoxicating pleasure with just the edge of risk that was unbearably exciting to men like themselves. Must remember that, Doyle thought, sighing, as he was licked and petted and coddled and loved. He spread his legs happily, smiling dreamily as the wet caresses covered his balls, shivering sensation all the way down to his toes. Bodie's hair was so soft in his hands, almost as soft as the skin on the curve of his shoulders, or in the hollow of his spine. Lovely. And Bodie's mouth was still doing wonderful things to him, until he was hard, and fucking Bodie was losing importance in the face of all this delectable pleasure.

Bodie's tongue was laving trails along his inner thighs, uncovering erogenous zones Doyle hadn't even known he'd had. Licking him all over, right under his balls, right there—

He was sitting upright, legs crossed, hands protectively between his legs before he even realised he was moving.

"Sorry," Bodie said, looking like he could kick himself. "I should've warned you I was going to rim you—didn't intend doing anything else, honest. It feels great, just wanted to do something else nice to you..."

Doyle tried a laugh, heard the panic in it, didn't kick himself, but did thump himself on one undefended thigh. "Stupid of me to over-react like that, it's just—"

"It's just too bloody soon for anything like that and I should've fucking well known better!"

"Well, no point laying blame, is there?" Grin, to show that he wasn't upset, to persuade Bodie to ease

up on himself a bit. "Better laying you, right? Want me to? Or 'd you rather I sucked you off?"

Bodie, kneeling on the bed, staring at him, Doyle awkwardly aware that he hadn't even noticed that Bodie was hard too, hadn't thought about Bodie-below-the-belt until this second.

"C'mon, Bodie," Doyle said, voice going deep, hands going deep too, touching Bodie's hardness, one finger tracing the length of it, capturing the glistening droplet at the tip. "What d'you want?"

"I'll settle for a good fuck."

Fire rushed through him, hearing Bodie actually saying those words. Seeing how much Bodie needed and wanted him, the other man's arousal catching. "A good fuck? How about," he closed his hand around Bodie's erection, holding it tightly in his hand, "a great fuck? A splendid fuck? A fan-fucking-tastic fuck?"

"On my back, this time," Bodie said, gaze never leaving Doyle's. "So I can see your face when you come in me."

Doyle felt that in his cock, his flagging erection coming back up to half staff.

"So you can kiss me when I you put your cock into me."

Another pulse through his cock, every individual word dropping from Bodie's mouth to land on his cock like a kiss.

"So you can fuck my mouth with your tongue while you fuck my arse with your cock."

Doyle grabbed him, hauled him round, got him on the bed, on his back, legs spread, knees lifted high, that tiny bud of flesh winking at him, dilating slightly just from Bodie's arousal, Bodie's anticipation.

I'm going to put my cock in there, Doyle thought incredulously. Fucking hell, I'm putting my cock in there!

Then Bodie was grabbing in his turn, his arms round Doyle's shoulders, pulling Ray down for a kiss. "Don't need any cream this time," Bodie was saying in his ear. "Could just use spit."

Use his tongue, there, the way Bodie had on him?

Doyle disentangled himself enough to get the tube of moisturiser out of the drawer. Definitely going to need a tube of proper lubricant, and soon, at the rate they were going through this stuff. He put some on Bodie, on the outside where the skin changed colour as it disappeared inside; put more on his own cock, making it slick and smooth as—

He pushed the word from his mind.

This was *not* the time to be thinking about cunt. He

should be thinking about Bodie, and how wonderful it felt inside him, all that heat and smoothness, all that depth, endless depths to thrust into. Oh, yeh, that's what to think about, and the kisses, the way Bodie kissed him, and the way Bodie loved him, and the way he loved Bodie. He looked up, to meet Bodie's blue stare, reached one hand to stroke Bodie's cock, the other rubbing the small mouth of flesh waiting to take his cock inside.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Come down here," Bodie told him, legs lifting up out of the way, arse canting upwards. "Like this," arms round Doyle, Bodie's thighs pressed hard against his own chest, the backs of his knees over Doyle's shoulder, his mouth open, hungry, under Doyle's. "Like this," he said again, and Doyle felt himself literally taken in hand, guided to the opening, swallowed in deep, deeper, until Bodie had him, all of him, and they were joined, his cock in Bodie, Bodie's tongue in him, and they were, quite wonderfully, complete.

Doyle wished they could stay like that forever, but his body was screaming at him, his nerves atingle, and he had to move, move, keep on moving, in and out of Bodie, thrusting and pushing, leaving only for the briefest possible instant before pushing in again, and all the time his cock was in Bodie and in heaven, his mouth was being ravished by Bodie's tongue, pushing into him like a small, wet cock.

Under him, Bodie moved, opened even wider, and Doyle plunged into him, plundering the pleasure so enthusiastically offered. He felt it building inside, couldn't bear to slow down, not when it felt so incredibly right.

Came, intensely, suddenly, pouring himself into Bodie, spilling his soul deep inside his friend.

Collapsed, lay there on top, while Bodie covered his face in small kisses.

Recovered, opened his eyes, only to close them again as Bodie kissed him, and moved him, until Bodie was lying beside him, that hard cock questing through the hair on his thigh, Bodie humping him, pushing and thrusting against him, while they shared kisses, deep kisses, redolent with passion and love.

"Look at me," Bodie said. "Look at me!"

Doyle opened his eyes, smiled at the way Bodie's face was flushed, sweat spiking the usually impeccable hair. He stroked his hand across Bodie's cheek, reached down for Bodie's cock. Pressed it against his own thigh, Bodie's pulse against him, and he rubbed his hand up and down it, Bodie's hardness trapped

against him. Did that until Bodie moved, just once, and Doyle brought Bodie over him, on top of him, let Bodie thrust hard between his tightly-closed thighs, held Bodie close, stared into those passion-darkened eyes until Bodie shuddered, and went still, mouth suddenly agape, as the moment came and he spilled himself between Doyle's legs.

The last thing Doyle remembered was clambering out from under Bodie's weight, then wrapping himself around his friend, holding him close: cradling, if one could be said to cradle a man so large. But he went to sleep holding Bodie, the wetness of Bodie's orgasm still between his thighs.

Dark, and disorientation. Too hot, too close, too—

Too nothing. It was Bodie, all over him, snoring a bit. Not what had awakened him, though: nature's call could be very insistent.

Necessities done, he meandered into the kitchen, poked through cupboards and fridge, came to the conclusion that he was really going to have to do some shopping and that if he planned on feeding himself or Bodie tonight, he'd better put some clothes on and go round the Chinkies.

When he came back, laden down with tin-foil boxes and wreathed in gorgeous smells, Bodie was already awake, and up, and the smile Doyle got when he walked in the door was worth more than all the tea in China.

An evening, spent in doing nothing very much, saying not too much of anything, and then finally, back to bed, long, slow, lingering kisses, and the touch of each other's hands.

Falling asleep at last that night, Doyle had one last thought before Morpheus claimed him: that odd feeling that had been niggling around for the past couple of days. He recognised it. As his eyes closed, Ray Doyle knew himself to be completely happy.

Of course, neither one of them had set the alarm clock for the next day. In by noon, paperwork to do before they faced Cowley and the next assignment. In by noon, and neither one of them awake before eleven, and the phone ringing twice, and the neighbour coming to ask if they'd seen her cat, and the Parcel Post delivering one of Lindsay's hideous cushions for Doyle to take to *Liberty's* to match to fabric, and the geyser on the blink, and no milk for tea.

He should have been in the foulest mood in the history of mankind, would be, normally, but this was hardly the most normal of times, was it? A huge gulf

between last week and this, and he couldn't find an ounce of regret over it. Doyle looked over at Bodie, still half-asleep in the passenger seat, one lock of hair askew and sticking straight out from the side of his head. Bodie should look stupid, Doyle thought, but he just looks gorgeous.

Oh, you've got it bad my son, he said to himself, and restrained himself from reaching over and smoothing Bodie's hair down. He had a sneaking suspicion that he wouldn't stop at that, that if he touched Bodie he'd end up kissing him and if he ended up kissing him—

Well, Cowley just might frown on two of his agents being arrested for public indecency and lewd conduct. Unless it was in the line of duty, of course.

Bodie turned to him, gazed at him, didn't say anything: Doyle didn't think either of them had to say anything, the way they were looking at each other. "Better watch it, I suppose," he said.

"Watch what?" Mumbled round a huge yawn.

"The way we are with each other. Murphy sussed us in two seconds flat, and we're even more over the top now. Best be careful." He looked away, shifted gear, followed the aggravated line of traffic through the lights.

"Best be careful to—what?"

Doyle barely glanced at him, the articulated lorry ahead weaving like a Scotsman on a Saturday night, and the teenager on the moped zipping in and out like Evel Knievel with a death wish. "Not to let on we're sleeping together."

Pause. Doyle negotiated a nearly clogged roundabout, nipped down the back road that would lead them in towards the general area of HQ.

"Be a problem, you think?"

"Course it would. Think they'd let us within sniffing distance of that liaison post if they knew we were in bed together?"

"And we all know how important that promotion is."

He'd spent a lot of time thinking about that job and what it would mean to them: the two of them, maybe three or four other people, still doing a good and useful job, but safe, off the streets, good money coming in, and best of all, no one trying to kill them. No risk of a bomb going off in their hands, no risk of someone shooting them in the back. Or in their own living room. Just thinking about it made him come over all warm-fuzzies: he and Bodie with somewhere to go when they got too slow for the streets, and a job they could love, and money they could use to go on

holiday to Greece and Paris and Rome and other places where men could hold hands without being beaten up. They'd even be able to buy a flat together, the two of them—commitment, that, one that would make Bodie feel a lot more secure about Doyle.

"Yeh! Have you seen the *starting* pay scales for that? Oi, you!" yelled out the window, Mr. Macho in sunglasses and hairy chest sneering over the bonnet of his Mercedes. "Where'd you buy your license, round the back of Woolies? Watch where you're going," ID. pulled out and flashed, Mr. Macho looking suddenly less macho, "or I'll have your license suspended so quick your head won't stop spinning for a week."

Shifting gears again, round another corner, turning back to Bodie. "Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Nothing much. Just how much you want that liaison job."

"We'd be proper Jack Horners pulling plum jobs like that. Good hours, amazing wages," quick look before zipping the car between two taxis, "no one shooting at us."

"Be nice."

"Be wonderful."

Then they were almost at HQ, and their radio cackled to life, and it was back to the grind. Hours later, they'd done their stint wrestling killing carbon sheets and murderous typewriters, even done their stint of going round interviewing a possible witness. Now, they were back in HQ, mugs of detestable pseudo-coffee or possibly pseudo-tea in hand, and what seemed like the rest of the squad piling in, the rest room heading for the Guinness Book of World Records for the most people piled into the smallest space.

"Anyone'd think there was free booze for the having," Bodie said, leaning in closer when Doyle obviously hadn't heard a word he'd said over the racket.

"Better than that. Payday."

An odd expression on Bodie's face then. "You'll be looking forward to that, I suppose, but not as much as your precious liaison job."

Doyle gave him a look for that. "Thought you'd like the liaison job?"

"Or at least the money, right?"

"What the hell brought that on?"

"Brought what on?" Murphy, sticking his nose in where Doyle didn't think it belonged, but Bodie was smiling at him like water in a desert.

"Did you get those brochures on that climbing

holiday in Switzerland?”

Murphy looked at Bodie, looked at Doyle. “Wasn’t sure if that was still on or not.”

“Oh, it’s still on.”

“Honeymoon over so soon?” Said so mildly, but there was genuine concern in that voice.

“Hang on a minute—” Doyle said, knowing only that there was something going on here that he’d missed, couldn’t be what it looked like—

“Why don’t you ask Doyle here?”

“Ask Doyle what?” McCabe, whose nose belonged even less.

“You’re asking *Doyle* something?” Lucas, Part Two of the double act.

Jax was sailing into view, all ears and witty comments, and Doyle would quite happily have strangled him.

“What’s this in aid of?” Doyle asked Bodie, freezing everyone else out with the sheer force of his ‘charm’. “A minute ago, everything was just fine—”

“Think so, do you?”

“Of course I fucking well think so! What d’you think the past three days have all been about?”

“Ooh, been off somewhere together have we?”

“Having a tiff already?”

One serious glower put paid to Lucas and McCabe’s double act, the overflow taking care of Jax too. Murphy, on the other hand, simply raised an amused eyebrow and took another drink of the brown stuff in his mug.

“Did you tell them?” Doyle demanded, one finger jabbing Murphy right in the breast pocket. “Did you fucking tell them?”

“Bother you, would it?” From Bodie, in the cold, hard voice Doyle hadn’t heard since before they started sleeping together. Which wasn’t very long ago, he reminded himself. It wasn’t very long ago at all.

“Bother me? Depends on how he did it. Anyway, it’s no one’s business—”

“And that’s all it is.” Such an overabundance of doubt, positively dripping.

“You stupid, pathetic bastard! You—”

Broke off, as the words bounced off Bodie like bullets off Superman. Which meant—

He’d promised himself he wasn’t going to hurt Bodie. But the bastard was being so fucking unreasonable—

“Right, that does it,” Doyle said to the room at large. “You, mate, are coming with me.” Grabbed Bodie’s shirtfront, tugged, Mohammed meeting the

mountain. “Now, Bodie.” Brooking no argument, the same tone of voice that had carried him through years of fights and set-tos with Bodie on the job. “Now.”

“Fine,” Bodie said, shaking off Doyle’s hand, turning on his heel with a military precision that boded no good at all.

“Want to borrow my flak jacket?” From Murphy, who else?

“You keep it. You’ll need it more than me.”

“Really? He gets angrier at you than he does with me.”

“But he l—” Jax, back again, bright eyed and ears positively out on stalks to harvest the latest gossip. “Yeh, well, things are different between me and him, you got that?”

Didn’t bother hanging around to see what Murphy was going to say to that, too busy hurrying off to catch that stupid bastard before he did something even more stupid than usual.

He found Bodie propping up a wall, a pose so casual to be totally unnatural on Bodie.

“So what the fuck was that all about back there?”

Bodie folded his arms, looked down at his feet. “I was out of order there—”

“I’ll say.”

“But all that crap in the car—”

“What crap in the car? Look, I’m the first one to apologise—”

Bodie snorted at that.

“—I am too. But all I said in the car was...” What had he said in the car? Nothing much, just stuff about them being together.

“All you said in the car,” Bodie told him, quietly, “was that having your name down for this might-be job was more important than anything you and me might be. To each other. Together. Us. You know.”

Doyle ran his hands through his hair: Christ, with communication skills this highly developed, they’d be in the divorce courts before the week was out.

“Did you mean it that way, in the car?” Bodie’s voice was milder than Doyle’d expected.

At least they were *both* trying to sort it out. Doyle sighed and stuffed his temper down into the back of his mind. “If it got to you that much, and I wasn’t pissed off at you and doing it on purpose, then of course I didn’t mean it that way. In the car or anywhere else.”

“Oh, well, that’s all right then.” Bodie was sounding more like his old self, making light of even the darkest things: their usual way of coping. “I’d like to apologise for being a bit of a prat—”

“No time like the present!”

“—but don’t worry, with you giving me such fine lessons, I’ll be a big prat in no time at all.”

Doyle was grinning with him, laughing, “You saying it was my fault? Just because you—” until he actually thought about what Bodie had said, “What *did* you do?”

Bodie didn’t look at him, but the calm in his voice hinted at old tensions. “You were going on about the job, about keeping quiet about us so we’d be in line for it.”

“And you got your knickers in a twist over *that*? What the hell else are we going to do, take out announcements in the *Times*?”

Bodie was matching him for fire now, Bodie’s voice escalating. “No, but there’s a bit of a jump from that to skulking around like lepers.”

Doyle was nearly shouting now. “Yeh, and there’s a bit of a jump between going around carrying bloody bells in front of us and going around telling everyone in CI-fucking-5 that we’re—”

Real danger, in the quietness of Bodie’s voice, as he asked, too, too, calmly: “We’re what?”

Take a breath, he told himself, get a grip on your bloody temper, don’t fly off the handle at him, don’t ruin already.

Bodie, toning his own voice down, neither one of them exactly racing happily into battle. “We’re not telling everyone, just Murphy, and he’s a mate of mine, Doyle, and he’s been my mate for years—”

He really didn’t intend to sound so much like a wounded puppy—albeit a vicious wounded puppy intent on spreading rabies. “And years, longer than you’ve known me.”

“Don’t sound like that!” Low-voiced, as if it pained Bodie as much to see Doyle hurt as vice versa. “You and Murph—it’s apples and oranges.”

Not the best time to ask. In fact, if this were a romance novel or a ‘how-to’ book on good relationships, he’d shut his trap and just get back to what this had all been about in the first place. Not the best time to ask, but when would there ever be a ‘best time’ for a question like this? “Have you slept with Murphy?”

“Don’t ask me that, Ray.”

“In other words, a big, fat, resounding yes. With bells on too?”

“Not the way it is with us. Why d’you keep harping on about that anyway? D’you hear me asking for the dirty linen on you and Ann?”

“You already know all that. You were there—or ’ad you forgotten that? Anyway, I didn’t exactly keep

it a deep, dark secret, did I?” He subsided into silence, looming, brooding silence cold enough to cut off the world.

The silence stretched.

Then finally, abruptly, just as Doyle was about to concede defeat, Bodie burst into harried, hasty speech, “Okay, all right, I’ll tell you. Yes, I’ve slept with Murphy, but no, I’m not—”

“Not what?”

Bodie looked decidedly uncomfortable, as if he half-expected saying it loudly at work would turn him into a reject from a romance novel. “I’m not in love with Murphy.”

“But you are with me.” Slow, steady warmth spreading through him as Bodie’s words permeated him. Knew it had to be written all over his face “Wasn’t just pillow talk—”

“Hope not. Never fancied Doris Day.”

Punch to the arm, for the kiss he couldn’t give here in the corridors of CI5. “Prat.”

Bodie leaning forward, their breath mingling, then whispering into Doyle’s ear as if they were discussing a sensitive case. “Want to fuck you right now, right here, up against the wall.”

And instead of a shiver of desire, all Doyle could think about was having Bodie inside him, up inside him there. Bodie was big, far too big for his mouth, how the hell—

“Not literally, Ray—already told you I won’t try that. But I’d get you up against that wall and I’d kiss you and touch you—”

Now that was better, especially the darkness of arousal in Bodie’s eyes, and the whole idea was sounding better and better. “Tonight. My place. Eight.”

“Oh, no, Ray. This afternoon. *My* place. Fourish.”

“You in a hurry again?”

“Not like the first time. But near enough.”

“Your place, then. Fourish.”

Then it was a shared smile, Bodie copping a quick feel of his bum, and back to the rest room, where the crowd had dispersed and another bit of work was waiting for them.

Fourish, and he was nowhere near Bodie’s place. For that matter, he wasn’t even anywhere near Bodie. He was, instead, stuck behind the steering while of Cowley’s car, while Cowley sat in the back with some German muckety-muck discussing policy and Interpol and a dozen other tiny details, none of which were of the slightest bit of interest to Doyle.

He kept his mind on the job, or as much of his

mind as a routine security drive through London required, which wasn't a whole hell of a lot. The rest of his mind was occupied by thoughts of what he and Bodie had done today, in bed, later, at HQ, in the corridor, that stupid argument over what he still wasn't entirely sure.

Going too fast, that was their problem. Far too fast, and any driver knows what happens when one takes the corner too fast. Splat. A big mess and some poor bastard left to scrape the remains up off the ground. They needed to slow down.

Correction. *He* needed to slow down: Bodie seemed quite happy to do his Stirling Moss, probably be quite happy to take the corners on two wheels. But then, Bodie'd done this before. Quite a few times before.

With Cowley droning in the back, with another agent in the passenger seat beside him, Doyle sat there and gave himself a good talking to, all about the stupidities of jealousy, and the sins of nosiness.

Didn't help. Still couldn't get it out of his mind. All that business with Krivas—that had been a bit personal, hadn't it? Then there was Keller, that had been well over the odds. Merchant navy, mercs, the all-male environment of the Army and the Paras and the SAS. And all of that led to other things, thinking about Bodie in the military, where he would've gone to avoid being caught—or was that why the SAS had been so happy to get rid of him? Now, back in mufti, did Bodie go to the queer pubs? Discos? Nah, couldn't imagine Bodie in discos. Until he remembered that he'd *seen* Bodie in discos, had gone to more than a few, he and Bodie and their dates.

Bodie, flirting with some complete stranger, going home with him, doing to him what he'd done to Doyle. Letting someone fuck him.

No. Bodie'd said there hadn't been too many who'd had Bodie.

Which could still leave several legions and a battalion or two, depending on how Bodie was counting it. Stupid, stupid, stupid, he told himself, a thought echoed from the back seat.

"Left here, Doyle, your other left."

"Yes, sir, sorry, sir, avoiding the suspicious car behind us, sir."

Kept driving straight, until the perfectly innocuous red mini had turned down the next side street.

And a perfectly innocuous yellow morris minor had swung into place behind their car.

"Shit," Doyle muttered. Just what he needed: the job actually needing him to concentrate on it today.

Brilliant, just bloody brilliant.

It was all routine, in the end, just MI5 checking up on the German team who had been checking up on the MI5 team, who had been checking—well, it was the usual circuitous norm. Whatever it was, it was gone ten before he was off duty, and his backside was sore from sitting on it all day.

Not a chance of Bodie getting his arse tonight, not when he had the perfect excuse.

He thought longingly of hæmorrhoids, and he was only half-joking.

There were plenty of parking spaces on Bodie's street, and a light on in Bodie's window. Doyle was whistling under his breath, the same tune Bodie'd been whistling so much recently. He took the stairs two and three at a time, pleased with himself that he wasn't out of puff by the time he got to the top.

Which was just as well. It made it all the more impressive when he had the wind knocked out of him. Doorbell rung, thumb pressing down hard the whole time, until the door opened to reveal—

Murphy.

(Editor's note: The following is the main ending of the story. For those who are aware of M. Fae Glasgow's tendency towards unhappy endings and would prefer something more 'positive,' may I suggest going directly to page 99 and reading the alternative ending instead.)

MURPHY.

At Bodie's place, at this time of night.

"He'd better be at death's fucking door," Doyle snarled, pushing past the colleague at Bodie's door.

"And if he isn't," Doyle's arm was grabbed bruisingly, "you'll put him there, is that it? Well, Ray old chum," Doyle's arm released, but Doyle held fast by the sheer threat in Murphy's glare, "before you go in there and rearrange his face, you just keep in mind that anything you do to him, I'll do to you—double. And while you're at it, you had better remember what I told you in the first place. If you don't want him, there are plenty who do. And some of us..."

Doyle blinked, once, as Murphy came in closer. And closer.

"...some of us are well able to take him right out from under your nose. Some of us..."

Closer still, impossible, unless Murphy was going to—

"...are positively bloody gifted..."

—kiss him—

“...aren’t we?”

Under the anger and the outrage, was the enormity of relief that Bodie was the only man he enjoyed kissing, Bodie the only man he *wanted* to kiss.

Doyle, without an ounce of shame, took great satisfaction in the sound of his fist decorating Murphy’s jaw in shades of blue. “Don’t you *ever* do that to me again!”

There was a flash of unbridled anger in Murphy’s eyes, then the shutters came down again, and all Doyle had to look at was a very urbane, very cultivated amusement. “Don’t do that to you *ever* again? Why not, Ray? Like it too much, did you?” And then, perfectly timed pause on the doorstep, moving quickly enough that there was no time to yield to the temptation to brawl, “Tell Bodie I’ve gone home for the rest of the night. I’ll see him soon enough, won’t I?”

Not if Doyle could help it. He kicked the closing door. Hard.

“I see the door bit you again.”

Bodie.

Well, of course, it was, after all, Bodie’s flat.

Where Murphy had answered the door as if he were used to it. As if he lived here. As if he had the right to.

Doyle looked Bodie up and down, from the shininess of his untidy hair to the bareness of his feet, and paid special, impertinent attention to the black expanse in between, Bodie black-clad from throat to wrist to ankle. Ready for a funeral, Doyle thought, and shivered, as someone walked over his grave.

“Have a nice time with Murphy, did you?” Doyle winced as he heard the shrewishness of that tone.

Bodie just stared at him, his very calm an intimidation. “We had a very nice time, as it happens.”

“And what else did you have?”

Such small changes, but speaking large volumes to anyone who knew Bodie.

And who knew him better than Doyle? Doyle, who swallowed, and whose mind skittered, trying to take stock of what the hell was going on, Doyle whose heart started to pound and race.

Balanced on the balls of his feet, expression shifting toward the truculent, Bodie looked ready for a any kind of fight available. “I would’ve thought,” Bodie said, sounding nothing much more than mildly curious, although Doyle saw the way the hands were clenched. “you’d’ve been more interested in what Murphy had.”

The nascent good intentions didn’t stand a chance,

suspended by the images that shoved in front of them. Doyle had expected the jealousy to surge through him: hadn’t expected the hurt to bite so deeply. “You think it matters if Murphy shagged you?”

“Doesn’t it?”

It was on the tip of his tongue, scraping at his teeth in its enthusiasm to get out, to fly and wound and leave Bodie bleeding. But there was something else, too, his own determination that he wasn’t going to destroy this and there, something in Bodie’s eyes, something—

Christ, the same as when Bodie’d been going on about Ann. The barbs were bitten back, bile rising as Doyle swallowed those poisoned words. “Course it fucking matters.”

But all Bodie said was: “Does it?”

Left flatfooted, Doyle stumbled after Bodie’s retreating back.

The living room was a tip, take-away food, empty beer cans, crisp packets and mugs cluttering everything. Bodie’s shoes and socks were an untidy molehill amidst the mountain of mess. The chaos drew Doyle up short: one thing for Bodie’s bedroom to be a bit of a mess, but never, never his living room—not the room that Cowley might walk into, not the room that years of living on base had trained him to keep spotless to divert inspection from the more private areas. Very slowly, Doyle looked around, really looked around, and wondered.

“Want a cup of tea?”

The panacea for all ills, or in this case, a nice hot drink to give them both time to cool down.

“That would be great.”

“Fine. It’ll just be a minute.”

Doyle shoved the evening paper off the sofa, flopped himself down there. To think, the two of them, reduced to the polite mouthings of strangers. D’you want tea it’ll only be a minute—Christ on a crutch, next it would be do you take milk.

Maybe taking that next step hadn’t been such a good idea after all. Might be best if they let it drop—just look at them, look at *Bodie*. And all right, he’d be honest: just look at himself. Not exactly at his best. In fact, if he were this shaky on the job, Cowley would have him round at Dr. Ross’ before he could say trick-cyclist.

“Here you go,” Bodie said, back already with the tea.

“That was quick.”

“I’d already put the kettle on when you showed up.”

Doyle slurped the none-too-hot tea, didn't even grimace over it, and answered Bodie's unspoken question. "Ended up chauffeuring Cowley around all day. He had a load of meetings, and the last one took forever."

"Supposed that was what it was."

"Then—"

"Then what?"

"Nothing."

"Don't start that with me, Ray Doyle. What were you going to ask?"

"If you weren't pissed off with me or worried or something, then—"

"You thought that was why Murphy was here? For fuck's sake, what d'you think I am? Eh? D'you think my brains go out the window as soon as you fuck me in the arse? I'm not one of your fucking girlfriends—"

"And I never said you were—"

"Then why're you saying I was sitting here worrying or stewing over you being late? I'm in the Squad too, you know, I *know* how the job works."

"I never said you didn't—"

"But you forgot it, didn't you?"

Doyle wished he were an American and could take the Fifth.

"Didn't you."

Not a question now, hard, flat statement. "Course I didn't. It was just—"

All of a sudden, Bodie was there, right there in front of him, hands digging into the back of the sofa, his arms prison bars around Doyle's face. "Don't you dare fucking lie to me. I know you, Raymond Doyle. I *know* you. And I know when you're lying to me."

Captured, caught, trapped, any number of words for it, but nothing came close to describing the feeling, mouse gone after the cheese, the trap coming down on him, cutting into him. "I thought you might be worried, 'cause of the way things've changed between us," oh, nice choice of euphemism, he sneered at himself, "especially since I'd said I'd be here about four and didn't turn up."

"Unlike the proverbial bad penny?"

"What is it, Bodie? Something's changed..."

A flex of muscles, and Bodie was gone, pacing slowly across the room.

"Something's changed. That's one way of putting it, isn't it? Something's changed." Half a laugh, an entirety of hurt.

"Stop messing me about—"

"Messing *you* about? Christ, you've got a fucking cheek!"

Not the time, Doyle knew, to leaven the atmosphere with even the most puerile of jokes. "So you think I'm messing you about then?"

"Yes—maybe. That's the thing, Ray, I don't know. I just don't fucking know."

"But you spent the afternoon here in a blue funk, thinking the worst, you and Murphy—"

"Will you leave Murphy out of this? He's got nothing to—"

"Leave him out? Wish you would. How d'you think I feel, showing up here this late and there he is, opening the door like lord of the fucking manor?"

"I'm not one of your birds, I don't have to answer to you every time one of my mates comes over."

"Not even when that 'mate' is one of your lovers?"

"Wrong tense."

"Since when?"

"About six, seven months ago. Before you gave any inkling you might bring yourself to let me touch you."

"So what's he doing over— Hang on a minute. The way you just said that—" Deep breath, calm down, stop trampling all over Bodie with borrowed size 8 army boots. "You still think I don't like the sex bit?"

"*Still* think? You make it sound as if you've spent weeks persuading me otherwise."

"I have—" Stop, think about the passage of time. "Christ, I haven't, but it feels like weeks."

Saw just how wrong the words were as they thudded into Bodie.

"I didn't mean it that way. It's just..." Run his fingers through his hair, wish wholeheartedly for a bottle or two of whisky or vodka or anything else of real potency. "It's been a bit on the quick side for me, that's all."

Doyle watched, fascinated, as the tension ebbed from Bodie's shoulders, watched, as the dark eyes lost some of their bleakness. Watched, as Bodie came back to him.

"Head reeling, is it?"

"Any faster and it'd fall off."

"Suppose it is a bit much for you. You really hadn't done it with another bloke before?"

Remembering being on his knees for Bodie, failing miserably. "Thought that'd been a bit obvious."

"Practice—"

"—makes perfect. It shows, you know, that you've had a lot of practice."

Muted flare, the anger merely banked, not gone. “D’you want a list, is that it? And what I did with each of them and when?”

“Keep your hair on. I was only trying to give you a compliment.” Bodie just looked at him. “Yeh, yeh, and fish for details too. C’mon, Bodie, how would you feel if you found out I’d been doing it with blokes? You already know about most of the women, wouldn’t you be just a bit curious and a bit jealous about the men?”

Bodie sat down heavily, the sofa cushions dipping under his weight, drawing Doyle an inch or two closer. “I’d be a bit curious, I suppose, but I’m not as jealous as you.”

“Yeh, well, I didn’t think I was as jealous as me either. It’s come as a bit of a shock, I can tell you.”

“So...” A look laden with uncertainty glanced off Doyle, then was gone before he could read more. “Why d’you think you’re jealous with me and not all the rest?”

“Because—”

He’d feel a right wally sitting there in an untidy living room face to face, lights on, nothing between them but a half-resolved issue. “Because—it matters more this time.”

Bodie sat silently, waiting.

“Because—Christ, Bodie, because every time I think of you letting one of them do you, I want to cut their pricks off with a blunt penknife, that’s why.”

Now it was Doyle who sat there silently, waiting, wondering what he’d said wrong this time.

“So it doesn’t bother you what I do to them?”

“Course not.” And why the hell had *that* brought on the storm clouds? “Bodie, what you do them... Well, it’s no different, really, from doing it to a bird or your own fist, but when you let them do *that* to you...” Was unaware of the expression drifting over his own face. “To let them do *that* to you, they must really mean a lot to you.”

Bodie shook his head, rueful disbelief written all over him. “You’ve always got to judge everyone by your own standards, haven’t you? Ray, my son, let me tell you all about the birds and the bees. Some bees like doing it. Some bees, though, like getting it. That’s it. Nothing complicated or meaningful, it just feels—incredible.”

“And that’s why you let them do it to you? It doesn’t mean anything?”

“I thought wanking was supposed to knock you blind, not deaf.”

“But to let someone inside you like that—”

“—can be because there’s nothing better than a hard cock rubbing against the old gland in there, or—”

“Or?”

Words mumbled towards hands clasped so tightly the knuckles were shroud-white. “Or because you love him.”

And that was what mattered.

Bodie loved him. All the rest of it, the arguments, the insecurities, whatever the hell else was going on, all paled to insignificance beside that one simple, salient fact. Bodie loved him. Doyle couldn’t help but smile, and he reached out, twisting round, unnoticing of the discomfort, until he could hold Bodie, until he could kiss him.

It was wonderful, just the way he’d imagined it, before Murphy had opened the door and everything had gone sour. Himself wrapped round Bodie, Bodie’s arms tight around him, and their mouths open, kissing, tongues touching and Bodie bathing him in love.

Wonderful. Pure heaven, to feel so loved—and to love so much in return. Bodie’s hands were on him, and his own hands were burrowing under that annoying black jumper, finding the white skin nestled within. Firm nipples rose under his touch, and he kneaded the ample muscles under them. Almost as good as a handful of tits, he decided, and ran his hands back down Bodie’s stomach, and round, to his back, to the dimples that lured him to the small of Bodie’s back, and the lush, ripe curve of Bodie’s buttocks.

“Can’t get at you,” he mumbled against Bodie’s cheek. “Let me touch you—”

“Better adjourn this to the bedroom, then.”

They did, Doyle stopping Bodie for kisses now and then, his hands full of Bodie’s arse.

The bedroom, eventually, the covers already in disarray, Bodie bending over to pull the bedspread off. “God, I love this arse,” Doyle said, cupping Bodie with both hands. “Most gorgeous arse on the face of the planet.”

For the briefest of moments, he wondered that there’d been no come-back, but then Bodie was standing up, and stripping, the sweater coming off to reveal the pallid skin, the hands dropping lower to unbutton and unzip the trousers. Doyle busied himself with his own clothing, hauling off shirt, kicking off trainers, pulling at the rest of his clothes.

“No,” Bodie said, “let me...”

So Doyle did, standing there, while Bodie went

down on his knees. The socks first, and then Bodie ran his hands up the length of Doyle's legs, following the inner seam, following that ridge of double stitching over the impressive bulge, the buckle being undone, the button pushed through its small hole, and then the zip coming undone as if by magic, Bodie's mouth following its path.

Then the jeans were slipped down, and the briefs were mouthed, wetly, Doyle's cock rising blindly towards the tantalising heat.

Bodie withdrew, looked up at Doyle with darkened eyes. "This is what you want, isn't it, Ray?"

Doyle wrapped his hands round the back of Bodie's head and drew him forwards, inwards, until the open mouth was back on him. One handed, he pulled his underwear out of the way, until the elastic cradled his balls and Bodie's open mouth was cradling his cock. He thrust, once, slowly, not too deeply, and felt the answering response. Thrust again, and again, Bodie giving him this exquisite pleasure.

Was bereft, when Bodie turned his face away from him, and went back to stripping him.

"It's all right, Ray, you'll get what you want."

Doyle allowed himself to drift on the sensations: Bodie, touching him, Bodie, undressing him, Bodie, sucking him. Perfect.

Bodie's mouth was all over him, licking and sucking and kissing, taking him inside the moistness of his mouth one testicle at a time, tongue caressing him, and then going back to his cock itself, incredible expertise made all the more wonderful by the knowledge that Bodie loved him. Loved him enough to let him fuck him.

Felt, at that moment, Bodie's finger against him, tip barely touching his most private part.

Knew, then, what Bodie wanted.

Knew, then, where all the talk of love had led.

He'd said it himself: letting someone do *that* to you meant you loved them.

One action, one word of permission, and he could prove to Bodie that he loved him. Loved him enough for this to work, for this to be forever. One small thing, and all Bodie's doubts and uncertainties and false truths would be swept away.

One small thing.

Only Bodie wasn't small. Bodie was huge, if it was going to be stuck in *there*.

But if he let Bodie do that, if he let Bodie inside him...

It wouldn't make him any less a man, of course

not. Wouldn't have him shopping for high heels and handbags.

It *would* have Bodie at his side. Forever.

A small price to pay for forever.

"All right," he heard himself say. "All right, you can do it."

Bodie's finger abruptly withdrawn, Bodie's mouth lifting from his cock, Bodie scrambling up his body until they were face to face and Bodie's cock, heavy with sudden arousal, was hard against his own softness.

"I wasn't asking—"

The fuck he hadn't been. "Not intentionally, maybe."

"I promised you I wouldn't try to fuck you."

"Good. That means you're going to succeed then, doesn't it?"

Doyle wondered if his nervousness was as audible on the outside as it was on the inside, his voice unsteady in his throat, his heart thumping, his pulse pounding, and every nerve thrumming.

"You don't have to do this—"

Oh, but he did, and he knew it. He could feel the necessity in Bodie's cock where it dug into him, could see it in Bodie's eyes, knew it deep inside—oh, fuck, a small voice in him whimpered, the rest lost in wordless fear—that if he didn't do this, sooner or later, then Bodie would never really believe there was love on both sides. And if he left, then 'later' might be 'too late'.

Could he face the future without Bodie?

Yes.

But did he want to?

No. His whole being recoiled from a life without Bodie. He'd get used to the sex, he knew he would. Would even grow to love it as much as he loved Bodie. An adjustment, that's all it was, give him a bit of time and he'd adjust to it completely.

Yes. He would let Bodie inside him. And do it now, before it was too late.

He looked into blue eyes that were staring at him anxiously. Grinned, to take the pressure off, knew his voice betrayed his attempts at confident jokiness. "Be gentle with me."

"Oh, I will," Bodie breathed, "I will."

And then Bodie's mouth claimed his, and Bodie's arms were around him, and Bodie was on top of him.

He fought off the feeling of suffocation, found instead the pleasure in Bodie wanting him this much, relished Bodie's need to hold him and cosset him.

Bodie's fingers were on his nipples now, teasing

them, making them erect and tingling with pleasure. Lower now, the fingers moved, taking Doyle's cock and stroking it, bringing back some of the lost tumescence, making his flesh rise and respond to the loving caresses.

All of this went on for some time, washes and waves of pleasure, until Doyle had relaxed, forgotten what this was all foreplay for, until Bodie kissed him once, hard, and then moved down him, kissing and licking all the way, until he had Doyle's legs raised, and that mouth, that hot, wet mouth was at the opening of Doyle's body, teasing him, caressing him there.

All Doyle could think about was if that was how big Bodie's tongue felt trying to get into him, then how the fuck would his cock feel? His erection flagged, so he moved, telling Bodie he wanted to roll over onto his knees. To give Bodie better access, of course.

He knelt there, face in the pillow, as Bodie's tongue laved him. He could feel his muscles relaxing, fought the urge to tighten them up. It's natural, he told himself, necessary: can't get a cock inside if you're all tight down there.

Relaxed, until the press of finger invaded him.

"Shh," he heard, "it's all right, we can stop—"

And all but tell Bodie he didn't love him? Not a chance, not a fucking chance. Deliberately, he relaxed his muscles, and pushed against Bodie, as if there were nothing in this world he wanted more than Bodie's finger inside him.

It wasn't as bad as he'd thought. Strange, to be stretched like that, but not unpleasant. Just not—great.

But Bodie and a million other queers loved being fucked. Give it time, he told himself, give it time.

Another finger, even slicker than the last, the excess of lubricant bringing it to Doyle's attention. He concentrated on it, trying to think what it reminded him of, focussing on that to distract from the discomfort of two fingers inside him, moving, moving—

He relaxed again, and pushed back, and felt the first stirrings of arousal when he heard Bodie's involuntary moan of pleasure. And need. An incredible amount of need in that broken murmur.

Doyle reached behind him with one hand, fumbled until he found Bodie's cock. So hard—so fucking huge, panic howled in the back of his mind—and the balls drawn up so tight. Must be nearly painful by now, and close to the edge, going by that hissed intake of breath.

Realised, too late, what it would mean to Bodie to feel Doyle take him in hand like that.

There, at his opening, the hugeness, the thickness of Bodie's cock.

No, he wanted to scream, don't, please—

"You don't have to," Bodie said, voice hoarse with unexpressed lust.

I don't have to, Doyle thought, and knew, that if he said no, even now, then Bodie would withdraw. Control flowed back through him, and he pushed, just a little, against the cock that was so desperate for him. "Do it, Bodie. C'mon, Bodie, fuck me, be inside me—"

And then it began. The first inch hurt, more than he had ever imagined, horrible, invading pain, taking him over—

A lessening of pain, an increase of pressure, more cock inside him, more—

More still—Christ, how much of it was there, ten feet? It went on and on, Bodie being so careful, so gentle, it was killing them both.

Doyle lunged upwards, impaling himself in one swift movement, the cock suddenly inside him, Bodie pressed to his back, Bodie whispering words of love, whispering again and again how much he loved Ray—

And now it was Bodie inside him, not just a cock, but Bodie, filling him with heat and hardness and bulk. It wasn't wonderful, it wasn't glorious, choirs of angels didn't sing the celestial chorus. Doyle prayed that Bodie wouldn't reach round to touch him, humiliated by his cock's softness. Bodie was too busy holding on to him, it seemed, and pouring those gorgeous words into his ear. Within him, he felt Bodie move, and waited for the magic moment when Bodie rubbed against his prostate.

No magic moment. Just an odd feeling of being near orgasm, when the rest of his body was a fractured glass of sensations, of thought, of emotions.

Bodie's movements were faster now, each thrust deeper, lunging into Doyle's insides, spearing him on Bodie's pleasure.

It's not unpleasant, he told himself. It's not. Just think about Bodie, and how much he's loving this—

Of how it had felt, when he'd been inside Bodie.

Bodie, feeling that, and knowing, every single second, that all this was because Ray Doyle loved him.

It was enough, it was more than enough. Pinned by Bodie's weight, Doyle moved as much as he could, pushing back to meet Bodie's thrusts, circling his hips

as much as he could, giving Bodie as much as he was able.

Then—

Bodie, inside him, swelling, going still, and—

The splash of Bodie deep, deep inside him, the most indescribable of sensations, Bodie, spilling his soul inside him again, and again, and again, until there was nothing more to give.

Quiet, then, save for their heaving breaths, joined, eventually, by the counterpoint of Bodie's voice, and this time, the love poured into Doyle in the form of words.

Another moment beyond description: Bodie's body growing small and soft inside him, leaving him, his own body slow to close in the aftermath.

He had the most unfortunate feeling—

With some delicacy and a touch of brute strength, he pulled out from under Bodie, started to bolt, then stopped, as the feeling receded.

He felt...odd, inside. Both lonely and violated.

Bodie was touching him again, pulling him back down onto the bed, back into Bodie's arms. Doyle went happily, needful of this simple affection.

"Thank you."

'Don't mention it' didn't seem like quite the appropriate response, so he just held on a bit tighter, pressed himself a bit closer.

Regretted that, just a moment later, when he felt Bodie's hand travel south.

"You didn't get hard."

No question there, just Bodie's certainty. "Too much else going on for me to think about. Anyway, what did we need *me* hard for?"

"Lots of blokes don't get hard at first."

Of course, that's the reassurance Bodie would naturally assume he would need. Doyle, on the other hand, didn't need any reassurance at all: he was just glad that he hadn't run, or thrown up, or rejected Bodie or any one of a dozen other things that could have gone wrong.

"Now you know how I feel about you," he said, kissing Bodie's neck.

A pause, far longer than the comment warranted.

"That the only reason you did it?"

"Christ, isn't that enough?"

It was, unless Bodie had wanted the same sun, moon and stars he'd offered Doyle.

The silence was telling. Very telling.

"Come on, Bodie, what else did you expect? I'm not going to change overnight, I'm still fucking straight, and you're still the first bloke I've ever even

kissed, let alone *this*. It's not going to be number one on my hit parade for a while, is it? Give me time—"

"Same way you need time to get used to sucking me or touching me?"

"Yeh—"

Heard that go down like the proverbial lead balloon.

Lay there, for a while, in silence, until Bodie got up from the bed.

"Where're you going?"

"Bathroom. Need to clean up."

Doyle was furious with himself, blushing over a thing like that. Bodie hadn't meant anything by that remark, just a fact of life for him, something Bodie probably did by rote.

The thought wasn't in the least bit comforting.

When Bodie came back with a cloth for him, he lay on his side, one leg drawn up, his eyes firmly closed, forearm draped, purely by coincidence, of course, to cover his face.

The touch on him was gentle, the stroking of cream completely unexpected. Bodie must have felt him flinch, for his voice was tight.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to rape you. Just some ointment to make sure you don't hurt and that everything's all right in there."

He was too mortified to thank Bodie, thinking about how he hadn't done that for Bodie, of how he'd left everything to Bodie the last time. Every time, really, no matter what they did, he left it all to Bodie—

Who hadn't come back to bed.

Who, half an hour later, still hadn't come back to bed.

He tried to tell himself that it didn't mean anything, that this wasn't some dark, foreboding omen. But he was reluctant as he threw his clothes on, uneasy as he walked through to the living room, his spine crawling with spiders of nervousness.

There was no light coming from under the closed living room door, but Doyle could hear the faint sound of the radio or a record Bodie had put on. Not sure what, couldn't quite make out the song. The doorknob twisted under his hand, and he mocked himself for behaving like an extra in a Hitchcock film. But he still didn't like this, all of his instincts on alert.

The music had stopped before Doyle had got halfway into the room, Bodie, in his tatty old dressing gown, fiddling with the record player arm, dropping the black vinyl back into liner, then sleeve, filing it away with a meticulousness that would make the CI5

office staff sigh in envy.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“Never went to sleep.”

“Oh.”

Pause. Very uncomfortable, a million miles from the usual easiness between them.

“I meant what I said in the beginning,” Bodie said abruptly.

“What—”

“About taking what’s on offer for however long it’s offered.”

“So all that talk the first night we fucked—all that crap about forever, I’m just supposed to ignore that?”

“Pillow talk,” Bodie said, turning round with a very bright smile plastiqued across his face. “I get a bit stupid sometimes.” Disingenuous shrug, that irritating smile still firmly in situ. “Carried away in the heat of the moment.”

But Doyle remembered that moment, remembered the other times too. “That’s a lie and you know it.” The flood of light was painful, and he stood blinking as Bodie switched lamps on to add to the brightness from the overhead light, and went round, tidying up and chatting away as if nothing had happened, nothing been said. Or done.

“There are times,” Doyle said evenly, “when I can’t decide if I’d rather give my right arm to find out what’s going on in your thick skull or if I’d rather shoot you.”

“Cowley’d probably complain.”

“I didn’t think you cared much if Cowley knew about you.”

“If Cowley knew? What makes you think he doesn’t?”

“You can’t have told him!”

“Didn’t have to.” A sigh so laden with patience it was a study in impatience. “Why d’you think I left the SAS? Cowley knew all about it before he signed me on. Not officially, mind, but he knows all right.”

“But if you had to leave the SAS—”

“I had to leave, that way there wouldn’t be any official enquiries or statements, nothing permanent on my record.” Bodie shrugged, but Doyle could see the tensions and conflicts that the shrug belied. “They just made it clear when it was time for me to sign on again that I’d best clear off instead. So I did.”

“Murphy too?”

“Nah, our Murph’s smart enough to keep his nose clean. He just wanted out of uniform—he’s too vain to put up with the haircut.”

Doyle applauded slowly, until Bodie stopped

fidgiting about and looked at him. “Nice one, mate. Would’ve got me well and truly sidetracked, usually. But not this time. Come on, Bodie, tell me what’s going on.”

“Nothing much.”

“You call sleeping with your best mate—your partner—‘nothing much’?”

No response to that, Bodie going back to his tidying up.

Doyle picked up the nearest newspaper and hurled it across the room. A cushion next, then Bodie’s jacket, and an empty crisp packet, that proved half-full as the crisps fluttered down like leaves in autumn.

Bodie glared at him.

Doyle stalked him, crossing the room until he was close enough to see every individual eyelash. Finger punctuating his words on Bodie’s chest, he was nearly snarling. “I’ve tried being reasonable, I’ve tried being nice, but I just let you fuck me, Bodie, and what do you do? You come in here and do the fucking tidying-up! What’s wrong with you? I let you fuck me! And we both know what that means—”

“Yeh, we both know what that means. Only problem is, it means completely different things, doesn’t it?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You ‘let’ me fuck you. That’s what you said, right?”

“It’s what I did.”

“But you ‘let’ me fuck you. You didn’t want me, Ray, you didn’t want me in you, you didn’t like it—Christ, Ray, you lay there and every time I touched you, you *flinched*.”

“Told you, it’s going to take time—”

“But until then, I’m supposed to be happy about you flinching or looking like you’re going to be sick?”

“What d’you expect—”

“You want to know what I expect?” Bodie grabbed him, slammed him up against the wall, pressed in against him until every breath he took was dependent on Bodie breathing too. “I’ll tell you what I expect. I expect—”

Bodie swallowed, and Doyle could have wept over the pain in Bodie’s eyes.

“You’ve done your bit, no one’s going to say you haven’t. But d’you know what’s going to happen, Ray? I know you don’t like doing anything to me, and I know you hate having me inside you—”

He wanted to break in, to tell Bodie he loved having *Bodie* inside him, it was just being fucked he

hated, but Bodie was still talking, and his thumb was rubbing gently, hypnotically, across Doyle's lips, blockading the words inside.

"So I'm not going to ask you to do any of that, I'll stick to the rest of it, and then every so often, you'll do your guilt routine, and you'll offer. You'll go down on your knees for me, you'll 'let' me do whatever it is I need, because that proves something. It proves you love me..."

That couldn't be tears he saw glistening there. But then Bodie blinked and his eyes were just overbright, and Doyle could see himself reflected in Bodie.

"That's the worst part, you know. I mean, you honestly do love me. It's no one's fault you don't love me the right way."

"I do love you in the right fucking way! How can—"

The thumb came back pressed his lips closed, gave Bodie time to speak.

"When you look at me, Ray, does your heart beat faster? Does your mouth go dry?"

"All right, so I don't react like a romance book when I see you. We're real people—"

"Do you get hard when you look at me, Ray?"

Such a brutal question, so gently asked. His silence spoke for him.

"No, you don't. D'you lie awake at night and think about me?"

"Yes—"

"But when you think about making love to me, I bet you don't end up all hard and aching for me, do you?"

"No, I don't, but give me time—"

"D'you remember the first time we had sex?"

Every second burned into his mind and his body, returning to haunt him now, coloured by the dawn-ing horror of just how different all of this truly was. Not different because it was with a man. Not different because it was done out of love. Different, because he and Bodie were an abyss apart.

"I couldn't wait, I was so keen I embarrassed myself like a raw teenager. But you—"

He hadn't even been excited.

"Looking at you had me so worked up, but you didn't even look at me. I don't excite you, do I?"

He had only one defence against this. "I love you."

Those were tears he had seen, was seeing right now.

"I know you do. You just let me fuck you to prove it, didn't you?"

He had. And he'd thought it would mean some-

thing. Thought it would make it all right.

"But Ray, how long can that last, eh? What's going to happen the first time you go out there and some busty blonde wiggles her tits at you?"

He willed his body not to react, tried to will away the ineluctable side-effects of earlier, when Bodie had stroked him inside, when that physical reaction had faded, and his body had been left unfulfilled and restless, the echoes of Bodie's passion nagging his body like toothache. Tried, so desperately, not to react. But failed, and was greeted by Bodie's sad smile.

"See? Mention jiggling tits, and you react. Is that what I'd have to do, Ray, after a while? Share you with some bird, or talk dirty to you? Talk to you about tits and cunts, sliding into all that wetness..."

He hated himself for his reaction, but he couldn't help it, his body remembering how it had felt to have his prostate massaged, and the images flooding his mind, word pictures painted in vibrant lasciviousness, Bodie's voice a seduction itself. "It's only turning me on because it's you saying it." He pressed his hips forward, until his groin was hard against Bodie's. "It's because you're touching me—"

"No," Bodie whispered, leaning closer, rubbing himself against Doyle, "it's because you're straight and I should've known better than to let myself ever hope for anything."

He felt Bodie's lips against his own, then, Bodie's hips grinding into his own, Bodie's fingers pinching his nipples, Bodie's mouth laving his neck, his ear, Bodie's mouth whispering obscenities into his ears, describing things they'd done with women, talking about it, using the gutter words that were all the more arousing for their lewdness.

He came, joylessly, into his jeans, Bodie's hand cupped hard around his groin, Bodie's eyes staring into his as every pulse of semen bled from him. He stood there, gasping for breath, unable to look at Bodie, unable to let Bodie go. More words whispered into his ear, different now, these words not designed to careen him into lust.

"How long will it be before that's what it takes every time? Tell me, Ray, when you fucked me, did you close your eyes?"

God help him, but yes.

"Who did you pretend I was?"

"No one. I knew it was you, I wasn't trying to make you into someone else. The way you're trying to make me into someone else. You can't expect me to change overnight—"

"I don't expect you to change at all."

But that would mean—

"I couldn't stop liking women if my life depended on it—and I like men just as much. So how could you change that about yourself? I don't expect you to change."

"Then you don't expect this to work, do you?"

"Do you?"

"I did." Heard the past tense, tried to erase it. "I do."

"Honestly? Do you really see us together fifteen years from now? Doing what? Living quietly apart, so we don't jeopardize promotions. Keeping up the façade of girlfriends so no one asks awkward questions. The thing is, though, it won't be a façade for you, will it?"

Had they discussed fidelity? Had they had *time*? He'd made assumptions—

Which were tumbling down round his ears, castles built on sand.

"You were the one who said it was forever—"

"Wishful thinking. I got carried away, that's all. But Christ, Ray, you let me fuck you, and it didn't work, did it? You hated it, just like you hated all the rest of it. And all the time in the world isn't going to change that."

"I'll get used to it—"

"But I don't *want* you getting used to it. I want you wanting *me*. And you don't and you can't, and I was a fucking idiot for forgetting that. It'd've been easier if you'd just been curious, and I'd just been randy."

"Oh, that's nice, that's just dandy, isn't it? I love you, I even fucking say it, and all you can do is wish we didn't even like each other. I suppose the next thing'll be that you wish we'd never even met each other."

"Got it in one."

"You ungrateful bastard! We've got a chance here, a once-in-a-lifetime chance, and you're trying to throw it away over sex! There's more to this than sex—"

"Exactly. But the way I feel about you—you can't take the sex away from it. And the way you feel about me—the sex doesn't really belong in there at all, does it?"

Doyle took a deep breath, uncomfortably aware of the dampness in his jeans, and of the dampness in Bodie's eyes. He'd promised he wouldn't hurt Bodie, and look at what he was doing. And all by loving him.

He squared his shoulders, making an offer he

fervently hoped Bodie would refuse. "D'you want me to leave?"

He watched Bodie toying with the idea, watched the conflicting desires flutter behind Bodie's eyes.

Bodie didn't want this to go wrong any more than he did. If he could just find the right thing to say, if he could come up with the right argument, he'd bet Bodie would be willing to try again. If he could just reassure him enough—

"You know, we'd never've got to this stage if you hadn't been so busy running away before I could leave you. Listen to me. I'm going to say this and I'm going to keep on saying this till you believe me. I'm not going to leave you. I let you fuck me—that means something, Bodie. All right, so it's not the same as a wedding ring, but it has to mean something."

Bodie walked away from him, quick, jerky motions, as if he wanted to punch something, anything, but preferably Doyle.

"Now what've I said?"

"Nothing, Ray, nothing at all. Look, we're both tired, why don't you go home and I'll see you tomorrow?"

He'd offered that himself, but that had been different, Bodie was supposed to say no, please stay, we'll sort this out together, not yes, go home, get out, get lost.

"Go on, Ray. I'll see you in the morning."

Yes, but at work, cold, calm, distant work, not the tumbled confines of a warm bed redolent with sex.

Maybe seeing Bodie at work tomorrow was a better idea. At least until he could sort out what had gone wrong, especially with the one thing he'd thought had been going best.

"I'll see you in the morning then." Automatically gathering his jacket, checking for his keys.

"Right."

"Fine."

He went then, slowly, glancing over his shoulder to where Bodie, face downcast, followed him.

At the door, one last look, Bodie still avoiding meeting his eyes.

"Tomorrow, then."

"Yeh. Bright and early."

And that was it. Without even really knowing how or why, it had gone wrong, all wrong, or wrong-for-right-now, so that he was leaving alone when he'd thought himself to be staying the night.

When he'd thought himself to be staying forever.

"Goodnight, Bodie," he said. As the door closed, he thought he heard something, thought

Bodie had said something.

Thought that something had been goodbye.

It was definitely early, but far from bright. Doyle wasn't exactly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed himself. Too many hours, in the dark of night, to lie alone in bed and worry.

Pack it in, he told himself. You've been asking Bodie for time, he just needed a bit of time himself, that's all.

He'd been telling himself that since twenty past three, and he still didn't believe it.

So he moved on, consoling himself with Bodie's motto: take what you can get when you can get it. Well, while Bodie was doing that, he, Doyle, would make sure that Bodie finally got to the point where he believed that Ray Doyle wasn't going to leave him, honestly did love him and that love was all they really needed.

They could work it out. Given time.

He wandered into the rest room, and stopped, dead.

Bodie. Sitting on the sofa, laughing, as if all was well in his world. And right there, right there beside him, Murphy. As if he belonged. As if he had every right to be there. Just like last night, when he'd opened Bodie's door.

Doyle grinned at the joke Susan had just tossed his way, pinched Jax's mug of coffee on his way past, looked every inch at ease as he went over to his partner.

He leant down, close enough that not even Murphy could hear.

"What the fuck's going on? This you taking what you can get, or is this you giving me a hint as subtle as a sledgehammer?"

He was taken by the arm and ushered from the room, while Bodie kept up their usual banter, not a single eyebrow raised at their exeunt.

"Look, Ray, I'm not going to cut off the rest of my life—"

"Who's asking you to? But after last night, to walk in here and there you are, just about sitting in his lap—"

"What am I supposed to do? Jump up like an outraged virgin every time someone sits down beside me?"

"Murphy's not 'someone'. Murphy's..." He'd almost forgotten that Bodie had said it, but now it came back, hauntingly. *Nearly the best*, that was how Bodie'd described Murphy. *Nearly the best*. After last

night's odd little scene, the 'nearly' might be obsolete. "Murphy's my..." He couldn't even bring himself to say the word replacement.

"He's not your rival, for God's sake."

"Better tell *him* that, cos he thinks he is. So if he's not my rival, what is he?"

Bodie looked away, then looked back, and Doyle wished for once that they could lie to each other, just a bit. Just enough to take away the edge of the pain.

"Insurance."

"For when I leave you. Someone for you to fall back on—"

"Not like that, but...near enough."

He'd said it himself: if he weren't there to pick up the pieces, who would there be?

Well, he had his answer now.

Not that he wanted it.

"How many times do I have to tell you I'm not leaving you?"

"And how many times do I have to tell you we don't stand a chance? I've been thinking about it—"

"So have I. And we've got something terrific here—"

"Listen to me, Ray. We've tried, Ray, we've given it a go and it's not going to work. A blind man could see that."

"Well, I'm not fucking blind, and I can see that it *is* going to work. If you'll just give a go, a proper go, not this half-hearted running-in-place crap."

"Ray—"

And Doyle couldn't decide who Bodie meant that wealth of pity for. All he knew was that he couldn't take seeing that much pity and that much despair in Bodie's eyes.

"We can work it out, Bodie."

"No, we can't. Not when it hurts this much already."

Oh, no, he hadn't gone this long without someone permanent in his life to give up easily now. "So you're scared. You think I'm not? We'll sort it out, you'll see."

"Will you listen to me for a minute?"

"So you can try to back off because you're afraid I'm going to leave you? After last night, how can you say that?" He dropped his voice even lower, a whisper so quiet the most assiduous eavesdropper couldn't hear. "You *know* what I let you do last night, you know what that means—"

"I'm trying to tell you what that means—"

"If we try, if we give ourselves enough time, things'll turn out all right. You'll see."

The backs of Bodie's fingers trembled as they stroked down Doyle's cheek. "Why won't you listen to me?"

"Because I'm not giving you up. I'm not giving up on us. If you'd just stop running away, if we both just try—"

"I'm sorry, Ray, God, I'm sorrier than you'll ever know—"

"I'm telling you," fierce now, fighting for what they could have, for what they already had, fighting against the nothingness he feared, but Bodie was turning and walking away already, and there was only the empty corridor to hear when he said it, and only the corridor to echo it back.

"We *will* work it out."

And he believed it. He kept right on believing it the first time Bodie was too busy to come over. Believed it even when Bodie turned down his offer to come over to Bodie's place. Believed it even when a day, a few days, a week, had gone by and they hadn't had sex. Hadn't done anything but spend the odd bit of time together. Hadn't even been on the same oppo.

They were busy at work, but they weren't *that* busy. No one was.

Not even Murphy.

He'd seen Murphy, in the corridors, in the rest room, always polite, always pleasant, nothing untoward, nothing out of the ordinary, and never ever with Bodie, not after that first day.

He told himself Bodie just needed a bit of time—they both did. Things had gone too far too quickly, until everything was spinning out of control, neither of them knowing which way was up. That's all it was, he told himself, and tried to be as patient for Bodie as Bodie had been for him.

It was just Bodie easing off a little, cooling things down from flashpoint. And it was just an ordinary busy time at work, they'd had that before, they'd even gone weeks before without working on the same things. So what was a few days? Nothing to worry about, he told himself.

So why was he panicking?

Because it wasn't so much that he could see Bodie slipping away. It was as if Bodie had never been there.

He came home one night, late, an evening stuck standing at the back of the room as bodyguard while some politicians discussed the most boring things in the world. A bath, he thought, then he'd phone Bodie. They needed to get together, to talk about this, find

out what was going on...

Bodie's spare jacket was gone. And the motorcycle boots he'd left that last time. Drawers were rattled open, clothes tossed everywhere, but none of them were Bodie's.

Bath forgotten, he was in his car and on his way to Bodie's before the last sock had come to rest.

He stood there, finger pressing down the doorbell, not letting up for a second.

For a moment, just a second, he wondered what he'd do if it was Murphy who opened the door. But it was Bodie, who said nothing, simply opened the door and walked away, expecting Doyle to follow him.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"All your things are gone from my flat."

"That's right."

"Don't you think you could've told me?"

"I tried—"

"Oh, yeh, right. When did you try, Bodie? One of those nights when you were too busy to come out with me?"

"That first day back at work when I tried to tell you in the corridor."

"A corridor in CI5? Perfect spot for a heart-to-heart, mate, a perfect—"

But Bodie had dragged him off into the corridor, had said, 'I've been thinking', that it wouldn't work, that they couldn't—

Doyle swallowed, cleared his throat, didn't look at Bodie.

Couldn't look at Bodie.

After all they'd done, after all they'd felt for each other, to end—like this? Fizzling out like a damp squid, not so much as a whimper.

"It's over, just like that, because you've decided it won't work?"

"It's over," and Bodie had never sounded so sad in all the years Doyle had known him, "because I decided that... Christ, Ray, it was tearing me up already, and look at what it was doing to us. I thought I could take it at first, I honestly did, but I'm sorry, I'm not that tough. I thought I was, I thought I could be cold enough to cope but—" Breaking off there, starting again, bitterly. "I used to be cold that way. Funny thing is, it was you who changed that, you got through to me, then when I needed to keep cool, so we could have a bit of time together before it fell apart completely, it—just wasn't there. You'd taken it out of me already and when I needed it..."

"You're still running away, aren't you? What's it

going to take—”

“It’s over, Ray, didn’t you hear me? Over, finished and done with. You didn’t leave me, I left you. All right? It’s over.”

“No.”

Bodie closed his eyes, leaned against the wall. “It has to be over.”

“Give me one good reason *why*.”

Bodie looked at him then, and he could see that reason written there clear as the light of day. “Because it *hurts*.”

Doyle stared at him, self-loathing churning. To see Bodie—big, brave, bluff Bodie—reduced to *this*. And he’d promised. At the very beginning—before the beginning—he’d promised. And look at what he’d done. He just stood there for a second, dazed, trying to take it all in, trying to sort it out, trying not to remember all the tiny clues Bodie had given him, trying not to hate himself for not seeing the huge, great big signs Bodie had held up to his face. Stumbling a little, he turned to leave, stopped when Bodie started to speak, the last tiny flicker of hope dying as he heard what Bodie had to say.

“There’s no kind way to say this, so...I’ve asked Cowley for a re-partnering.”

Doyle closed his eyes, trying to make it all go away, turn it into a nightmare he could awaken from.

“It’s for the best, Ray. You’ll see.”

“Will I? Will I really?”

And with his bitterness hanging in the air like a tattered rainbow, Ray Doyle shut the door behind him, and walked away.

“Hold all my calls,” he said on the intercom, not even waiting for Miss Carruthers’ acknowledgement. She was a good secretary, one he’d miss, although there was a chance he’d be able to have her promoted so that she could continue working for him. That would be considerably better than having to break in someone new to his foibles and habits.

His desk was clear, the drawers already emptied, contents divided between wastepaper basket and neatly labelled boxes. Incredible, how much junk a person accumulated over the years: all this, and he still had the bottom drawer in his personal filing cabinet to do. Knees cracking as he crouched down—another legacy from his over-active years in CI5—he took out the small key that fitted this last lock, and opened the drawer.

Ephemera in here, and memories, things he’d put away because he hadn’t been able, yet, to throw them

out. Ah, but that was much water under the bridge ago: he was a different man now, and the old memories might hold embarrassment, but who was there in here to see his blushes.

He took out the first manila folder, one of the ones he’d pinched when he’d been promoted sideways from CI5 into the liaisons office. Quite a feather in his cap that had been, something he’d been well proud of.

He dusted the folder off, although there was nothing on it but an old label misidentifying the contents.

He opened it up, and there they were: he, and Bodie, arms round each other after some bike meet, laughing.

He, and Bodie.

He had thought the pain long since put to rest.

He, and Bodie.

Oh, we never stood a chance, did we? he thought, as he went through the photos one by one. Never stood a chance.

It wasn’t only the folder he dusted off, the pictures dusting off old memories too, memories he’d forgotten, carefully, methodically forgotten.

The first day he’d gone into HQ, when everyone had known Bodie had been repartnered, and no one could quite look him in the eye. Murmured words of sympathy, noises of enquiry, all of them drifting round him, substantial as fog.

Going into Cowley’s office, being told he was a solo agent now, the sympathy and questions in the tired old blue eyes making it hurt all the worse. Blurting it out, then, too early, his request to be transferred, put into something other than CI5.

He hadn’t needed to tell Cowley why, and the shame still burned, even after all these years.

He looked at the photos again, each one a catalogue of memories, of places they’d been and things they’d done: of the people they’d been.

For once, he allowed himself the luxury of imagining where Bodie was now. What he was doing—what he looked like, for that matter, running his hand over where the once-abundant curls of the ’70s had given way to the neat crop of the ’90s. Would Bodie have gone grey? Or heaven forbid, bald?

He laughed out loud at that—Bodie, bald! The world wouldn’t have survived Bodie’s outrage.

Of course, for a while, he hadn’t been too sure he could survive Bodie’s absence.

Water under the bridge, now, all in the past.

There was a knock at his door, the movers come

for his boxes and the bits and pieces he'd provided over the years out of his own money, the comfortable chair that made up for the back trouble that was another CI5 legacy, the plants that lined his window sill, the hatstand he'd inherited when Cowley retired.

Quietly, not allowing himself another look at the pictures or the memories they held, he put the manila folder in with all the other parts of his life to be discarded, closing that door forever.

But still, that afternoon, as he stood looking out his bedroom window at his children playing in the garden, as he heard his wife calling them in to wash their hands before tea, he couldn't help but wonder.

Would he have given all this up, if he'd had Bodie?

He thought about how much he loved his children, how fond he was of his wife, of how his life was the perfection most people could never even hope for.

Considered, what life would have been, in a homosexual relationship, unable to go to the right sort of place and be seen with the right sort of person. They would've stayed in CI5 until Thatcher disbanded it—Cowley far too tough for her to control. Then what?

He heard his wife calling him down, thought about the disappointment he'd been to her as everything but a father and a provider. Thought about how little sex there was between them, and how half-hearted even that was. Thought, again, of how it had been with him and Bodie.

They'd just needed time, both of them. Time for him to adjust, time for Bodie to trust him. That's all it would have taken. They'd just lacked the courage.

He leaned his forehead against the window, caught a whiff of the flowers he spent so much time on each weekend, flowers that blossomed in profusion this time of year. So much like that flat he'd had then, the flat where he and Bodie had made love, the flat where it had all gone so badly wrong. So much of it his fault, so very many things he would do differently now, all those wishes still clinging to his heart, until he couldn't deny it, not any more.

If Bodie were to walk in through his front gate right now, if Bodie were to knock on his door and ask him to walk away from all this, leave everything and everyone behind, to finally take the chance, grab it with both hands, would he do it?

Yes.

Without a second's hesitation.

Even his children, God forgive him, he'd even

give up them for Bodie.

Oh, Bodie, he thought, looking out at the trees, hearing the birds singing and the children playing, his life the perfect suburban dream, if only you'd given us a chance.

And if only I'd listened.

If only...

If only the suburban dream didn't feel so very much like a dreary nightmare

—September 1995

(Editor's Note: The following is the alternative ending to the story.)

MURPHY.

In Bodie's flat. At this time of night.

Doyle didn't give a flying fuck how unreasonable his reaction was: he wanted to rip Murphy's eyes out and feed them to Bodie, then shoot the pair of them.

Murphy, who had come out into the hall, all the better to slam Doyle up against the nearest wall. Oh, all right, Doyle conceded, it wasn't exactly a slam, more a gentle urge—no excuse for a fight there, more's the pity.

"Before you say something you'll regret, Ray," Murphy said, covering Doyle's mouth with his hand, "the reason I'm here is the hospital wanted someone to pick Bodie up."

Now Ray wished Murph and Bodie *had* been messing about: better a bit on non-marital infidelity than Bodie with so much as a skinned knee.

"What happened?" Clichéd and trite, but Doyle wasn't much interested in how he sounded.

"Stupid accident. We'd gone to pick up—"

But Murphy was already completely forgotten, Doyle disappearing through the door, on his way to Bodie. Nothing serious, the mantra sounded again and again in his head: nothing serious because Bodie was home. Nothing serious, nothing serious—but there was still that shiver of fear, that worry, the terror of what if this time they'd sent him home and it was serious... Stupidity, he told himself, but he didn't catch his breath again until he found his partner lying on the couch, every visible inch of skin covered in marks as if God had been playing noughts and crosses with crayons. But he was alive, no parts missing, and Doyle had had more than enough experience of injury to recognise some nasty contusions that would hurt like hell but do no permanent

damage. “Thank God,” he breathed, and meant it, for that single, heart-felt second. Then: back to business-as-usual, no mollycoddling, play it down the way they always did, everything was okay, Bodie was all right, jolly him along—business as usual, never mind that everything and nothing had changed.

“Lovely colour-scheme. Who’s your decorator?” Still not exactly scintillating or thrilling, but Bodie didn’t seem much bothered. Bashful as well as bashed, Bodie just grimaced. “Murphy said you were on a pick up—that foreign bigwig?”

“You could say that.”

“God, that one—” all intentions to play it Bodie-cool forgotten under the impact of a red patch that was slowly blossoming into a glorious bruise, “must hurt like hell.”

“Not half as much as the one on my bum.”

“Your bum? Bodie, what the hell happened?”

“Well, it was a foreign pick-up.” Bodie looked up at him through what were going to be a pair of beautiful shiners. “From the Chinese takeaway. You know that zebra crossing? The one we all—”

“Use as target practice, yeh, I know the one. And I know what’s coming too.”

“You tell me what you think happened, and then I’ll tell you if you’re right.”

“Yeh, but if I do that, you’ll change the story on me.”

“Would I do a thing like that?”

“You? You’d lie to the Pope if it would get you a pint.”

“I’d lie to the Pope if it cost me a week’s wages.”

From the doorway, Murphy laconic and lean: “I don’t believe you two. At least Laurel and Hardy only kept it up in front of the cameras.”

“He’s asking for a comment for that, isn’t he?” Doyle, quite expansive now that Bodie wasn’t seriously damaged and Murphy, poor rejected bastard, had been nothing other than a glorified taxi driver. “Should we give him one?”

“Nah, let him get his own, he’s old enough to know how to use it now. Speaking of which... Thanks for the lift home, Murphy...”

“...but why don’t I bugger off now instead of standing here turning into a gooseberry. I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone, then, shall I?”

Doyle could hear the challenge and the concern under the light tone, was almost hit over the head with it as Murphy continued.

“I can leave you to do your Florence Nightingale, can’t I, Doyle—mop his fevered brow and all that.”

Just because Murphy was once—Doyle refused to succumb to the nasty voice that added *and still was*—Bodie’s lover was no reason to want to decapitate the poor soul. Should feel sorry for him, having to watch Bodie go elsewhere. Must be tough, to stand back and watch Bodie happy with someone else. “Not only will I do my Florence Nightingale—”

“Ooh, I bet you’re a real treat in your frock and cap, Ray.”

Doyle was ignoring Bodie, it seemed, unless one were as sharp-eyed as Murphy, who couldn’t shift his stare from the way Doyle’s left hand was stroking the inside of Bodie’s wrist. “—but I’ll even render aid and succour to the injured.”

“And I’m not stupid enough to touch *that* with a barge pole. I’m off then. You’re definite you don’t need me for anything else tonight, Bodie?”

Simple enquiry, meaning so much more.

“I’ll be fine, now.”

Something going on there, Doyle was certain of that: oh, to have been a fly on the wall, to hear the conversation that led up to that particular scenario of looks, comments and meaningful tones of voices.

Bodie was still looking at Murphy, but the fingers of his hand had curled around Doyle’s, making a statement as loud as a gold band. “Thanks, Murphy.”

Doyle wasn’t—quite—cruel or elated enough to grin as Murphy got that message loud and clear.

“That’s it, then.”

“Fraid so.”

With one last, surprisingly dignified, nod, Murphy was gone, and it was just the two of them at last.

Later on, he might ask about Murphy. Might. Or better yet, just might let sleeping dogs lie. “What hit you anyway? A bloody great artic?”

Bodie looked remarkably shamefaced. “Ice-cream van.”

“An ice-cream van? You know, it’s customary to wait until the van’s stopped before you get an ice.”

“Never did get any.”

“Want some?”

“Would you go and fetch me some if I did?”

“Not a chance. But I’ll make you a nice cuppa, bit of toast, if you’re really lucky.”

“Thought you were going to render succour?”

Doyle gave him a good looking-over, from the bruise on his forehead to the black eyes to the scraped forearm to the bandage-festooned ankle. “You up to that?”

An elegant *moue* of regret, spoiled by the way the stitch on his lower lip twisted everything. “Wishful

thinking.”

“Bloody hell, you must be really knackered to come clean that quick.”

“Ah, that’s just your influence, Ray. I spend half my life round you coming quick.”

Even keeping up the banter—never mind keeping up anything more pertinent—was obviously wearing Bodie out. Back to the old routine then, the one they’d gone through any number of times, from serious injury to a Cowley-sized rollicking. “If you’re going to start on puns like that, I’m making tea. D’you want toast?”

“With butter *and* jam. And there’s a bar of Fruit and Nut in there as well—”

“Chocolate, with tea? You’re really disgusting, you know that, don’t you?” But he made sure his affection showed, made sure that Bodie would have to be deaf and incredibly dumb not to hear the warmth in his voice. A thought struck him, and he headed back to the living room door. “Fruit and Nut, eh?” he asked the reclining mummy that had opened one bloodshot eye to look in his general direction. “So which one are you?”

He hadn’t expected an answer, hadn’t known how much the question had bothered him until Bodie put it to rest, or exhumed the corpse, depending on how one looked at it. “Thought that was obvious,” Bodie said quietly. “I’ve always been a bit...fruity.”

“But you like girls too?” Somewhere between brain and mouth, the definite statement had become a question. “I mean, I’ve seen you with them...”

A shrug, and Doyle winced in sympathy at the pain that flickered across Bodie’s face. “I’ve always liked girls too. Equal opportunity lech, that’s me. But you...”

“But me...”

Not much to say, or too much to say: either way, the words were impossible. A few seconds passed with all the haste of eons.

“I’ll make you that tea then.”

“Don’t forget the toast.”

Half-hearted at best, but better than it might have been.

Fruit and nut case: how many times had he heard that bloody jingle? He couldn’t get it out of his head now as he went through the soothing routine of making tea. One of the great lessons of police work, he thought: the restorative powers of a cuppa. And chocolate, of course, for Bodie.

Who’d ‘always’ been an equal opportunity lech. A teenaged Bodie, let loose in all-male world—small

wonder he was such an expert in bed. Of course, it wasn’t as if Bodie had stopped practising either, was it? There’d been Keller, probably, and Murphy, definitely. And now himself.

How long did Bodie’s boyfriends usually last?

A week, a month, a year? Longer than the girlfriends, who were changed more frequently than sheets in a five-star hotel?

And how much time did Ray Doyle have left in Bodie’s little calendar?

But this time was different, Bodie had said.

Different.

Different enough that Bodie had sent Murphy packing.

Doyle decided that he really ought to be ashamed of the little glow of pride over that. But still, Murphy was gone, he was here and Bodie had made his choice, maybe even made his commitment.

The idea didn’t scare him half as much as it had. In fact, the idea didn’t scare him at all. No baggage to go with it, except for that horribly embarrassing sentimental glow that was slowly converting every cell in his body.

Fucking hell, Ray Doyle thought, slathering jam over Bodie’s toast, licking an extra blob from his thumb, but he was actually feeling hopeful. And loved. Not to mention secure. Maybe they did stand a chance together. Maybe all his early fears had been right, that this was the Real Thing for Bodie, his one big chance at real, permanent happiness. Settling down.

Forever, Bodie had said.

And Doyle smiled, quite beautifully, turning the mundane act of pouring tea into a ritual of glory.

Forever, Bodie had said. Settling down, the two of them, till death do us part: and there was nothing in him but happiness, and contentment, and hope, and a million other emotions that had seemed so far out of reach at the beginning, when first he’d thought about this.

He and Bodie. Together.

Yes.

Oh, yes.

He took the tea into the living room, and couldn’t have cared less that it was written all over his face.

Pity Bodie’s eyes were firmly shut. He was tempted to let Bodie sleep, but if he left the poor bastard on that sofa all night, Bodie wouldn’t be able to walk come morning. So, with a tenderness even his mum would have thought beyond him, he shook Bodie awake. “Hate to wake you up, but you

need to be in bed.”

“Need to take these pain tablets the doc gave me as well.”

“I’ll bring ’em in a minute, let’s get you through and into bed first. Upsa-daisy, you great lump. Christ, look at you. Drop his lolly on you after he hit you with his ice-cream van, did he?”

“Felt like it. Oh, that’s nice. Could you shove my pillow—”

“—where the sun doesn’t shine? That’s my preserve, mate. Right, you lie there for a minute and I’ll fetch the tea through.”

The bustle of setting things down and putting food in Bodie’s hand took a few moments, and through them all, Doyle was aware of Bodie’s gaze locked firmly onto him.

No point in poking at him: Bodie would say what he had to say if and when he felt like it. So Doyle left him to it, busied himself reading the label on the little cardboard pill-box and whistled under his breath. Small wonder Bodie was being so pliant and restrained, if he hurt enough to take these. Powerful stuff, this, and not something Bodie normally admitted to needing. Unpleasant side-effects too, in Bodie’s books, although in Doyle’s days on the drug squad—his mind provided the perfect memory of Bodie snoring—people paid a small fortune for these pills for those very same side-effects.

Without protest, Bodie took the two tablets, grimacing as the nearly cold tea still managed to start dissolving the pills before he’d swallowed them down. “Give us a bit of chocolate,” he said, opening his mouth with a touching display of trust.

For just a second, Doyle wished, really, really wished that he had a tablespoon of mustard handy. Oh, well, time enough for their usual carryings-on tomorrow. Or perhaps next week: some of those bruises and scrapes were quite spectacular. Might be a while before Bodie was up for messing about. Or for Messing About.

The guilt came so quickly, it almost superseded the relief. Almost.

Come on, he told himself, it’s not as if the sex is bad or anything, is it?

Just wasn’t quite as good as with women. But he’d get used to that, or find other things that they both liked better than anything they’d done with anyone else.

Which brought him back to something they hadn’t done yet, something that made him ashamedly grateful for Bodie’s current crop of minor injuries,

something that was explanation in full for that hateful relief.

In the small light from the bedside lamp, they sat in silence for a while, Bodie under the covers, Doyle sitting on the bed beside him. The clock ticked loudly, Doyle wondering how Bodie put up with that racket, until he realised that his own pulse was louder in his ears. For Christ’s sake, get a grip, he told himself. Anyone would think something big was going to happen, not just Bodie settling down for the night.

But there it was, at the back of his neck, rising like hackles: whatever it was that Bodie hadn’t said.

“Penny for them?”

Doyle managed a wan smile, fooling neither of them. “They’re worth at least a tenner, Scrooge.”

“A tenner for them then.”

“Nothing much,” Doyle told him, veiling the moment by stroking Bodie’s hair back from his forehead. Under his hand, Bodie was warm, so vibrant and alive, and despite the bumps and bruises, so gorgeous. Bodie, who’d sent Murphy away tonight, wanting Doyle instead. “D’you mind if I stay the night?”

“I won’t be up to much.”

“That’s all right.”

Undressing, his back towards Bodie, freezing into utter stillness for one awful moment as he heard the pain in Bodie’s voice. “It’s more than all right, isn’t it? You wouldn’t much mind if we never had sex again, would you?”

“Come on, Bodie,” he said, smile carefully pinned in place before he turned round to face those troubled blue eyes. The pupils were dilated, huge, darkness eating away at Bodie’s eyes: the drugs, Doyle hoped. “It’s as plain as the nose on your face how much I enjoy the sex bit with you.”

“Yeh, it is. How else d’you think I know you’d rather give it a miss?”

“What’s brought all this on? You know I like sex with you—”

“You like when I do things to *you*,” Bodie corrected, and drugged or not, those eyes were too sharp for Doyle to meet their gaze. “When it comes time to do anything to *me*...”

“What d’you mean?” Wanting to hear, dreading hearing, the awful feeling of truth looming over him like death.

“When you fucked me—you didn’t even touch me.”

“How could I not touch—”

“My cock. My chest, anything that made me into a

bloke.” Voice so soft now, so sad. “Did you keep your eyes closed, Ray? Did you pretend I was someone else?”

“Christ, Bodie no, I—” What *had* he done? He could remember being inside Bodie, touching him, hands moving—seeking curves and finding none, instinctively avoiding the hard planes where there should be soft peaks, not touching the hollowed flanks or the hard thrust at groin. Arm around Bodie, as if he were in a woman. But he hadn’t pretended Bodie was someone else. Not even for a second. “It was more...it was more that I was concentrating on nothing but you being Bodie. Every time I thought about you being a man...” The unnoticed depletion in his arousal, the instant need to bolster the passion, to find something else to turn him on—his thoughts constantly returning to Bodie, and Bodie, and Bodie. “All I thought about was it being you I was inside, and how wonderful it was and how much you loved me—”

Slightly fuzzy now, that voice, as if walls had been lowered and all the structures and strictures that held Bodie in place had softened, going slightly out of shape, letting loose things that would never otherwise be said. “And when you sucked me off? You looked like you were going to be sick.”

No denying that. “Bodie, I’d never done anything like that before—”

“And you didn’t much like it, did you?”

“I liked giving you pleasure. Loved it, in fact.”

“Is that what made you offer in the first place?”

Some remnant of pride or fear wanted to turn all this into a bit of a joke, make it lighthearted and meaningless, but then he looked at Bodie again, and remembered the promise he’d made to no one but himself. He would not deliberately hurt Bodie. And he wouldn’t throw this chance of happiness away on mere pride.

“I offered...” Pause, to remember, to relive. There were any number of things he could say, any number of reasons he could give, from the way Bodie sounded to the pettiness of giving head to postpone being on the receiving end of buggery. But in the end, the only thing that really mattered was the barest, plainest truth. “I offered because I love you.”

“No greater love hath man,” Bodie intoned, “than that he get down on his knees for his friend.”

Grinning, Doyle accepted the somewhat wobbly embrace of Bodie’s arm, leaning into it, the pillow behind him, Bodie beside him. “Something like that.”

The sombreness that bled from Bodie was unex-

pected, the seesaw swing of emotion uncomfortable. “You don’t ever want to let me fuck you, do you?”

Doyle pleated the top sheet, ran his fingers down Bodie’s forearms, fascinated by the way the small hairs rose in his wake. Definitely a topic to obfuscate as much as humanly possible. “C’mon, Bodie—”

“Ray,” said very softly, but impossible to ignore, “don’t lie to me. Not when I can tell.”

Doyle gusted a sigh, and went back to pleating the sheet, stopping only when Bodie’s unsteady fingers took his hands in thrall. “All right,” Ray said. “I won’t lie to you. But don’t ask me questions that’ll hurt you.”

He didn’t look at Bodie, could see in the open door of the wardrobe, in spite of the age of the spotted mirror, that Bodie wasn’t looking at him either.

Bodie, still sounding so very melancholy it made Doyle’s heart ache. “Would the answer hurt me that much?”

“Maybe it won’t hurt you at all, if you give me long enough.”

Slow, sad smile, the medicine blurring all of Bodie’s sharp edges. “I’ll give *you* enough time, no problems there.”

“I’m not going to clear out.”

“Yeh, Ray, you’re going to stick around forever and a day.”

Bodie’s bitterness flayed him like acid. “I told you, I’m not—”

But Bodie didn’t seem to be listening. “It’s all right, you know. I told you, whatever we have for however long’s fine. Life’s too short, and all that stuff.”

“Look, Bodie, I’m not going to dump you next week. You said it yourself, we’re like a pair of newly-weds. And you’re the one who said this was forever.”

“Wishful thinking. Wish I could have some wishful thinking now, but I can’t.” An abrupt frown, some of the old, familiar mask redescending. “Am I drunk? Don’t remember drinking...”

“The hospital gave you some tablets.”

“Oh. Doped. Stoned out of my skull.” A very unBodiean giggle. “That mean I can say whatever I want and then not remember any of it? Here, does that mean I can tell you you’ve got the prettiest arse I’ve ever seen?”

“You can tell me anything you want.”

“Yeh,” Bodie agreed, with every appearance of happiness. “In here I can. Not out there.”

“What d’you mean?” Challenging, that, denial bristling in anticipation.

“Can’t tell you you’ve got a gorgeous cock in front

of all the lads, can I?" Another giggle, Bodie curling himself round Doyle, the laughter warm and gusting against his chest. "Oh, c'n just imagine poor old George's face!" Laughter dying, sobering immediately, the melancholy that was a normal aspect of Bodie's rare bouts of drunkenness transforming the looseness induced by the medicine. "C'n picture your face. Face like fizz. You don't want anyone knowing, shhh, got to keep it secret else Ray'll be pissed off with me. Can't tell anyone, you know, not even Murphy."

"You've already told Murphy."

"I know, I know and the way you looked at me, oh, that was horrible. Didn't like that, Ray, hated it and you looked sicker'n when I came in your mouth. Don't like that either, do you, Ray, don't like any of it, not really, do you?"

"I told you," Doyle said very slowly and clearly, hoping this was getting through, "I liked getting you that worked up."

"But you don't like getting it. You're never going to like it, are you, Ray and then you'll find a nice girl you like and you'll leave me."

"That's not going to happen—"

"Tis."

"It's not—"

"Tis too."

"It's not—"

"Tis too!"

Doyle gazed heavenwards and then turned back to exasperation personified lying in bed beside him. "I haven't had a conversation like this since Primary Three." He turned over onto his side, wishing Bodie weren't so banged up, for then he could have wrapped himself around his friend and convinced him of how much he really meant it. "I've told you, I love you and I'm not going to leave you."

Bodie sounded like a five-year-old reciting the new rules. "As long as I keep quiet and don't try to fuck you."

"Bodie, it's not like that at all!"

"So I can tell the Squad then, can I?"

"And lose our jobs? I don't mind Murphy knowing—" No choice there, make the most of it, and anyway, Bodie had sent Murphy off all alone and kept Doyle here with him. "But we can't go blabbing all over the place about this."

Bodie's eyes were very readable now, and Doyle craved the old lies.

"So that's it, then? I can have you, forever—as long as I don't get greedy. As long as I don't expect to ever

let anyone know, keep it under your hat." Pause, Bodie's eyes closing heavily, opening again, the huge pupils focussing entirely on Doyle's face. "An' as long as I don't ever, ever try to fuck you or ask you to suck me off ever again or anything horrible like that."

"If it bothers you that much—" but it was him it bothered, Bodie too big, Bodie tearing him apart, making a woman of him— "then we'll just forget the fucking altogether. We can hold hands and snog—"

He could feel the sharp welt of Bodie's cut lip where it pressed, very carefully, against his. "Don't get angry with me, Ray, please don't get angry. There's not much time, don't..."

"We've got forever, Bodie."

"No we haven't." Said, with the certainty of a child to whom all things are black or white. "Haven't got long. Ann didn't have long, did she, and you were going to marry her. Can't marry me." A stifled giggle, the edges of Bodie's stitches dragging against Doyle's face. "Look awful in white. Wouldn't mind seeing you in a long frock, though and you could throw your bouquet and maybe Murphy would catch it." It was Bodie's breath that was caught, now, in the back of his throat, and for a dreadful moment, Doyle thought there were going to be tears. "Poor Murphy. Poor, poor Murphy. He knew, you know."

This was another of those questions Doyle wasn't sure he wanted answered. "Murphy knew what?"

"'Bout you. Knew I was in love with you—told me 'fore I'd worked it all out myself. Hated him for that. Didn't believe him neither. I don't fall in love. Hurts too much."

"It won't hurt this time," Doyle promised, ready to sell his soul to the Devil himself to make it true. "It'll be all right, Bodie, it won't hurt this time."

Bodie dug a finger into Doyle's ribs. "Stupid prat. 'Course it hurts. An' you'll hurt me."

"I won't—"

"'Course you will—already do." Tsk-tsking at Doyle's disbelieving expression, fingers missing as he tried to count off the reasons. "Don't love me, won't let me fuck you, don't want anybody knowing..."

Doyle closed his eyes tightly, shutting out the light, shutting in the pain, the answer to the first thing already given, no answer to the second, only the third something he could bring himself to talk about. "Bodie, we can't go blabbing all over the place. We'd lose our jobs—"

Bodie was shaking his head, rolling to a gradual stop, hands going to hold himself against the dizziness. "Couldn't fire us. Union won't let him."

“What?”

“Don’t tell me you’re not in the union, Ray? Christ, d’you even join the fucking library? The Union, Ray, the *Union*. The Society—we’re down as civil servants, right?”

Yes, their old joke, all of them sitting round the armoury laughing at their job designations.

“The Society won’t let anyone fire anyone for anything ever, you know that. They’ll just dump us sideways. Into the DHSS or the tax office or something.”

Bodie looked suddenly sick, and Doyle wished he’d had the foresight to bring a basin. Or, given what Bodie’d been saying, the foresight to thump Bodie hard, on the head, and knock him out before all this started.

“Fucking hell, c’n you imagine being in the DHSS? ‘S a bit worse’n the tax office.” Another pause, Bodie’s eyes closing again, fooling Doyle into thinking he’d been granted respite. “Still don’t see why we can’t tell anyone. One job’s as good as another and we wouldn’t get shot at if we worked in the DHSS would we? Might though, if we were in the tax office.” Huge great breath, Bodie frowning ominously. “But if we were in the tax office—”

“Shh, Bodie,” Doyle said, cutting him off before he got started on one of his rambles, “it’s time to go to sleep.”

It never took much to distract Bodie at this stage of the game, the drugs well and truly through his system now. “Is it late?”

“Yeh, it’s very late. Close your eyes, that’s it...”

He settled himself under Bodie’s weight, found a band of skin that showed no damage, and held Bodie as close as he could.

Lay there, light still on because he knew what would happen if Bodie woke up from drugged sleep into darkness, Bodie’s heartbeat slow against his own, Bodie’s breath damp against his throat.

Lay there, in his own gathering darkness, and counted himself amongst the lucky that he’d been able to stop Bodie talking, had put an end to those scalding, painful words. He’d been shot, he’d been stabbed, kicked, beaten, burned, and he’d take any of them over what Bodie had just done.

He’d already hurt Bodie. Not something he hadn’t known, somewhere in the dark of his own mind, but to have it brought out into the light as if it were an everyday fact...

But then, that was precisely what it was.

In his arms, Bodie shifted, one clumsy hand

turning Doyle’s face until he was looking into Bodie’s eyes.

“Still here?”

“Still here.”

A look of utter satisfaction spread across Bodie’s face. “Good.”

Then Bodie’s eyes were closed, his breathing slowing, becoming deep and steady.

Doyle was very still beside him, and his eyes grew gritty and bloodshot, as he lay there, thinking about the future.

He’d get used to the sex, he told himself. Just needed a bit of time. He’d even—shifting uncomfortably, rejecting the instinct to cross his legs—get used to the idea of Bodie fucking him. One day, he’d let Bodie do just that. He’d let Bodie spread him and enter him with that big cock; he’d go on his knees or on his back, wide open, let Bodie do that, to him.

He would.

One day.

And then Bodie would be happy. Then Bodie would know he meant it when he said this was forever.

He’d get used to the idea. He’d even get to like it. After all, there were millions of queers in the world who took it up the arse every day of the week: how awful could it be? Bodie loved it—and he loved Bodie, so how long could it be before he liked being on the receiving end too?

Bodie was willing to wait, was willing to settle for half a loaf right now, the rest—later. And give him time, he’d even convince Bodie that he did love him in the ‘right’ way. He would.

Dawn was creeping shyly over the rooftops, and his mind was still going round in circles. Sleep, he told himself for the thousandth time that night, better get some sleep.

He shifted, uncomfortable, a small trickle of sweat running down under his arm, his body too hot from Bodie’s too close embrace. Doyle stroked Bodie’s hair, fingers finding yet another bump, there, just behind Bodie’s ear. Poor bastard, he thought, and his lips found Bodie’s forehead and kissed him, gently enough not to disturb Bodie’s rest.

God, he loved this man.

He knew what people would call him for that.

Even though his body didn’t stir for any other man, even though the mere glimpse of a shapely breast still made his heart pound, he knew what the world would call him.

And he didn't like it. Not one little bit.

Tough, he told himself: you've never given a flying fuck what people said before, why start now.

Good point.

But the whispers, the comments, half the Squad already thinking he and Bodie were having it off...

He pushed it from his mind. He had Bodie, that's all that mattered. Bodie, whose name was shorthand for love and being loved, for belonging, for a friend-

ship that would never wane, for all the bright spots in his life. Bodie.

How could he lie here and think about sex and what people would say, when he had Bodie?

Stupid, he told himself again. Complete prat.

Mindful of Bodie's hurts, Doyle gathered him in close. The fine details didn't matter: after all, they had love.

And love is all you need.

—September 1995

SEBASTIAN

PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS

M. FAE
GLASGOW

IONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS

HELEN
RAVEN

PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS

PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS PROFESSIONALS

WONDERFUL TONIGHT

I've heard some say that Sebastian is a Goddess.

She is.

Period. Full stop. Point.

This story reaffirms her place in the pantheon. In fact, it reaffirms the viability of slash as a (sub?)genre of fiction. It elevates erotic/psychological writing to the highest level. How I wish I could take Wonderful Tonight and fling it at the world saying, "Read this people! See what you're missing. Some of the best writing today is hidden underground, accessible to only a well-informed few." But I can't. We remain carefully guarding our secret fiction from those who wouldn't understand.

But you do. You possess this story. Read it and rejoice in Sebastian's strong, clear words and in her power to transport you into the heart of two men. Their lives are not always wonderful; in fact, they're often dreadful, but things were wonderful tonight for a while, and—eventually—they may be again.

*For Helen Raven
—because of Heat-Trace*

PART I
(SEXUAL) INVOLVEMENT

THE MEAL HAD BEEN A GOOD ONE, ITALIAN, THEY MUST SURELY REEK OF GARLIC,

but it didn't matter. If you'd had it yourself you never noticed it on someone else.

They split the bill 50/50, after a bit of an argument because Bodie claimed Doyle's starter (langoustines) had cost unacceptably more than his own (tagliatelli), but Doyle had defended with the contrary evidence of Bodie's liqueur coffee and extra helping of garlic bread. So all was settled amicably.

"You comin' back with me?" Bodie asked quite casually as they reached the door. Doyle had wondered whether the offer might be forthcoming, and whether he would accept it if so: now he found himself agreeing. For better or worse.

Back at Bodie's flat—Regency, all high ceilings and ornamental plasterwork—Bodie made him a coffee and watched him while he drank it. He was looking, Doyle decided, particularly attractive tonight, his classic dark good looks accentuated by the smart suit he wore, the crisp blue shirt—"You goin' on somewhere tonight, Ray?" Bodie asked him, and Doyle made wide eyes at him over the rim of his mug.

"Wasn't planning on it. But I can if you want me to."

Bodie shook his head dismissively. "Nope. Just thought you might be planning to pay a call on Linda."

"Susanna," Doyle corrected.

"Susanna now is it. Whoever."

Doyle shook his head, made expressive eyes. "Too tired."

Bodie shot him a glance. "Really?"

"Not that tired," Doyle amended with a smile, inwardly disturbed. Bodie was so unpredictable; you could never guess what he intended from one day to the next, and the rules seemed to change with the turn of the wind.

"Nice meal," he said at last, sitting down and swinging one leg up and down gently.

And Bodie the amiable buffoon of the evening had shed that mask the instant they walked through the door here.

If it bothers you so much, Doyle decided, still

rocking in his seat, why do it at all...

"Yeah, it was okay. Filled the right holes, anyway."

But that was one mystery he had never come close to solving.

"Drink?" Bodie jerked a moody eye towards the bottles on his bar.

They had had a fair bit already, in the restaurant. "Depends," Doyle said, and risked a little upwards curl of his lip, chipped tooth flashing, and then it was gone again as he leaned back in his seat. From across the room Bodie eyed him, the intensity of his scrutiny affecting Doyle, making him act for it, stretching a little, playing with a button on his shirt, undoing some, slipping his hand inside.

"Just yes or no'll do, Doyle," Bodie growled, and Doyle's mood shut like a door. —Okay, that was it.

"Just no, then. About time I was going, I reckon." He began to rise to his feet, chilly with rejection, but Bodie was there beside him looking down with such brooding trouble in his eyes that Doyle sank down again with a sigh.

"Look, Bodie, do you want me to go or stay? I'll do either, only spell it out for me, will you. Reading your mind's never been my strong suit."

Reading his body was easier. He slipped his hands around Bodie's waist and Bodie stayed still for him. So he unbuckled Bodie's heavy leather belt, taking his time over it, letting it swing loose; button, zip followed. It made a little rasping sound as he drew it down. No action from Bodie: he stood there with his head averted, his eyes on some distant thing, but it was clear by now he was going to let Doyle do it.

Doyle released Bodie's cock from its musky nest, let it spring free and jut proudly forth, stiffening further at his touch until it perched bolt upright against his belly, strung on its own taut suspension. He ringed it with one hand, rubbed rapidly up and down. With the other hand he undid his own jeans, thrust a flat palm inside, propping himself in a half-sitting pose along the couch.

"Was beginning to think you weren't interested,"

he said caustically as his hand laced a delicate path around Bodie's swollen cock, pinched the foreskin up between finger and thumb, mirroring the actions of his other hand on himself.

Bodie gave a short, harsh laugh. His eye wandered to the opening of Doyle's jeans; with a grin of understanding, Doyle said to him, "Want to see, do you?" pushing himself up, dragging his jeans down his thighs. Bodie shuddered: his cock wept a tiny, glassy teardrop.

"Closer," Doyle told him, and leaned out to kiss the drop away, dipping the point of his tongue into the slit with a little murmur of pleasure. He slid his hand around behind Bodie now, pulling him closer, opening his mouth.

As Doyle lapped at his cock, eyes closing, mouth- ing the tip, the desperation in Bodie grew; his eyes darkened as they passed from one thing to another, from the lush pink mouth closing over the dusky helmet of his cock, to Doyle's hand moving lazily inside his own jeans; his eyes lingered there, the sight of Doyle jerking himself off always an intense and violent thrill for him. Holding on the wooden back of the settee he leaned over the other man now, pushed himself deeper, began to fuck his mouth with a fast, hard rhythm. Within moments the deep, dark sweetness focused and flowed out of him down the warm grip of Doyle's throat; he felt Doyle swallow- ing, and swallowing again, each convulsive move- ment pulling out of him the last, the very last drop of pleasure.

He stayed there for a moment, heart thundering in his chest, the pulse of blood heavy in his veins, Doyle's mouth resting gently against him, then turning his head to watch the other man's hand on his own cock. As his eyes rested there Doyle's flying fingers stilled with a jerk, and Doyle sighed, intense, as the white stuff hurled itself out and upwards, landing on his tipped-back throat, his ruffled shirt, his own dark pubic hair. One droplet landed on Bodie's hand; he stared at it for a moment before bringing it up to his mouth, tasting it and swallowing it with a casual voluptuousness noticed and stored away by Ray Doyle even as he gasped for breath, forcing himself to breathe slower, his heart slowing with it as the pleasure echoed fainter, and more faintly still.

His eyes dwelt on Bodie, narrowing as Bodie turned his back to rearrange his own clothing, following him as he began to walk away. He flung one hand up over his eyes.

"Tissues," he commanded tiredly, and some landed by his head. He swabbed himself off in silence and then chucked them in the bin. He could hear Bodie singing away in the bathroom, which didn't surprise him; the aftermath of sex always seemed to lighten Bodie's mood even as it darkened Doyle's.

He was sitting up, hands behind his head, when Bodie came back into the room wearing his dark red dressing gown. Doyle tipped his head back, met Bodie's eyes.

"Think I'll go on home," he said; after all, there was no point staying now.

"Yeah?" was all Bodie said.

Doyle shrugged. "Might as well. Got a few chores to do."

On his way out past Bodie he stopped, took hold of his wrist, looked deep into his eyes. Bodie offered a cool resistance, both to the look and the hold.

"Got anything to say?" Doyle asked him, curious, and then dropped Bodie's wrist, shaking his head. "Forget it, forget it. See you tomorrow."

He flew down the steps three at a time, opened up the Capri and swung himself inside. As he did so he glanced upwards at Bodie's window: nothing, no light showed.

His teeth showed in a grim smile. Well, he hardly expected Bodie to be there, calling over the balcony perhaps, imploring his return: —'It is the nightingale, and not the lark!'— He turned the key and the engine sprang into life. And as he pulled away from the kerb into the dark London street he did not look back again.

It seemed to him that Bodie's tension coiled up day by day, hour by hour, a little at a time: sex with Doyle defused him at a stroke. Tomorrow his mood would be cheerful, gleeful even. But dark introspec- tion had already begun in Doyle; why did they do it? He asked himself that every time: release of tension, after all, could be as speedily achieved alone with one's right hand and a bottle of body lotion.

Bodie had even asked him once: Doyle's moody silence had prompted a little, bitter smile from him and the comment, perhaps a question: "I don't know why you go along with this, Doyle. Don't enjoy it much, do you?"

He had not answered, because Bodie did not need an answer, knowing as well as Doyle just why they did it: because having started it, they could not stop.

Doyle turned the car onto the long wide sweep of the North Circular Road; joined all the other cars in convoy, all the lights of London spread out

low beneath the sky.

—*HOW* had it started?

Bodie was thinking this, looking out along the empty darkened street: remembering the first time.

Routine stuff really: he had infiltrated a ring where the punters were introduced to some temptation, drugs, underage prostitutes of either sex, then offered a gambling circle to get them out of it, nothing so very much out of the ordinary and scarcely of interest to CI5, except that the poor punters tended to have Home Office links. Cowley, on the scent of some triplethink espionage connection, had set himself and Doyle onto it: Bodie as one of the unfortunate punters, presumably because he looked more likely to have ministerial connections than his scruffy partner, who was assigned to the other side, a recruit to the ring itself, a pimp with a whole string of tasty little chickens in his stable.

Only someone had rumbled Doyle, or thought they did, though he had played the part with ease, hardeyed and ruthlessly indifferent to perverse sexuality; sentenced to death in someone's flat by a firing squad of two he had kept up his facade to the end, fighting and protesting to the very moment he was left, blindfolded and tied, against the wall.

Then he had gone quite silent.

Bodie, sweating ice, did not have to imagine what that silence cost him; he was fighting the same battle. Clearly Doyle was thinking along the lines he was: that the whole execution setup was a bluff, to get Doyle talking. But if it was not—?

He would blow the gaffe on Cowley's op. just like that, no question of it, if it would save Doyle's life. But it seemed to Bodie that there would be no spirit of generous forgiveness in the room. And then they might both end up dead.

So...they had sweated on it. Ice and blood.

Eyes on that jeaned figure against the wall, defiant and cold to the last, perhaps ten seconds away from death with the barrels of two Lugers trained on him, Bodie would not have blamed Doyle for breaking down, falling to his knees, crying out for mercy; he had seen the strongest of men turn into children when they realised death was there for them. But Doyle had shown the deepest, steadiest courage: he had simply waited, without a word, or a breath.

And nothing had happened.

Having failed to break him or out him they had hit him about a bit and thrown him aside. It was all

over by nightfall.

Bodie had driven then after midnight to Doyle's flat, found him there awake in the dark. Still in darkness, in silence, they had come together, found something which had taken them both by storm.

Something they had not been able to leave behind.

Bodie turned away from the window, and the night, and went to bed.

SUSANNA was a nice girl, not long out of some boarding Seminary for Young Ladies, and keen to make up for lost time: Doyle was only too willing to help her. Clearly, by the way she clung on to Doyle's arm and hung on to his every word she had never met anyone quite as rough, quite as hard, quite as carelessly sexy as Ray Doyle before, and Bodie could imagine from the way Doyle looked at her from time to time just how all that toughness would turn to sweetness when they were alone, how he would undress her with the gentlest of touches, how careful he would be not to hurt her, how he would take care to please her. Susanna had glossy dark hair and sweet brown eyes which followed Doyle everywhere he went, a neat little figure and expensive dress sense.

So different from his own girl-child, here reluctantly at his side tonight; she had wanted Bodie to take her bowling tonight and instead been dragged here for a drink with Ray. Mary was her (unsuitable) name, a lankhaired blonde with a pale sullen mouth and sexy brown eyes. Beside Susanna's elegance her cheap leather skirt and net stockings looked cheap, tarty.

Not that Bodie had one moment's doubt as to who had the better deal here. Girls like Mary were the type to get you going, every time: you had to work on yourself to appreciate the likes of Susanna. Pity really, but that was the way it was. Despite the fact that he couldn't keep his eyes off Mary's creamy black-netted thigh, Doyle obviously felt he had to rise above such base impulses and persevere with some less exciting, classier material. Personally Bodie felt he was making a big mistake, but there you were.

The pub was a Kosy-Korner type of place, all inglenooks, dark wood and mock log fires. Mary was bored, lighting her eighth Silk Cut of the evening from a green plastic lighter, having downed her first gin and tonic very quickly. Bodie and Doyle were nursing pints, while Susanna was halfway down a fruit-juice and saying very nicely to Doyle:

"I don't think it would be convenient this month.

Perhaps in April?"

Doyle was looking disappointed. Fancied a free weekend in the country at Mummy's expense, no doubt.

"You ashamed of me?" he drawled.

Her instant denial flowed like balm. "You know I'm not."

Of course he knows you're not, sweetheart.

"Don't ever think that, Ray."

He doesn't, sweetie. He knows quite well you think he's the bees knees, wings, arse n'all—not to mention the honeypot.

"I don't know why you want to meet Mummy anyway. She's incredibly boring," Susanna said, the clipped brusquery betraying of her breed.

"He wants to put the make on her, darling," Bodie drawled. "She's nearer his age than you are."

"The thing is, there's a bit of a family crisis at present."

"Do tell." Bodie veered near her conspiratorially. Baiting Ray's girlfriends was essential to him. This one didn't like him.

"It's Sebastian—"

"Sebastian!" Doyle sucked in a breath, rolled his eyes.

"My brother. He's got tangled up with this artist chap from Cambridge, and, being my brother, he can't keep it to himself and wait for things to die down, he has to come home and announce to my parents that he's gay, the whole Oscar Wilde. And Mummy is *wildly* upset."

"Well, she would be," Bodie approved. "There goes the family name."

"—Threatening to throw him out of the family altogether unless he goes into therapy—"

"Quite right too. Filthy little bugger," Bodie enthused, rubbing his hands together. Doyle's eye sought out Bodie's, but found it evasive.

"Well, Mummy certainly thinks so. And so do I, actually," Susanna said briskly. "Even if he *does* get—feelings like that, he should jolly well—he should pull himself together and do the right thing."

Mary withdrew her distant gaze from some bowling-alley vision, exhaled a thin stream of smoke and said in her husky little voice, "What's wrong with it? Poor bloody guy. Leave him alone."

"Well, tolerance is all very well in principle," Susanna said crisply, averting her head from the trail of smoke particles, "but I can assure you, one feels rather differently when it's a member of one's own family."

"Yeah," Bodie said with an aristocratic snort. "Not in *my* backyard, thank you."

"Bodie." Doyle gave him a quelling look.

"Used to kick queers round the camp barearsed," Bodie said, quite unrepentant. "Who wants those filthy buggers eyeing up your kit when you're not looking? Should bring the death penalty back for it. Trouble is, they'd probably enjoy it."

"Bodie."

"I suppose, during your sheltered life on the beat, you never encountered any cases of autoerotic asphyxiation?" Bodie winked at him kindly.

"It's not funny, Bodie," Doyle said, deadly quiet.

"Who's joking?" Bodie met his eyes dead on.

"Mummy's right in this case. Little Sebastian should keep his unpleasant tendencies to himself."

Doyle looked at Bodie carefully, noting that his partner did not seem to be joking, had trotted it all out without a trace of humour. Something very odd here. At least it was distracting him from Mary—so irritating, that his cock moved like a magnet at the sight of her, cliched though her style was. He'd just bet she was wearing suspenders, the full tackle, beneath the short, tight skirt—and yet not only was she Bodie's bird, but he actually preferred the cool elegance of Susanna, by a mile.

Trouble was, old JT down there didn't seem to agree with him, wishing it were in Bodie's place with all its might.

Feeling disloyal, he put his arm around Susanna's shoulders, squeezed her tightly. His eye engaged Bodie's boldly, chased it when it evaded his, held it firmly. "You hate queers, do you Bodie? Funny. I never knew."

"Every proper bloke hates queers," Bodie growled.

"That's not the fashionable way of looking at it these days, though, is it?" Susanna agreed with Bodie, for about the first time ever. "It's all *tolerance* and *we understand* and *you get on with it, chaps*, these days."

"Yeah, and why not?" Mary chipped in, flicking the ash off her cigarette onto the floor. "Don't harm no-one, do they?"

Doyle would have let it drop, but he was intrigued by Bodie's attitude. He leaned forward a little. "Yeah, come on, Bodie. What's wrong with it?"

"You've never heard?" Bodie said smoothly.

"Oh Ray," Susanna said, unwillingly on Bodie's side, "It doesn't bear thinking about—what they do."

"Sodomy?" Mary said, and gave an excited little wriggle.

"What the hell's it matter what they do? It's no-

one's business what they do in bed but their own. I'd say the same about any of us, wouldn't you?" Doyle said very deliberately.

"Ah, come on, Ray." Bodie said soberly. "You gotta set some standards."

Doyle gazed at him in disbelief. Bodie must be very trusting, very trusting indeed, that Doyle was not about to blow the lid off all this hypocrisy with a few well-chosen words. All he had to say was—

"What I've never understood," Susanna said, "is why any man should want to muck about with another man."

"Well, quite a lot of 'em do, sweetheart," Doyle drawled. "Must be something to it, mustn't there?"

"Can't see what you're getting at." Mary addressed herself to Susanna. "*You* like to muck about with a man, don't you? Why shouldn't another bloke get as turned on mucking about with Ray as you do?"

That was when Bodie chipped in happily with: "Maybe that's what he's trying to tell us."

Susanna gazed at Bodie with ill-hidden contempt, but Doyle did not see that; looking out over her head towards Bodie with cool deliberateness he said: "Got time to listen?"

"Drink, anyone?" Bodie was on his feet, blue-eyed and gallant and collecting glasses.

"Mine's a double," Doyle said, and his mood remained dark, introspective all evening despite everyone's attempts to cheer him up.

THE phone rang at about one: cursing, Doyle rolled over in bed and grabbed it, three-quarters asleep.

"Doyle," he growled in the most surly manner possible.

"Don't sound so pleased, will you? I could have been Betty, finally got up the nerve to ask you out for a date."

"Well, you're not, are you?" he said sourly, and dropped his head back on the pillow, nesting himself further down in the warmth with the phone still clamped to his ear. Bodie's voice came tinnily and cheerfully down the line:

"Just as well, mate, or she'd have hung up by now. But I'm not so easily put off."

"Don't tell me—you're ringing to ask me for a date?"

"In a manner of speaking—"

"Dunno how you've got the nerve, after your little performance tonight."

Bodie slid out of this gracefully. "Nothin' wrong

with my performance, mate. Mary's not complaining. How about Sus—hanna?"

He would never, he knew, get Bodie to talk about it. There was a dark tangle of thorns inside Bodie, no admittance without the magic sword. He cut through Bodie's loud and fairly tuneful rendition of 'oh—Susanna—*won't* you marry me—dadadadedadedadeda, me banjo on my knee—' with a forceful, "No complaint either. At least, I never heard one."

Bodie's voice dropped to a low whisper. "Was she wearing a bra, under the cashmere?"

Doyle smiled to himself, cradling the phone against his ear. He knew this game of old. "I'm not playin', Bodie."

"Ah, c'mon." Bodie sounded disappointed, then his voice swooped down salaciously. "I'll tell you if you tell me."

"Too tired. Out of juice. Whatever."

"Out of juice!" Bodie's voice came across astonished. "Not you, Ray. Never. How many times was it, tonight then?"

He had to grin. "Three. How about you?"

"Only once," Bodie countered immediately, "but once with Mary wrings as much out of you as three times with any other bird."

That he could believe. "What was she wearin'?" he heard himself asking, but Bodie's introductory chuckle dragged him instantly to his senses. "No, *don't* tell me, Bodie, I'm too tired for this. It's nearly mornin' for godsake."

"Pity," Bodie said, crestfallen. "You mean I stripped off for nothing?"

Doyle spluttered down the phone, grinning broadly to himself. "Surprised you expected anything different, after your attitude tonight."

"Nothing wrong with my attitude, old son."

Straight over Bodie's head again. *I just do not understand you*, Doyle thought, *you are just such a mystery to me*.

"If that's all—"

"No, it isn't. What are you doing next weekend? Bank holiday and all that."

"Why?" Doyle asked cautiously.

"Mary's cousin works as a steward in one of those lodge complexes up beyond the border. Cowley country, y'know? Time to time he gets an empty one to pass on to friends, family, what have you. She thought we might go up there next weekend, and it sleeps four."

"Me and Susanna?"

"Yeah."

“Mary wants us to go in a four?” Doyle tested, in case it was one of Bodie’s crazy ideas.

“She suggested it, yeah. She likes another bird around for a bit of bird-talk—can’t screw all the time and she doesn’t like darts.”

“She does. But—okay then. Don’t see why not. I’ll ask Susanna but I reckon she’ll go along with it okay.”

“Eating out of your hand.”

“And other places,” Doyle said; he put the phone down.

Bodie’s warm chuckle was still reverberating in his ears as he turned over to go back to sleep, shrugging the covers up over his shoulders, feeling warm and relaxed. Talking to Bodie on the phone in the middle of the night had an intimacy about it he found comforting.

Also, exciting.

THE miles sped past the window.

“Gonna be bloody cold up there,” Bodie said cheerfully, one hand on the wheel, one resting on the gearknob. “Pack your sporran, did you, Ray?”

“We must be mad,” Doyle said glumly. “Beyond the Tartan Curtain—in *February*?”

“I’m sure we’ll have a lovely time,” Susanna said bracingly.

“It’s free, innit?” Mary added.

“So’s a dip in the Thames,” said Bodie, meaningfully.

“Ooh, look!” Susanna squeaked, thrusting her face up against the car window. “Lambs—look, Ray—”

Secretly, Doyle was beginning to find the extreme exuberance of youth an irritation. Get this weekend over—give her a really good time—and then—

“Yum yum,” Bodie slavered. “Mint sauce, any-one?”

“Should get there by tea-time,” Mary yawned, and curled up on the rear seat for a nap.

Bodie slammed the car down a gear then gunned it up again with a tremendous roar. “Lunchtime,” he promised evilly.

The miles went on speeding by.

They arrived at the holiday estate about three and were directed to their accommodation by the receptionist. It was possible to drive to the door, through straight roads. The whole place reminded Doyle of a lego town—neat, artificial. Each lodge was designed in the shape of a wooden triangle rather like a Swiss

chalet—but less pretty. The lounge area was large, being at the foot of the triangle; the two bedrooms, at the apex, were tiny. Both were galleried—clearly the target inhabitants was your average nuclear family, two adults and two small children.

“—Togetherness!” Doyle nodded upwards.

“Don’t you worry, Ray. We’ll keep our ears plugged.” Bodie pulled Mary to sit on his knee. “Won’t we?” Fortunately Susanna was across the room in the kitchen area, making a cup of tea.

“Gerroff, Bodie, I wanna fag,” Mary was brushing off his wandering hands briskly and tumbling to sit beside him. She was wearing today another short, tight skirt, black leather boots with long pinpoint heels, and a little T-shirt. Over this she was wearing one of Bodie’s thick chunky sweaters, onto which her thin blonde hair tumbled untidily. Devastating.

Susanna, sensibly attired in jeans and a pink sweater, arrived with a tray of tea. Mary’s cigarette smoke began to curl thinly and bluely through the air; the girls began to fuss about with the tea. Bodie’s eye travelled around the room and came to rest on Doyle.

“Glad we came?” he said, beneath the chatter and the clattering of cups, and Doyle made an expressive face at him.

“I’ll let you know.”

At night, they left the little house and went to the Leisure Centre in the main complex; considering it was off-season it seemed quite busy and cheerful, though the main area had all the atmosphere of a school dining room, long wooden trestle tables, hatches, that school-dinner smell. Fortunately there was a bar, which gladdened the hearts of at least three of the party. Most of the room away from the bar was taken up with a bingo game, very popular; Mary, an aficionada, was determined to join in. Surprisingly, Susanna took to it instantly. Doyle played out a few cards himself, but got bored with it quickly; as for Bodie, he looked half asleep after the long drive.

“Shall we go?” Doyle tried at about 9PM. There was a boxing match tonight on ITV and he rather fancied settling down in front of it with a can or two of lager, a packet of crisps—

“Oh, not yet, Ray,” Susanna said in surprise, setting up her cards for the next round. “I’m really getting into this,” and Mary did not even look up from hers.

Bodie drained his pint of beer and set down the empty glass. “Leave ’em to it, Ray? Holmes v. Ali in

twenty minutes.”

Amazed as ever by the way Bodie’s mind and his, essentially wide apart, moved along the same lines, Doyle nodded, pushing back his chair and getting up.

Bodie made the girls a sardonic bow. “Take as long as you like, ladies.”

Mary shushed him vigorously as the teller’s sonorous voice intoned the starting ritual “Eyes down everybody—” and Mary said, “Just bugger off if you’re going, will you?”

Out in the chill night air Doyle shivered. “S going to be bloody cold in there.”

They were walking down a narrow track between the lodges. It was very dark, the sky pitchblack and aggressively parading stars.

“Chilly, sunshine?” Bodie’s voice in his ear made him jump. He turned to look at him, and Bodie slipped an arm around his shoulders as they walked on, without breaking stride. “Never wear enough clothes, that’s your trouble.”

Doyle shivered again. A vision came to him of those two small bedrooms, side by side, open to the gallery. Bodie and Mary—

Bodie squeezed his shoulder tight, tighter, bruising him; then let him go as they got to the door, searching in his pocket for the key.

“Think the girls’ll be all right walking back?” Doyle asked, looking back from the doorstep at the long dark trail.

“If they remember the chalet number,” Bodie said, and opened the door.

The rooms were very cold and Bodie went to switch the heating on at the kitchen unit. Without putting the lights on Doyle ran up the open-plan staircase in the centre of the room, tossing back to Bodie: “Going to have a shower before the fight starts, okay?”

The water was unexpectedly hot. It sang in his ears; he squeezed his eyes shut as the scalding needles prickled his skin and gave himself up to vigorous washing. When he opened his eyes again, it was to see Bodie standing there, leaning against the door, deep, dark eyes trained on him. A big man, brooding, and powerful.

“Didn’t hear you come in.” His heart, indeed, was thudding with shock.

Bodie stirred a little; his eyes did not leave Doyle. “Funny time to take a shower.”

“Save time later.”

Bodie smiled at him then, the look which dwelt on

him warm and the words which followed low and sensual, “You think you’re going to get lucky, yeh?”

“Reckon I might,” Doyle said, with a little smile, and he stood his ground as Bodie approached him. Water fell on Bodie’s navy army sweater and lay there glistening. Doyle looked at Bodie’s square, strong hands that reached out for him, took hold of him, settling comfortably around his waist, slipping around his back.

“Very lucky,” Bodie whispered to him warmly, passionately, and began to kiss his shoulder, his neck.

“Bodie, no,” he said. “Don’t,” but made no move to stop him, his head tipping back and a deep sigh escaping him as Bodie swiftly knelt, pressing his face against Doyle’s loins, turning his cheek against him and closing his eyes. *We shouldn’t be doing this*, he thought, watching the top of Bodie’s dark head, *too dangerous*; but at that moment he felt Bodie’s lips brush against him sweetly, and the last resistance in him dissolved away as he looked down at his own body, and Bodie’s mouth, and bliss gathered inside him like a storm.

Afterwards Bodie seemed oddly buoyant, while Doyle himself felt a vague dissettling anger which he did not bother to hide. Bodie clattered about cheerfully and energetically, clearly feeling he had scored some point too subtle for Doyle to see; his eyes were bright, his air provoking.

“Why are you looking so damn pleased with yourself?” he asked sourly and rhetorically. He sprawled out on the sofa and watched the television, whence hoots and cheers and catcalls emerged as the two fighters danced around each other on screen as the bell rang and the bout commenced.

“Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, Doyle.” Bodie mimed a few sharp punches where he sat.

“Yeah, that’s your motto all right.” He still felt quite dangerously moody; when the girls returned he was hardpressed to summon a smile for Susanna, let alone anything else when eventually, after too many cans of beer, they got to bed.

“What’s the matter, Ray?” she whispered to him, into the dark.

He lay on his back, openeyed. “Nothing. Tired, ’s all.”

“Okay,” she whispered, sounding very quiet, very young, and turned onto her own side of the bed.

Sorry, darlin’.

Definitely she was too good for him. Guilt was about the last thing he needed. He could hear Bodie and Mary giggling as they half fell up the stairs,

exchanging some sort of hilarious banter over the barmaid who had caught Bodie's eye earlier—

"Look, don't let me stand in your way, Romeo. I swear she was giving you the eye."

"Are you kidding? See her moustache, did you? I'd rather go to bed with you—" A noisy kiss.

"Sure?"

"Come to that, I'd rather go to bed with Ray!"

This was said right outside the alcove where Doyle and Susanna's bed was situated. It seemed to strike both Bodie and Mary as exceptionally hilarious.

"At least I wouldn't have to say *'I love you'*," Bodie mimicked himself in a cruelly light falsetto.

Well, no, there was that.

"Thanks, Bodie," he heard himself, unwisely sharp and clear. "Course you wouldn't. Wouldn't want me to get the wrong idea, would you?"

More scuffling and hilarity. Well, he was glad to have amused them. Nice to know his existence wasn't a total waste of time.

All of a sudden he became aware that someone was standing in the archway, a dark silhouette. An unsettling image for a man who lived by shooting at shadows; although he knew it must be Bodie still he found it disturbing.

"Okay, mate?" the shadow murmured.

"Oh, yeah."

Bodie's shadow stayed there a moment longer, head turned towards him eyelessly, then it slipped away. Doyle lay tensely, wakefully at the edge of the bed, and listened to Mary's giggles, the slaps and scuffles and whispers. Which, some time later, became either in his imagination on the edge of sleep or in reality whimpers, then moans; the rhythmic creak of the bed. Doyle touched himself restlessly, head turning to one side on the pillow. Susanna was asleep beside him, breathing deeply, evenly.

Feeling unreasonably alone, Doyle shut his eyes and blocked out the world.

NEXT day was bright, if chilly; they drove to a beauty spot on the nearby hills, and went for a long walk. Doyle held Susanna's hand in his and breathed in the fresh Highland air and felt content, fit, good to be alive. Susanna was in a sweet, serious mood; she looked good and she smelt good and he had spent the night with her and made love to her this morning, and yet still Doyle could not rid himself of the sense of utter detachment from her: the sense that if he

never saw her again from this moment on it would not trouble him at all.

What's wrong with me.

Maybe nothing. Maybe just a sign that it was time to move on. Bodie had his arm around Mary and his head very close to hers, whispering—secrets?—perhaps, and Mary was giggling, chewing gum, running with him over the springy grass when he urged her on and shrieking when he ran too fast. Doyle felt odd watching them, an outsider.

Why the hell did I come, that's what I want to know.

Back at the leisure complex they studied the notice in the reception area to see what activities were on offer. "Oh, look, Mary—" Susanna had discovered a projected visit to the local film set for some Highland soap opera. Doyle rolled his eyes at Bodie.

"Not my idea of a perfect afternoon."

"You surprise me." Bodie was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, looking dark and moody and bored. Susanna and Mary were hard at it discussing the acquisition of tickets.

"Looks like we're going, though," Doyle added, resigned to it.

"No way, mate. They want to do that, they're on their own."

"What about us then?" Doyle asked, grinning at Bodie's scowl.

Bodie's eyes met his, a darkly vivid flash of blue. "We'll think of something."

WHAT are you and Bodie going to do?"

"Maybe go fishing—" he kissed her offered lips as they stood waiting for the coach, liked it, kissed her again— "shoot on the ranges, something like that."

"Will you be all right?"

"Course we'll be all right. You'll be back by evening." Another kiss. Over her shoulder he could see Mary, locked in an embrace with Bodie; from the waist down she looked like a forties film star, seamed stockings and high heels. "Here it comes," he added, releasing her, stepping back as the coach drew up at the kerb.

"Don't sit with your backs to the engine," Bodie added, materialising with Mary.

"That's trains," Doyle enlightened him, and "Enjoy yourself, sweetheart," to Susanna, who didn't seem to want to let go of him, though Mary was already climbing up the steps. Doyle's eye dwelt on her slim thighs in the short, split skirt, and met Bodie's cynical gaze watching not Mary but

himself, watching her.

They waved the coach off and went back to the lodge to collect their shooting gear. The activity amused them for an hour or so but the afternoon seemed unnaturally cold and grey, a raw wind shrieking around them on the exposed ranges, and they were the only people there, which took half the fun away: only each other to show off to.

Eventually Doyle rubbed his numb fingers briskly on his jacket. "Go back for a cuppa?" he said through chattering teeth, "Warm ourselves up a bit," and Bodie agreed, shouldering the borrowed rifles to return them to the office while Doyle jogged back to their lodge and put the kettle on, whistling to himself as he got out a packet of mini swiss rolls bought at the on-site supermarket that morning. For no obvious reason he felt happier today, settling in, ready to take things as they came. He heard the lodge door open and close, bringing with it a draught of chill air.

"Watch this, Bodie," he called, and as his partner appeared he tossed a swiss roll upwards, tipped his head back and caught it in his teeth like a rose, posing for applause.

Bodie gave him a slow clap or two, then strolled over and stole the cake with his mouth, swallowing it down in one go and pulling Doyle close to him, twisting one arm behind him in an arrest grip. For a moment, eyes dark, unreadable, he stared down into Doyle's face. Then he kissed him on the mouth.

Bodie tasted sweet. "Mmm," Doyle said, amused, savouring the taste thoughtfully, "Not bad, these, are they?"

Bodie held him there a moment longer and kissed him again, the front of his body thrusting hard and arrogantly against Doyle's. Just as Doyle began to close his eyes, opening his mouth, giving himself up to the kiss, Bodie pulled abruptly away from him and walked into the lounge area. Abandoned, Doyle dropped his head back, exhaled hugely. He was getting tired of trying to second-guess Bodie: the other man's moods seemed to wax and wane like the phases of the moon, only not half so predictable.

He finished making the tea and took it in through the archway. Bodie took his with barely a grunt of thanks; his eyes were fixed on the TV screen, some afternoon chat show. It was already four o'clock, and getting dark quickly; too late to bother with anything much except wait for the girls to get back. Doyle briefly considered going for a swim in the large indoor pool back at the complex, but he didn't much

fancy the idea, barely warm yet from the brutality of the sojourn outdoors. He wrapped his hands around the hot mug of tea, slumped on the settee a fair distance from Bodie, but it turned out he had misread Bodie's mood one more time, because Bodie said, "Come here," in a gentle sort of way, and put his arm out. Doyle leaned against the solid warmth of him and sipped slowly at his tea, resigning himself guiltlessly to laziness.

After a moment Bodie plucked the mug out of his hands, set it on the floor, and leaned over him. Sensing what was coming, Doyle's heart began to pound, leaping as Bodie began to kiss him again, every nerve in his body tingling in its instinctive, blind response to the smallest things Bodie did to him, to the hardness of his lips pressing Doyle's against his teeth, the taste of his mouth and the scent of his skin. Bodie kissed him into another world, another mood, where desire was the only sense he had, so that he lay there exposed and wanton and hungry for the hard, sure exploration of Bodie's hands, the liquid warmth of his mouth, the warm press of his body.

Caught in some nuance of pleasure, his eyes wavered open, travelled from the dark top of Bodie's head beneath his chin to the windows beyond; dusk was gathering, he could see their reflection in the glass. The coolness of sanity intervened: he hit Bodie's side. "Curtains are open," and when this produced no response he moved sharply, dragging his nipple out of Bodie's suckling mouth with a shocking pang of pain, pleasure. "*Bodie*. Anyone could look in."

"Let them," Bodie said lazily. "Not illegal, is it?" His slowly questing mouth searched for and recaptured its prey.

"Not officially, maybe. But I'll just bet Cowley's got small print on the matter. *Bodie*—!" He removed Bodie's mouth again, with difficulty, from where it strayed.

"What's up with you?"

"Don't keep doing that."

"Ah, you love it."

"Yeah, all right, I know." He shut his eyes as pleasure unsettled him, lanced down to his cock. "You'll make me come..." he whispered.

"That's the idea, isn't it?" Bodie's low voice caressed him, arrogant and amused, and his hand went to the fly of Doyle's jeans, pushing inside the open zip. Doyle summoned every last little atom of reserve and pushed him away.

“Upstairs. Upstairs, Bodie.”

Bodie, stripped already and lying back on the bed, watched through half-closed eyes his partner undress. Head drooping, knee turned outward, Doyle fiddled with each button of his cuff in turn, then his shirt buttons, taking his time over it, finally shrugging the shirt off. His hands moved to the buckle of his belt, unfastened it, let it swing loose as he found his zipper, easing it down, pushing his jeans down his thighs and then off. Lastly his pants—dark green—which he kicked off and lobbed gently toward the bed so that they landed across Bodie’s face.

“Mm,” Bodie said, muffled. “Warm—smell of you—”

Doyle vaulted neatly onto the bed and whispered close to Bodie’s ear, “Would really, wouldn’t they?”

“Think they’d fit me?” Bodie plucked them off and tried them against himself for size. His cock was hard up over his belly, rigid and extended, weeping a diamond tear which trailed in his navel like gossamer.

“Not at the moment,” Doyle said kindly. “But you can wear ’em tomorrow, if you like.” He himself loved to wear Bodie’s shirts next to his own skin and borrowed them often. He leaned up on one elbow next to Bodie, let his eyes trail over his face; perfect, familiar, it hid its secrets well. As he leaned over to kiss him he noticed a flash of pink beneath the pillow, pulled out Susanna’s nightie and tossed it aside.

Bodie noted its path with a languid eye. “God, Ray. Is that what she wears?”

“Think it’d look better on me, do you?” Doyle said. His hand wandered down Bodie’s chest, pinching up his nipples on the way, travelling swiftly down towards the dense dark hair at his groin. As his hand approached Bodie’s cock lifted and swung up off his belly, a blind move Doyle found both exciting and also touching: watching him, following his gaze, Bodie murmured with a lick of lazy fire, “It likes you, poppet.”

“Yeah, I wonder why?” Doyle answered in the same soft tone. At moments like these he knew how easy it would be to love Bodie, really love him, to the exclusion of everyone and everything else in the world.

Bodie’s hands twined in his hair, seeking to push him down, seeking the rapture of his mouth; Doyle resisted, ducking his head away, wanting Bodie to ask, just for the sheer kick of it.

“What d’you want then, Bodie? Eh?”

“Go down on me, you little cocktease,” and Bodie’s voice was a rich sexual purr which shivered down his spine like a shower of stardust.

“And then what?” Dropping his head he kissed the tip of Bodie’s cock, savoured it, kissed it again. “What will you do for me?”

Bodie’s voice stroked him again as his hand stilled itself, and flowed instead through his hair and over his scalp:

“Then I’ll suck you to kingdom come.”

They stayed in bed for nearly two hours, drifting in and out of sleep and sex. Then they got up and showered in good time for the girls to come back, Bodie cheerful, clowning around, while Doyle was pensive, depressed almost, by one throwaway remark of Bodie’s in answer to his own malicious comment:

“They’d never guess how we spent the afternoon, would they?” and Bodie had looked at him, one eyebrow quirked, eyes cool: “What?” he had said, just as if nothing had happened.

As if he had never touched Doyle, never closed his mouth over Doyle’s and kissed him deeply as he came, sweetly, violently, never shared with him some rune of possession, madness, passion.

Now Bodie kept two feet away from him and would not talk.

The comparison drew itself for him: he had been through it many times himself with countless forgotten lays. It was exactly as if Bodie had had what he wanted from him and now he had lost all interest, dead, cold.

Could not even stand Doyle too close to him.

For now.

So Doyle withdrew as well, wrapped himself in his own dark thoughts, and they stood together in silence on the cold exposure of the drive and waited for the coach to sweep around the corner and bring their ladies back to them bright, chatty, and excited.

“Last day tomorrow,” Susanna yawned. She was full of Doyle’s best party-piece pasta. Bodie and Mary were washing up, giggles and shrieks punctuating the clatter of pots and plates. Obviously Bodie was feeling frisky. Chasing her around the table with a dishcloth, or something.

“Mm,” he roused himself to reply.

Susanna looked at his taut profile, the sultry pout of his mouth. “Ray?”

“What?”

“Is something the matter?”

He rallied himself with an effort. “No—sorry. Just—tired.” He summoned a smile for her. “How about an early night?”

Quite honestly, he fancied she looked less than thrilled. Well, there you were then. Back to the singles bar.

The last day. They spent the whole of it touring around the local beauty spots, stopping for a pub lunch. Two pints at lunchtime always turned Doyle sleepy. He had his arm around Susanna, her dark, sweetscented hair on his shoulder. Bodie was wrapped around Mary as usual, hand roaming under her little black leather jacket. Watching Bodie’s macho heterosexism, his possessive way with her body, Doyle felt a streak of something unreasonable that made him turn his head away from them, concentrate on Susanna.

“Don’t think much of this, do you?” he said, picking the lasagne over with a fork.

“It’s not as good as yours.”

He threw the fork down. “You cook at all?” he asked, making conversation.

“Not really.”

She was quiet today. Relaxed and affectionate with the beer he pressed himself closer to her, and felt immediately her resistance.

“No domestic science at Roedean, then?”

“Only the thickies do it.”

“Right,” he said, put in his place.

“Dunno what that says about you then, Doyle,” Bodie said, eavesdropping unashamedly as he nibbled Mary’s ear. He wasn’t, Doyle noted sourly, having half such a difficult time with her as he was with Susanna. Well, breeding would out. Mary was a little trotting show-pony, bedecked and beribboned. Susanna was a racehorse, nervy, moody, apt to rear.

“Right little Fanny aren’t you?” Bodie was adding. “Craddock, that is.” He withstood Doyle’s poisonous glance with some style.

“What time we leaving tomorrow?” Mary asked with a yawn.

“Not too late, I hope,” Susanna said. “Because actually, I’m quite looking forward to getting back.” And Doyle answered her with a little chill, a little edge:

“Homesick?”

She looked at him without smiling. “Not exactly.

But I haven’t seen as much of you as I’d expected this holiday.”

What? “We’ve been together all the time,” he defended himself.

“When have we?”

“Today.”

“Yes, okay, today. But there was yesterday—”

The injustice of this stung like vinegar on a graze. “You didn’t have to go, you know!”

“Well, you knew *I* wanted to go. It wouldn’t have hurt you to come with me. Not to mention the fact that you and your *mate* have left the bar every single evening before the dancing started—”

“Didn’t know you had any interest in dancin’, sweetheart. It’s the bloody bingo you go for, innit? Dunno how *Mummy* would rate that, I really don’t. Not quite up there with bridge parties, is it?” He was angrily amused by all this: why hadn’t he seen it coming?

Well, no mystery there. Truth was, he had been far more interested, excited, caught up by, his other affaire of the heart to notice much, or care, what this girl was thinking. A streak of remorse softened him after his bitter selfdefence, taking hold of her averted chin in his hand and saying with lowered voice, a little tenderness, “Look, I’m sorry you feel like that.”

“Sorry isn’t much good. It’s too late now, we’re going home tomorrow.”

“Oh dear,” Bodie leaned forward solemnly, “Reckon she’s sussed our little secret.” He looked mournfully at Doyle, whose heart leaped and began to pound violently.

“What?” he said, to buy time, mind flying on; he didn’t trust Bodie, didn’t trust him one iota, not to come right out with it and say it, for mischief alone.

“Can’t leave your beautiful body alone, can I?” He leered in at Susanna, who flinched back. Bodie eyed her delightedly. “He didn’t give you that old ‘partners’ line, did he?”

“*Is that supposed to be funny, Bodie?*” Doyle exploded: trouble from Susanna, Bodie playing with fire, everyone against him. He hunched himself up tighter and glowered defensively.

“I’ll bet he has got a beautiful body, though,” Mary said, and he loved her for that, stepping in to save him, taking the heat off.

“I’d tell you, if I could remember,” Susanna said, with more cool wit than he would have given her credit for.

Doyle stood up, pushing the table back. One knee bent outward, one hand on his hip he slouched,

moody, withdrawn. "Shall we go?"

The day improved a little as they walked along some beautiful coastline scenery, but not that much. Susanna was obviously punishing him for some slight, real or imagined, and he didn't feel inclined to press it. They made little conversation, and only on the subject of the views (breathtaking) the weather (bright but raw) and history, since apparently some famous naval battle had been fought along this strip of coastline. Bodie had brought a camera, and photographed Ray and the girls sitting astride a huge cannon mounted on the cliff-top; he kept commanding Doyle to smile, which at last he did, laughter finally dragged out of him at the sight of Bodie's bug-eyed face.

They ate chips along the front of a little off-season seaside resort, sea dark grey and rhythmically pounding the harbour wall, hands so cold they fought over who was to hold the hot paper bundles. Then the drive back to the lodge. Looking out at the dusk, the sparkle of the moon on the sea, Doyle hardly spoke a word all the way home.

Back late, they got ready for the potential battlefield of the evening out. Doyle washed his hair in the shower, paid great attention to his personal hygiene, put on his smartest trousers, a clean shirt, tie and jacket, ran his fingers through his curls, and looked in the mirror.

"Ugh, horrible." Bodie's reflection loomed up darkly behind him and admired itself over Doyle's shoulder. So there they stood, Bodie just the taller, short dark hair groomed, satanic gleam in his eye, a little, cynical smile. And Doyle, odder looking altogether beside Bodie's heroically masculine style. He scowled at himself and turned away, thereby missing the moment when his stilted self-conscious pose turned itself into a casual, abstract beauty, though Bodie did not, tracking him with his eyes.

Susanna was looking very lovely tonight, in a long flowing skirt with a pretty blouse. In a few years she would be the classic Home Counties wife, well-dressed, aristocratic bone structure, well-styled hair. Mary wore a little black dress, and managed to look like a pert French maid even without the frilly apron.

There was a band playing tonight, smooth MOR, and a crooning singer. Doyle danced with Susanna, holding her close, her head on his shoulder; the softness of her body aroused him, and the scent of her skin, the youthful sheen of it: she was so young. Too

young for him. He had blooded her, and now he was going to have to let her go, to some undeserving Yuppie type. That was the way of the world.

He relinquished Susanna to Bodie when hassled to do so, and found himself dancing with Mary instead. A different proposition entirely.

Where Susanna, shy, would hold herself a little away, Mary went straight for it, hustling her hot little body up against him, thrusting her belly in exactly the right spot. She knew, all right, knowing little minx, and laughed throatily in his ear when he pressed involuntarily closer.

He closed his eyes. "Will you marry me?"

She was ready for him, delighted to play. "Not before our first date."

"How about tomorrow?"

"You'd have to go through Bodie."

Doyle grinned, smoothed back the lank ashblonde hair at her temples. "You think I'm afraid of Bodie?"

"No, I think he's afraid of you." Her reply came quickly, leaving him not knowing if she was serious, or not.

"Maybe we could share you?" he offered, and she looked at him soberly, brown eyes, gypsy eyes. He wanted to kiss her.

And knew he could not.

The music was slowing, coming to an end, and he released her, not without regret. "I'd better let you go, sweetheart. But if ever you get tired of the Tarzan treatment, just let me know."

Bodie relieved him of Mary and delivered him Susanna in one swift and easy exchange: his sharp eyes swooped in on Doyle, malicious. Doyle knew Bodie had not missed a thing, was savouring every moment of his reaction to Mary. Not that that mattered: but it did matter about Susanna, who was looking at him quietly, uncertainly. So he took her in his arms for the next dance, and was attentive, even affectionate, for the rest of the evening.

At one time both girls went off the the Ladies' to refresh themselves. Bodie leaned across the table towards Doyle, almost avuncular in his manner: "You enjoying yourself?"

Doyle shrugged. "It's okay." And then, at Bodie's faintly disbelieving stare, "Maybe we've just been on holiday too long."

"You want to get back to work?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I think I do." Actually, he was suddenly sure about that: his job was something he was uncommonly good at, and although by definition the job of a CI5 agent had no parameter and no safe

houses, he was at home there, he knew what he was about.

And Bodie knew exactly what he meant, nodded at him over the glasses of beer between them. "Fish out of water, aren't we. Tell you what though," he added, "I wouldn't wish tonight over too soon."

"Why not?" Doyle took a drink of his lager, looked at Bodie.

Bodie gave him a slow, satisfied smile. "Mary's a little goer, isn't she? And don't tell me you don't fancy her. I saw the way you were dancing with her."

Doyle smiled, looked into his glass. "Okay, so I fancy her."

"Pretty obvious, that was. Surprised you didn't wear a hole in her dress." And he grinned at Doyle's quick, involuntary glance down at himself.

"You noticed how they always go to the loo together?" Doyle said to change the subject.

"Discussing our technique, probably. A very short discussion, in your case—" he ducked so that Doyle's halfhearted swat went past his ears—"and I tell you, mate, you wouldn't last long under Mary's regime. What she's got planned for me tonight—"

"Well?" Doyle glanced over at the door of the Ladies' Room; it was just opening. "What has she got planned for you tonight?"

Bodie smiled down at the table. "Special treat," he said laconically, and he would say no more.

Back at the lodge, Bodie and Mary turned down coffee and went up to bed, claiming extra tiredness: an early start was planned for tomorrow. Doyle could not get Bodie's comment out of his head; he was listening, he realised, all on edge for sounds from above; and that, he knew, was just what Bodie had intended, telling him half the story, leaving him guessing.

All right, so he would love to be up there watching.

And, Doyle gave a little inner smile, Bodie would like that. It gave both of them a kick, a real charge, to watch the other getting off. Bodie would agree to it like a shot. Even Mary might. But Susanna, now...

Out of the question.

Well, he had brought the girl along with him; he owed her this one last night. *Jaws* was on the television again; he'd seen it before, but Susanna seemed to get into it, shrieking rather appealingly at the scary parts, clutching on to him. It was like his teenage years, being with his girl in the back row of the pictures on a Saturday night. One foot up on the

coffee table, Doyle sipped from a can of beer and kept an arm around her; by ten when the film finished he was kissing her, losing himself in her sweet pink mouth, hot little thoughts running through his head.

"Sanna," he murmured, his lips seeming to want to cling to hers, burying his face in her hair. It smelt summery. Like a meadow.

She was pushing at his chest. "Ray."

"What?" He opened his eyes.

She was pulling away from him, evading his searching lips. "I want to watch this. The golf. It's being transmitted from Daddy's club this week."

"Okay," he murmured, and heaved a sigh. He settled back again, one hand on her breast, feeling the smooth heavy contour of it, immensely arousing, intriguing, to any male. He could imagine the soft, creamy skin beneath as he reached over to undo the buttons of her blouse, slipping his hand inside to caress the lacy frill of her bra.

"Ray." A definite cool warning there.

He desisted, shut his eyes, tried to be good. He could always think about work. For example: the Bader-Meinhof setup, the cache of weapons CI5 had discovered two weeks ago:

But then again. Time enough for all that tomorrow. His thoughts went back, inexorably, to Bodie. Bodie and his special treat. Mary had promised him a blowjob tonight, perhaps? Bodie turned onto that like nothing else, well, what man didn't.

Couldn't be that simple. He'd just bet Mary blew Bodie every time he felt like it, no inhibitions there on either side. Nothing out of the ordinary about fellatio, not among consenting adults: only the very young balked at it.

Susanna, for example, had never offered, and he hadn't pressed it.

He ran through a few more options, from a little light bondage (Mary would definitely look the business in handcuffs) all the way out to watersports and back again, and rejected them all as incompatible with a borrowed bedroom, clean white sheets, and two other people just a stairwell away.

Well, Bodie would probably tell him. Would definitely tell him, either to boast, or because he knew it would turn Doyle on to hear about it.

It was one of those nights when sex and sensuality seemed to suffuse through every physical and mental sense he had and leave him hypersensitive; at home alone he would have tossed off by now and got it over with. He didn't want to wait any longer. He undid Susanna's blouse again, gently so as not to

disturb her, and stroked the soft skin of her bare breast as he saw it in his mind's eye; round, swelling, a little pink nipple puckering pertly to his touch—

As if in a dream he leaned over her to seek her mouth, trailed his lips down her throat to the sweetly perfumed skin inside her blouse, shutting his eyes in pure pleasure.

“Ray. Don't. Please. I'm trying to watch this.”

But he was urgent this time and not to be denied, closing his mouth softly over her nipple while his hand roamed over her body, towards the top of her skirt.

It was then he became aware that she was really resisting him now, trying to push him away hard, saying more loudly, “Ray. Ray. Stop it.”

He drew back half an inch. “What's the matter?”

She was looking at him seriously, without any hint of a smile. “It's been such a lovely evening. Do we have to spoil it?”

Took his breath away. He gazed at her narroweyed, his pulse thundering in his ears, his body throbbing almost painfully as she went on, almost petulant, “Can't we even sit here and watch the television together without you getting ideas?”

They were—so far apart. He wiped the back of his hand over his mouth, said with a flash of vivid anger, “Look darlin', only today you were complaining we hadn't been together enough.”

“Yes, I want us to be *together*. But it seems to me the only times we *are* alone together your mind's only on one thing.”

He threw himself back on the settee, closed his eyes, fighting to get himself together.

“Christ, Susie.”

Women. His mind briefly juggled with notions of capricious injustice while his body thrummed sweetly, insistently with desire and would not let up on him.

To compound the lack of understanding, within moments she was squeezing his hand in an anxious kind of way; his own, sullen, did not respond.

“Ray.”

“What?” He opened his eyes, bitterly. “Well, what *do* you want us to do? Discuss Shakespeare? The meaning of life? Nice game of backgammon, perhaps?” And his teeth briefly showed in the flash of a smile with no humour at all; had she known this man in his other life she would have seen the danger and begun to run.

But she did not know the Ray Doyle of the streets; she drew his head down for a kiss. He held back for a

moment, then gave in to it, his mouth opening to hers. Instantly his body was on alert again, kicked right back into play.

That was when she pushed him away for the third time. And this time it was harder for him to rein himself in.

She looked into his eyes, a little nervous now, trying to explain. “Ray, I'm not in the mood tonight. It's not that I don't *love* you. I just want to sit here with you and have a nice cuddle, without—well. Without it leading to anything else.”

Dark thoughts, the darkest, swooped in on him. Her clothes were flimsy, her skin fragile: so very vulnerable against his own masculine strength. She had been a virgin when he had taken her first, blood on his cock. It would be so very easy for him to push past her reluctance now; there really would be very little she could do about it.

And then she saw the look on his face and guessed what it meant and fear flashed across her whole body, her eyes going wide and frightened, terrified.

He let go of her at once.

“Okay,” he said, breathing hard and fast, trying hard for control.

“Sorry. I'm really sorry. You do understand, don't you? You don't mind too much?”

Mind.

“You pick your moments, that's all.” He gave her a small cold smile: encouraged by her answering one he took the hand he still held in his own and moved it down the front of his body. Okay. So she wasn't in the mood. But upmost in his mind shrieked the primitive male instinct that she had got him into this state and it was unfair of her to cry off. Well, she didn't have to get involved: he still felt she owed him something.

She touched him reluctantly, but he didn't care about reluctance, if anything it made it sweeter. After a minute he unbuttoned his fly and pushed her hand inside, closing her fingers tight around his cock, but she had never got the hang of this, too halfhearted, and he was too strung out by now to fantasise his way through some inept groping; he needed something hard and direct.

Running on pure instinct, he cupped his hand around the back of her neck, began to push her down. Some sixth sense alerted her to what he was wanting.

“No, Ray. I can't.”

“Yes you can.” Nothing about this was pleasurable to him any longer, he only needed to get it over with as quickly as possible. His body no longer seemed to

know what was going on, he had been there, not there, there again, and now his insides were beginning the heavy throb of pain he remembered from teenage years.

"I can't. Honestly."

"Course you can. Come on, it's not that bad," he soothed her, urged her, stroking the nape of her neck. "I won't come in your mouth, I promise."

"I just don't—"

"Ah, please, sweetheart. Do it for me." Her head lowered, and he felt something wet fall upon his belly.

That was when, belatedly, he heard the previous note in her voice, categorised it, saw the panic in her eyes, already beginning to resolve itself in angry, frightened tears.

However old was she? Eighteen. A teenager.

What the hell was he doing?

Sanity drenched him in a rush and froze him up. He took his hand away from her, completely away, and spread his fingers out around his own eyes. Selfcontrol was easy to come by this time: brought to the brink once too often his desire had fled high and tight inside him, hurting him, tying his guts in a knot, but very far away.

"Ray?"

He ignored her anxious query, opening his eyes, pulling his shirt down and tucking it in, buttoning his jeans over his rigid cock, swift, precise, everyday actions.

"Ray, I'm sorry, I really am."

He jumped to his feet, not bothering to reply.

Her voice rose in a teary wail. "I wish I could make you understand. It's just—I feel sometimes—you only want me for one thing."

He bit down hard on the cruellest answer and went to the front door, dragging on his leather jacket as he moved.

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

He slammed the door, hard, on her reply, left her sitting there crying in the dark, in front of the television screen where a green-trousered golfer paddled his feet, sighted in the ball, raised his club, and struck.

Upstairs, Bodie came wide awake at the sounds, the reverberation of the door downstairs slamming. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and reaching for his clothes.

"Wha'wazzat?" Mary spoke drowsily at his side.

"Sh. 'S okay." He was already onto his sweater

by now.

"You goin' somewhere?"

"Sshh. Go back to sleep. Won't be long."

On his way to the door he passed the settee where Doyle's bird lay all in a heap and crying into a (no doubt) lace handkerchief. He spared her no more than a glance as he snatched up his jacket from the hatstand, checked his pocket automatically for car keys. For the second time that night the door slammed.

Doyle had not gone far before Bodie caught up with him on the moonlit paths around the lodge complex; unmistakable, the sight of him in the shadows, he always had the faint look of a hustler beneath a lamppost even when he wasn't skulking the streets at midnight.

"Oi. What's the matter?"

Doyle turned away from him, kept on walking. "Sod off, Bodie."

Bodie grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him round. The first impression he had had, the midnight hustler, was only reinforced: the swollen mouth, the hazed look about his eyes told their own story to Bodie, who had seen Doyle that way before. He shook him a little, not ungently.

"Doesn't she love you tonight, sunshine?"

Doyle shivered, and shivered again in the cold night air. He wore only a thin shirt under the leather blouson. Bodie slowly released the handful of Doyle's jacket that he held, put his hand in his pocket, jingled his keys:

"Frigid little cow," and the chill contempt in his voice startled Doyle, lifted him out of inner obsessions, made him look at Bodie with attention.

"Come on," Bodie said, and touched him lightly, turning back towards the Capri parked by the side of their lodge. With the ease of long partnership he did not look back to see if Doyle followed.

In the car it was no less cold than outside. Bodie put the key in the ignition and the fans leapt into action along with the engine: he didn't put the car into gear, just sat there with the engine idling for a moment.

Doyle clenched his hands together in his lap. The tension knotting deep inside himself was a real, physical thing. When Bodie leaned over towards him with the best will in the world he could not prevent himself from flinching away, all his nerves on edge. "Sorry," he said, looking away from Bodie, out of the side window, seeing nothing.

“Not good enough for you tonight, am I?” Bodie asked him, head cocked, a humorous quirk to his lips, and Doyle felt a little warmer, a little less estranged from reality. That was the thing about the two of them together: there was, beneath everything that was between them, an intuition verging on the psychic. Bodie would not play the wrong card.

He even managed an answering smile. “Too far gone. You know how it is. She got me so worked up I didn’t know if I was coming or going—”

“Hmm.”

—“Now I feel I’d just lay one on anyone who tried to touch me.”

“Lover’s nuts,” Bodie assured him sagely, and he put the car into first and drove off, gunning through the gears in true racing style. “We’ve all been through it, Raymond, believe me.”

“Yeah?” Doyle asked, grinning a little despite himself. “Gotta magic cure?”

Bodie’s reply was swift and succinct. “No, I mean it,” he added with a sidelong glance when Doyle only snorted. “Just get yourself off, sooner the better. Want me to stop the car?”

“Something makes you think I can’t do it going along?” Doyle challenged.

“Come to think of it, I know you can,” Bodie said softly, reminiscent; and Doyle’s mind flashed back to a wild incident of some months past. But even the twinge of pleasure at the memory hurt him deep inside, and he folded himself over, one arm across his tender belly, cradling it.

“Look, I just couldn’t right now, okay? Hurts too much.” He felt as if sex would be the last thing he would ever want in his life again. Hanging onto the door strap as they rocketed around a corner, the disaster of the evening replayed itself in his mind again— “Must’ve lost my touch with women,” he said bitterly, looking out into the dark: he expected Bodie to join in on this theme, mock him and his sexual technique with the fairer sex, but Bodie did not, frowning out into the dark, following the maze-like trail out towards the open road, prompting the question from Doyle, “Where we going?”

“Just sit tight, sunshine.”

Not that it mattered. The last thing he wanted was to go back to where Susanna was; give him time to cool off a bit. Bodie’s company was helping him already, he felt Bodie’s sympathy around him, but Bodie not making a big deal out of it, no fuss, the ‘it happens’ attitude calming him down where pity would have tipped him over the edge.

He had calmed down enough to talk about it now. So he began to recount to Bodie the battlelines of his own private war of the sexes, beginning with ‘you don’t spend enough time with me,’ all the way up to ‘It’s been a lovely evening—*don’t let’s spoil it—*’

At this Bodie, who had listened silently until now, shifted in his seat and said: “Bitch. Bloody little bitch.”

“Yeah,” Doyle said wryly, “Makes you wonder if birds come from the same planet, doesn’t it?”

Kings would give up their thrones for it, women got headaches.

“It’s not as if I was laying anything heavy on her—” his resentment surfaced again.

Bodie’s voice had a naughty lilt to it. “Nothing *extreme*, Raymond?”

And Doyle shook his head, still remembering. “‘Spoil it’. I ask you. She obviously didn’t enjoy it much all the times before, did she?”

The note of strain was back in his voice again. Bodie glanced quickly his way: sexual ego was a fragile thing, even Ray’s presumably. “She didn’t deserve you, sunshine,” was all he said. “Next bloke up she’ll realise how lucky she was to have you.” He flicked the indicator on, left.

“Yeah, try telling her that.” He felt bruised, wounded by rejection.

“I might just do that.” Bodie’s voice held no obvious threat and yet the quiet tone of it chilled Doyle to the bone. He backtracked quickly:

“Ah, forget it, Bodie. What does it matter, after all? I’ll get over it.”

Bodie smiled at him then, a smile of such sweetness it lit up his eyes and his whole face and was reflected in the softness of his voice as he answered Doyle: “I know you will.” He pulled the car up beside the kerb, and the rasp of the handbrake broke loudly into the sudden silence. “I thought it was somewhere here,” Bodie said in another tone entirely, opening the car door.

“Thought what was?” Doyle squinted out of the car window. Naziras Stores, read the sign above the little shop; all its lights were on, and it was 11.30 p.m.

“Never miss a chance of a bit of business, Pakkies. I mean,” Bodie added, bending down to look in the car at him, “our coloured brethren.”

Doyle watched Bodie push through the door of the shop, tall, dark, broadshouldered. And racist. Even his black girlfriend of a few years’ back hadn’t cured Bodie of that. He could see Bodie through the shop window, behind the exercise books and the paint-

brushes clustering up at the glass; he was talking to the Asian shopkeeper. Bodie was shaking his head, both hands flat on the counter. But whatever it was Bodie wanted it was obviously not on view, because the man was disappearing now out of the side door.

Booze and fags, that would be the main trade at this time of night. Or something else, perhaps.

Doyle shut his eyes, put his head back on the seat. His insides still ached, to the very entrails of him, a steady, dull pain locked up inside him. He felt tense, edgy, unreal... He sat up with a jolt as the car door opened and Bodie eased himself into the driver's seat, tossing something onto the back seat, turning the ignition key all in one go.

"The things I do for you, Doyle."

The shopkeeper was looking out through the glass at them. Bodie gave him the smoothest, most ironic of smiles, and accelerated the Capri away with a burst of speed James Bond would have been proud of.

"What?" Doyle was canting his head towards the back seat. The cover of a glossy magazine glinted there in the dim light. He couldn't quite make out the title, but the picture was—interesting. "What the hell's that?"

"Bedtime story for you."

Pornography of some kind, obviously. His heart began to beat faster. "D'you know, if I'd been guessing, I'd have said it was dope you were after."

Bodie's hand stilled on the gearstick. "Want some? Could go back."

Doyle considered it for a scant second. A joint might be just what he did need, they could share it here in the car, get high and relaxed together.

"Nah," he said, not without regret, and Bodie began to urge the car on again, changing up from third to fourth. "Reckon if I get the drug habit, it might stick with me."

"Pot?" Bodie said scornfully. "They'll legalise it one day."

Doyle said calmly, coolly, "It'll still be a drug." Bodie might be safe. But Doyle had always recognised in himself an addictive personality.

The car streaked on, far too fast as always, out into the night. "Where we goin' now?"

Bodie's brow furrowed. "Bit of a problem, that one. Unless—" He grinned at Doyle. "Got your gloves with you, Raffles?"

Doyle told him he was mad. He was still telling him even as they stood in the dark outside one of the empty lodge houses, Bodie wielding one of the select little tools they always had about them. The flimsy

lock of the holiday home proved to be a walkover; they were in.

"It's going to look very good if we're caught," Doyle said, vaulting up the stairs behind his partner, imagining the list—breaking and entering; possession of obscene material; possible indecent acts to follow.

"Could have been worse, Doyle." Bodie appeared from behind the bedroom door, enigmatic and unsmiling.

"Could it?"

"We'd have been carrying, wouldn't we, if I'd gone back for that dope?"

"One sin off my conscience, anyway," Doyle said with a wide, slow smile at Bodie as he kicked the door shut behind them.

The bedroom was freezing, but otherwise comfortable, made up ready for visitors. They had the lights very low and the curtains tightly drawn in case by some miracle the security guard, seen every night in the bar totally ratted by 10 PM on mild and bitter, should take it into his head to patrol the grounds in the middle of the night. Doyle stripped off all his clothes except his T-shirt and got into bed, sliding between icy sheets, watching Bodie kneel before the gas fire, feeding it with 10p pieces. A rush of affection for the other man stole over him: this tough dark fighter, his partner, here with him, loyal, sorting him out, chasing his blue mood away with the genius of intuition.

"Look after me, don't you?"

"Try to," Bodie answered him, rising to his feet and turning; and Doyle was struck by the deep dark blaze of Bodie's eyes, the blue of the deepest ocean, narrowed in attention on him. Some little part of him felt disturbed by the intensity of it, the way Bodie's gaze seemed to sight him in, ready for the kill. He also felt a leap of the most thrilling excitement, for at that moment there was as much power, as much attraction, about Bodie as he had ever sensed in his life before.

And then Bodie's smile, creeping across his face, dissolved away the air of danger about him as if it had never existed.: Doyle breathed again, slowly settling back. Bodie was adding, "Not easy sometimes, the birds you land yourself with." He was stripping off his clothes now, leaving, like Doyle, only a T-shirt, black, tight, his muscular arms shrugging off his gun and holster: a manhunter.

Doyle picked up the magazine that lay with them on the covers and flipped it open at random. "Think she'd suit me any better?" He held it open for Bodie

to see. *She* was about fourteen stone, with an unusual liking for vegetables.

“Mm,” said Bodie admiringly, getting in beside him. “Well, you’ve got leanings that way, haven’t you?”

His bare, strong thigh touched Doyle’s under the covers. Doyle pressed back against it, hard, with his own. He gave Bodie an arch, flirtatious look from beneath his flicked-up lashes: “Have I?”

Bodie smacked him on the cheek. “I *mean*, your cupboard’s always full of that healthy stuff.”

They arranged themselves comfortably in the bed, Bodie propped up against the headboard and Doyle leaning back against his chest, lying between Bodie’s legs. Bodie’s skin was warm against his own, and he could feel the tender press of Bodie’s genitals against his back, Bodie’s arms wrapped around him, Bodie looking over his shoulder. Doyle propped the magazine in his lap and had both hands free to turn the pages.

“Did he ’ave any more of these? We could go back with ID and raid ’im in the morning,” Doyle said with a copper’s righteousness, pausing at one particular page. “Reckon this is definitely a prosecutable item, Bodie.” Certainly the page in question showed a prosecutable act, though Doyle couldn’t remember any convictions offhand. The magazine was most definitely hardcore, catering for every possible taste, none of it new to him, but it was not the sort of thing he usually scanned for kicks and for that very reason it made it mysteriously exciting to gaze upon these astonishing depictions of bizarre sexuality, find them arousing and feel no guilt, Bodie here with him to share the experience.

He paused for a long time at one page, bondage with a hint of blood and worse.

“Like that one?” Bodie said in his ear, soft, quiet, curious, no more.

“It’s—pretty—”

Bodie’s teeth grazed his ear, sending shocks along his skin. “Which one are you?”

Doyle smiled, remote, faraway. “Oh, either, I should think.” The next page made him wince. “That looks painful, dunnit?”

Swift as a snake, Bodie’s stroking hand struck at his nipple, pinched it up tight in his fingertips. The arrow of pain resolved itself in his loin, fierce as pleasure. Bodie smiled at the gasp of reaction, the grimace.

“I dunno, Doyle. I reckon you’d get off on it.”

His tone was admiring. Doyle sighed, arching

back into his partner’s arms. “Do it again.”

His nipple looked pretty, reddening in Bodie’s fingers. Bodie went on to soothe it, petting it as he gazed abstractedly at Doyle, mulling some preoccupation, deciding to speak it.

“How far *would* you go, Ray?”

“How d’you mean?”

“Anything you wouldn’t do?” Bodie asked, clipped and precise.

It was the wrong time to ask, if some serious answer was required, for at the present time, when his body was alight and blazing his instincts were not to deny it any thrill at all.

“Don’t think necrophilia appeals to me.”

“That’s all?” Bodie prompted after a while.

“Coprophilia?” Doyle offered, a rich pageant of perversion running through his mind.

“What’s that?”

“Page 15,” Doyle told him succinctly, and Bodie flipped through, found the place.

“Oh, I dunno.” Bodie smirked.

“You *are* joking. Well, you can try that one on your own. Or with Mary, since she’s so obliging—” and that reminded him, and he stared up at Bodie, eyes wide, limpid. “That reminds me. When Susanna was busy pointing our relationship towards a higher plane, I suppose Mary was givin’ you your special treat as planned?”

For some reason, he could see that brought Bodie up short, that he didn’t want to talk about it; but that only made him the more determined to know. “Well? Did she?”

Finally Bodie conceded him a grin. “Yeah, we got there.”

Doyle was in there like a rat up a line. “And? So? What was it? You’re going to tell me, Bodie, or I’ll never lie to George for you again, I swear it.”

Bodie evaded him for a while, but had to give in in the end. “The old Greek thing,” he said lightly, pulling Doyle’s curls through his fingers, not looking at his eyes. “You know... look, there was a photo of it somewhere. Centre spread, I think.”

It turned out to be Doyle’s prosecutable act. Doyle gazed at the picture, not speaking; the girl’s skin had a lovely sheen to it, the curves of her body so beautiful it scarcely mattered that you could not see her face. The male, all grace, all strength, like a powerful cat sprung on her back, the joining of their bodies stretching the unaccustomed orifice wider than seemed possible. The picture moved him strangely, strongly.

“That’s what Mary let you do tonight?”

There was a pause, then Bodie said softly into the silence, “Yeah.”

Doyle’s gaze searched him out, and held him, transfixed, his eyes so wide and so clear that while what he was thinking was the very opposite of innocence, yet it was not depravity Bodie read there but a perfect clarity, a kind of essential truth. For a while, lost there in the remoter places of Doyle’s psyche, Bodie forgot to breathe for a while. Then:

“Want me to tell you about it?” he said gently, and Doyle did not reply, did not need to, lying back in Bodie’s arms while Bodie’s soft voice spoke to him of what he had done, and Bodie’s hands coaxed sweetness out of him slowly, surely, returned him to the point he had left behind hours ago, unlocked him at last. So it was only moments later when he came, easy, endlessly across Bodie’s fingers, and when it was over he draped himself over Bodie, panting, his sweating forehead on Bodie’s shoulder, his arm flying around him, gasping into Bodie’s ear:

“Do it again.”

“Now?” Bodie asked him, laconically.

He nodded. “Yeah. Do it hard.”

His eyes opened wide and stared across the room as Bodie’s hand struck magic down through his cock again, and he felt the ghost of something wonderful—only just out of reach—

“Really hard, Bodie.”

DOYLE wandered into the Quiet Room and stood for a moment watching Cowley and Bodie at work. His hand was wrapped around a mug of tea, from which he took an occasional sip. He was wearing a cream linen shirt casually unpoppered to midchest, its sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm, his gun in place. Tight, faded jeans and white leather Kickers completed the picture of a scruffy young tough, selfconfident, prone to violence, and very very fast on the draw.

The man in the chair noted all of this: *Oh Christ. Another one.*

“Who’s come to play today, then?” Doyle wondered aloud.

“This is Jimmy Edwards, Doyle.” Cowley answered him. “But he’s not playing—yet.”

“Doesn’t seem to understand the game,” Bodie chipped in; he was always in tune with Cowley, just exactly as if Cowley was the leader of the gang, a bit smarter, a bit more intelligent than the rest, and Bodie

his favourite thug. Bodie played to this role no end, much to Doyle’s disgust.

Cowley, he sensed, did not like him one tenth so much as he did Bodie. There was just—something—about Bodie which Cowley especially loved. Well, that was all right by Doyle. He wanted to be free: to question Cowley every step of the way, if he had to.

“It’s hide and seek, Doyle,” Bodie told him, eyes never leaving the man. “Jimbo here knows where our friend Anwar’s gone to ground.”

Doyle screwed up his eyes and considered a long mental list. “Anwar. The butcher, the baker—or Anwar the bombmaker?”

“That’s the one, Doyle. Only part of what he does for a living, though,” Cowley said, disagreeably. “I won’t go into it all, it would spoil the taste of your tea.” He directed a look at the mug Doyle held.

“Sorry, sir. Did you want one?” He took a last sip, unhurried, and set the mug down on the tools table. Then he moved over, softly, to the chair where the man sat.

Hardeyed, bullet-headed, no pushover here; he looked up at Doyle with cold defiance.

“You on for the game then, mate?” Bodie asked of his partner, smiling gently.

“Might as well. Nothing better to do.”

The man was not fettered in any way, but he was not fast enough, unlike George Cowley who had stepped back at just the right moment out of reach as Bodie and Doyle moved into action together, working as one unit: Bodie tipping up the chair as Doyle dived for the man and pinioned him in place with a friendly hand on his windpipe. Bodie beamed down genially into Jimmy’s purpling face. “You’re going to tell us, you know.”

Doyle released the pressure, just a little, in case anything useful should be trying to emerge. “I want my lawyer,” the man gasped, “entitled—civil liberties—”

“Sorry, mate,” Doyle shook his head regretfully, “Didn’t quite catch that. Got your knife, Bodie?”

“Why, gonna sharpen your hearing?” Bodie quipped, and found himself very amusing as he dangled the knife in front of Doyle’s nose.

Doyle took his time over extracting the thinnest, sharpest blade, watched by three pairs of eyes, two dispassionate, one wary. “Where d’you think I should start?” Doyle enquired delicately of Bodie.

“I’ll never forget you at catering school, Doyle.” Bodie chuckled, shaking his head. “No-one could flay a fish closer to the bone than old Doyle here!” he

informed the man genially. “Think yourself lucky, mate. Some of the butchers we got round here, and we got in an expert, just for you.”

Doyle spun the knife, a little bit of circus artistry. “Tongue?” he suggested.

Bodie said, scarcely moving his lips, “My grandmother was Jewish, did I ever tell you?”

“Really,” marvelled Doyle, testing the blade over the skin of his thumb, wincing—

—“I promised her, on her deathbed. As many converts as possible.”

“Only natural. Ease her passin’ moments. Well, that’s it, then. Deathbed vows are sacred.” And, watching the approaching knife, the smiling violence in the eyes of the men who held him, the nodding, avuncular approval of the older man—

“Unzip ‘im for me, will you?” Doyle asked casually, and Bodie moved to do it: only stopping as the outburst from the chair scaled new heights around them—

“All right! All *right*. Put the fucking knife away, will you?” and Doyle tossed it, caught it by the handle, sheathed it, not without regret.

Despatched afterwards to deal with the new information they had won, Doyle caught Bodie’s arm on the way to the car. “Hey. Want to come round to my place tonight?” He hadn’t seen much of Bodie off-duty since the Scottish trip last week.

Bodie shook his head without looking at him.

“Sorry. Busy.”

“Tomorrow, then?”

“Got a very busy week, mate. Some other time, hm?”

Doyle stared hard at him, but Bodie was already ducking his head in under the doorframe, getting in ready to drive off. After a moment Doyle did the same, and made no further comment, though his mind was racing on it: such utter indifference. However else could it stand, but at face value?

All right then: he would leave it.

But even doing that gave all the power over into Bodie’s hands.

He supposed Bodie saw him as a passing sexual fancy, one he could access whenever the heat was on: *oh, good old Ray, he’ll come across for me tonight, no questions asked*. Well, fair enough. Up to a point, that suited Doyle too.

But he was not willing to be used whenever Bodie felt like it and cast off when he did not. Treated, in fact, exactly like some tarty bird hanging around,

okay for a poke when you were so desperate a letterbox would do.

The instinct for revenge was fully developed in Ray Doyle; he stored every little arrow Bodie sent his way, if not consciously, certainly instinctively, and this day’s rejection sent them just one step nearer a crisis.

“PRESS the next number in sequence.”

Doyle frowned as he concentrated. Through the grid he could see Bodie, who always looked supremely happy as he did these tests, chuckling to himself as he flexed his fingers over the keyboard. Just as if every single answer came to him pat.

Curious, Doyle had once made the effort to get a look at Bodie’s intelligence profile, and found it almost identical to his own in overall quotient, Bodie scoring more highly on certain areas of verbal ability, and Doyle on spatial awareness, but for the most part they were just about a match. Both a high average: not genius material, but no way dim, either. So Bodie’s projected confidence was an act, no more; he must be struggling just as Doyle was struggling, to choose one of six silly variables to continue a pattern. Doyle shrugged, recklessly chose. Across through the grid Bodie did the same.

Doyle sat on Dr Ross’ desk when it was over, Bodie behind him. She had always seemed quite immune to their charm but that was no reason to stop trying. Her glacial good looks appealed to him, and she was certainly a challenge: his natural male instincts were intrigued by that and determined to engage him in combat.

“Well, you’ve both achieved your usual score,” she said, with that natural condescension which made one feel that the score was deficient in no small way. “Which of you boys wants to go first for the interview?”

“Oh, I think Ray can go first, while he’s fresh,” Bodie murmured, looming in over Doyle’s shoulder and fixing Ms. Ross with a dark, malicious eye. “No staying power, this lad.”

And it was directly to this point Dr Ross led him once they were alone and after he had dutifully drawn his House-Tree-Person icons for her inspection:

“Does it ever annoy you, that your partner continually puts you down in the company of females?”

“Bodie? Hadn’t noticed.”

She registered disbelief by a narrowing of the gaze. “Come on, 4.5. He does it all the time: he makes subtly, correction, not-so-subtly, degrading references to your size, your sexuality, your success with women.”

He fixed her with a cool stare. “It’s not important. Just his way of going on.”

“Yes—but a particularly consistent one, with a main theme of building himself up at your expense.”

“Well, that’s just Bodie. No-one takes it seriously. Look, what is this? You tryin’ to put me against him, or something?”

“Not at all. Quite the opposite. I’m trying to establish whether or not it bothers you. And if it doesn’t, then its relevance to you is zero—its relevance to Bodie, of course, what his motivations are, is another matter. Let’s look at it another way. The nicknames he has for you.” She read them slowly, through pursed lips, making a meal of each one. “Goldilocks. Doyli-carte. Sweetheart. ‘The boy’. Doubtless there are others. Do you begin to see a common theme here?”

Some of the things Bodie called him in private would interest Dr Ross quite a lot more than those. Doyle coldly played the idiot card. “No.”

She was never at a loss for words, old Kate Ross. “So. You’d say, from your point of view, that you were getting on well with Bodie.”

“I’d say so, yes.”

“Just as well as ever?”

“I said—yes.” Unlike some lines of questioning she took, he could actually see that this one had some relevance; naturally Cowley would want to be fully *au fait* with any ripples in the partnership which might affect the teaming. But he was bored now, he’d answered the question, and his eyes slipped past her to the open spaces beyond the window.

“You’ve just been away together, haven’t you?”

“Yeh. With Bodie’s bird and mine,” he added.

She was looking back through her file, leafing through several pages. “Let’s recap, 4.5. The last time—no, the time before, I think—that you underwent this psychological profile, in the course of your ‘Partner—Relationship’ evaluation, you told me that you and 3.7 were regularly involved sexually with each other.”

His heart began to pound. Hadn’t seen that one coming. He leaned back in his chair, flipping a pen in his fingers. “Yeah,” he drawled. “So I did.”

She looked cool, unconcerned. In her job, she’d heard it all before, and many times worse. “Is that still

the case?”

“Yeah.”

She was making quick checks on a chart. Her well-cut dark hair swung around the pale curve of her cheek; impatiently she brushed it back. “But, presumably, this sexual involvement drops off whenever either of you has a relationship going with a girl.”

“Not really, no,” he said, thinking that if that were the case he and Bodie would never get it together at all, since one or other or both of them was *always* involved with a girl. Usually several.

Dr Ross’ head came up, with that slow intent stare which meant that something he had said had engaged her attention. “So, are you saying, that this sexual contact with your partner isn’t just a substitute—a stopgap, shall we say—between heterosexual relationships?”

“No.” Was that wrong? She was writing at speed now, pen flying across the paper, dark strands of hair flicking as she wrote. He tried to read it upside down, but as usual could not.

“But, for example, when you were on your holiday with the two girls last week, presumably your sexual relationship with your partner receded into the background—”

He hesitated. “Couldn’t say that exactly.”

“Elaborate for me,” she said, dark eyes intently dwelling on him, and he took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and told her.

Half way through his account—truthful, but edited—she laid down her pen very carefully and sat quite still. And when he had finished her gaze remained fixed on him, as blank and unreadable as a camera lens scanning and scanning for information.

The silence began to make him uneasy. He didn’t think he’d told her anything all that shocking, no details: just times, places, frequency. None of the emotive words of sex and passion there, no mention of lust, desire, fellatio, nothing about the way he had whispered Bodie’s name as their bodies touched in the night, the way Bodie’s kiss had lingered, with love, on his lips—

“Let me get this quite clear,” she said at last, quiet and uninflected, “You and 3.7 take two girls away for, what, four days. In that time you have sexual contact with your girlfriend, twice, and with Bodie, six times.”

Put like that—

He shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, but it wasn’t—” It was all far too complex to explain. *‘Bodie took me by surprise.’ ‘The girls were out.’ ‘Susanna wasn’t in the*

mood.’ all sounded in the analytical light of day like poor excuses indeed.

“Anything wrong with that?” he asked aggressively, going all out for attack.

She shook her head briskly. “How you manage your personal affairs isn’t a matter for me to make moral judgements on, Doyle.”

He picked on the word instantly. “So you *are* sitting there thinking I’m immoral?”

“Morality is of no concern to me,” she said coldly, “except as to how it affects *you*. And more specifically, how it affects your performance in the job you’re paid to do, ergo how it affects your relationship with your partner. Just one more question, 4.5—”

He grinned at her, mocking. “Got it in one. You want me an’ Bodie to take *you* away for a weekend in Scotland.”

“—which of you usually takes the dominant role? I mean here,” she added, pen poised, “in a purely sexual situation.”

“Neither of us. Either.” She was always hinting at some sexual ambiguity in him: fortunately it didn’t bother him one bit. If you played both sides of the line you had twice the fun, that was how he saw it. But he was damned if he was going to give her what she was angling for and confess that he played the girl in bed to Bodie’s he-man, because it didn’t happen to be true.

He left the session feeling, as always, vaguely moody.

What went on between Bodie and Kate Ross he didn’t know: they were supposed to keep their sessions confidential, and for the most part Doyle was happy to go along with that; the woman had a way of digging out of you points of character you would prefer to keep to yourself. But he did ask Bodie if Dr Ross had asked him about their Scottish weekend.

“Yeah, she touched on it,” Bodie said, eyeing Doyle’s sandwich.

Resignedly, Doyle tore it down the middle and handed Bodie half. “Not liver sausage again,” Doyle queried, and let Bodie take the first bite, only risking his own when Bodie said thickly, “Ham.”

“What did you say?” Doyle asked. They were in the CI5 canteen at the time. Formica tables and a very grumpy tea lady, illnamed Glad.

“Ham,” Bodie repeated, and Doyle kicked him under the table.

“To Kate Ross.”

“Forgotten now,” Bodie said uncommunicatively.

Doyle shared out the other half of his sandwich. “Better get back. Cowley said ten minutes.”

“Man’s a bloody workaholic. Have you ever seen him eat?”

“Don’t remember it. Probably sets up an intravenous drip while he sleeps.”

“You still seeing Mary?” Doyle asked as they walked together out of the canteen.

Bodie was making a polite farewell bow to Glad the tea lady. “Yeah. On and off. You still got that hooray, henry bird?”

Doyle grimaced. “You *are* joking, I take it. It would never have worked out.”

“I could have told you that.”

Doyle shot him a glance. “Was all right while it lasted.”

“Yeah, yeah, course it was,” Bodie agreed faintly, to humour him.

Doyle was still looking at him. “Come to that, I haven’t seen much of *you* lately.”

“Only every day, eight till six.”

“You know what I mean. Gone off me, have you?”

He meant it to be humorous, but Bodie only twisted around to see if anyone else was in earshot, then gave him an obscure look, “Drop it, Doyle, will you?”

Doyle raised an eyebrow, shrugged. Inside him an instinct for trouble stung. Because something was offkey in his relationship with Bodie at the moment. Bodie was cool with him everywhere but in bed, and he found himself following Bodie’s lead, contradictory and snappy, not particularly goodhumoured beneath the joky veneer. Yet he could not pinpoint the moment or the phrase which had turned the course of things. It was—just a feeling. That everything was not all right with their world: or at least, with Bodie.

“—WHAT the—”

Startled awake, his eyes sprang open and searched the darkness, every nerve tense and on alert.

“Ssh.” Bodie, moonlight on his naked skin, pulling back the covers and getting into bed with him. “‘S only me.”

“Mad bastard,” he grumbled thickly, relaxing, stretching, turning over in the bed. “Made me jump.” It was the middle of the night, the luminous green numerals on his alarm clock reading 2:14. Bodie was covering Doyle’s body with his own, pulling Doyle’s rumpled T-shirt up and out of the way. Their cocks kissed sweetly, lushly.

“Mm—you’re warm—” Bodie murmured into his ear, between nuzzles at his neck, his ears, his throat. Bodie smelt faintly of alcohol and faintly of Aramis: his sensual assault on Doyle was tender, knowing. Through rapidly spinning senses Doyle tried to fix onto the notion that he was annoyed with Bodie, and should be saying no. It was impossible: his body was already going along with it, nipples erect, stirred by Bodie’s firm chest, cock up like a lightning rod and seeking to snub itself blissfully against Bodie’s belly.

Saying no was off. He was slipping hazily back into fantasy, the echoes of a dream still with him. Bodie a sheik, come to his tent in the middle of the night, to ravish him; yeah, that was a good one. The darkeyed, silent stranger would be merciless, despite his struggles. In the bed, he struggled.

Bodie spread his thighs, pushed them back to his shoulders, kneeling up over him. Heart pounding violently, Doyle dug his nails into Bodie’s arms, sweat sliding on sweat, Bodie’s harsh fast breathing a counterpoint to his own. Bodie and Mary flashed into his mind, the images which had haunted him; frailty and innocence overcome by brute force, the slick and savage invasion, the melting of resistance into sudden, shocking rapture—

Let it happen.

Fervently imaginative, strung out, he waited, on the very edge of tension. And when Bodie knelt up again and kissed a trail down Doyle’s stomach on the way to suck him off, Doyle opened his eyes wide into the dark. As Bodie’s mouth paid sweet attention to his cock he twisted himself away, taking hold of Bodie by the shoulders, pulling him up the bed. Bodie had frozen, offput by such unusual resistance: Doyle pulled him down fiercely into an embrace, pressed himself hard against Bodie.

“Not that way. Let’s really go for it.”

Bodie raised himself a little, one palm flat on the bed either side of Doyle’s face, his eyes a glimmer in the darkness. “You know, like you did it with Mary,” Doyle said softly, flat on his back, looking up at him. “Ever since you told me, I’ve been thinking about it.”

“Christ, Doyle.”

“Come on.”

Bodie said nothing, but his cock was ironhard, moving a little instinctively, pressing against Doyle’s between their bodies. Doyle shoved himself upwards, hard.

“Come on. You did it with her, where’s the difference?”

“You’re not a bird, that’s the difference.” Bodie’s

voice was a little husky.

“What the hell does that matter? I swear to god, I can’t get it out of my head since you told me. Just do it, Bodie. An’ don’t be too gentle.”

Bodie seemed quite still, shocked perhaps; but his mouth came down to fasten on Doyle’s, kissing him with just the kind of savage possession Doyle was after. He opened his mouth to the kiss and drank Bodie down with a powerful thirst for the man, the masculinity of him; his body lying open, defenceless beneath his weight. Still kissing him, snatching at his mouth in a fury or a desperation, Bodie rolled them both over so that Doyle lay on top of him; he brought both hands down to Doyle’s hard lean buttocks. They thrust together for a while, finding the same desperate rhythm. Bodie’s hands traced thrillingly around his arsehole. And when he stabbed inside him with a thrust of possession, aggression, Doyle cried out throatily as he came, his body spasming all over, clenching around Bodie’s finger in strong convulsions of delight as his cock spat rivers of fire across Bodie’s belly.

A mindless while later, still panting for breath, struggling to order his boneless body he got to his knees and discovered that Bodie had come too; he lay down again and made himself comfortable in the loose circle of Bodie’s arms. And later, much later, Bodie half-woke him, made love to him again, easy this time, and gentle, a draught of simple water to a thirsty man.

“I could get used to this,” he yawned, in the morning. Bodie, fully dressed and shaven was setting down a mug of coffee on the bedside chest. “How d’you fancy marrying me?”

Bodie was very pale, very darkeyed this morning. “That a serious offer?”

“Oh yeah. Cowley could be Best Man.”

“—oh, and I had him pegged for bridesmaid.”

“Which one of us would he be givin’ away though, that’s the question?”

“Oh you, Doyle, no question of it. After your performance last night.” Bodie didn’t say it particularly lightly, not out for a laugh, but not in a macho, scoring-points sort of way, either.

Doyle didn’t take it seriously. Why should he?

“I’m concerned about this pairing, as you know.”

It was Major Hannay’s turn to put in his penn’orth. “Well, I have to say, George, I can’t think

why Dr. Ross is concerned. Physically and mentally they're the best team you've got. Timing, training, fitness—it's all there. And, begging your pardon Doctor, that seems to me more vital than any airy-fairy paper test failures."

Cowley was paying them both his best attention, thoughtful and alert. In a long, long list of facts and figures and statistics, Bodie and Doyle's scores did set them consistently ahead of the pack: both Cowley himself and Major Hannay would have been more than happy to dismiss them and move on to the next partnership up for review.

But Dr Ross disagreed.

And, Cowley reflected, while that undoubtedly had its annoyances, that was after all why she was employed—to give his operatives a battery of psychological testing, to see a different view, to look beyond mere physical statistics to the men beneath.

"What's the nature of your concern, Doctor?" he enquired, rather disagreeably—psychiatrists needed no excuse, he had found, to become longwinded, and must not be unduly encouraged.

The octagonal conservatory where they held their meeting was an attractive and elegant setting, with mossy green carpets and stylish wicker furniture. The sun fell through the huge glass panels onto Kate Ross' hair. She moved her head impatiently to be free of it.

"You're aware that 3.7 and 4.5 are sexually involved with one another."

"I'm aware of it, aye," said Cowley impatiently, "because you brought it to my attention in one of your previous briefings. Otherwise, the two of them keep it very much to themselves, I'm glad to say."

The Major chuckled. "Never seen them so much as holding hands in the gym." One freezing glance from Cowley informed him that he had not, after all, been open to lighthearted repartee.

"My stand on this," Cowley said, addressing the psychiatrist, "is as I made clear to you at the time: far better for them to resolve that kind of feeling than to let it fester—You remember Aisling and Browne—that sort of thing. Very unhealthy."

"Well, I'd agree with you," Kate Ross said. "That really is the essence of any therapy—to bring out what's hidden, to face up to it, to learn to live with it comfortably. 3.7 and 4.5 have taken the first step—they feel a strong sexual attraction towards one another; ergo they have sex together. So far, so good. Now, if we take them individually—4.5 is dealing with things really quite well. I'd expect that from him: he's generally quite secure in his self-image. He has

his moments of doubt, the 'why-am-I-here' syndrome I call it, but on the whole he feels at home with himself, he believes in himself, he thinks he's on the side of the angels, as it were."

She paused. "The story with 3.7 is rather different."

"Och, Bodie's all right," Cowley's voice broke in, stopping Dr Ross in her tracks. "The man's not had the easiest of lives, you know; he's doing just fine despite that."

"Mm," Ross said noncommittally. "But I think you'll see what I mean if I show you—" she leaned forward and did something to the video machine on the cabinet, and the familiar rounded profile of Ray Doyle was suddenly captured there on the large TV screen, half-face to the watchers, looking not to the camera but across the desk to his inquisitioner.

Here in person, she turned up the volume in time for her own recorded voice to filter into the room, saying: "*Do you feel any sexual attraction to your partner?*" and then she froze the screen again to explain coolly to the two Majors— "This is the first time I've put this question to him, so one would definitely be looking for some reaction here."

And yes, the film had perfectly captured the man's surprise, his extreme stillness; and then the caution in his voice as he queried it— "*Are you asking me—do I fancy Bodie?*"

You could only admire the matter-of-fact, almost impatient cant of her interrogation: "*Yes, that's essentially what I'm asking.*"

Auburn curls drifted through restless fingers, and Ray Doyle hitched one denim-clad leg up across his other thigh. He said, with half a smile, a look almost flirtatious, "*Bodie's a very attractive man. You'd have to be—very straight up and down—not to notice Bodie—*"

Immediately Kate Ross stopped the tape and the screen went dark. "There. Notice how quickly he recovered from the question—which I introduced deliberately out of context, so that he wouldn't have a prepared response. And here's an interesting thing: you must have noticed the ease with which he surmounted the most difficult part of it: he isn't uptight, it doesn't stress him at all to admit that he isn't 'straight up-and-down' himself, as he puts it. Many, in fact the majority, of people with bisexual inclinations, would have found that much more difficult than he did."

"Yes, yes," Cowley said irritably. "Fascinating. And your point is—"

Unfinished, she withdrew the tape and slotted in

another. There was Bodie, now, up on screen, in all ways a contrast to his partner: bigger, darker, smoother, more masculine. Whatever that meant. Cowley found himself wondering just what it did mean, in the light of Kate Ross' excursions into the dark world of the male psyche.

She was fully into the swing of it, leaning forward. "Now listen to this. And watch the man's body language; that can sometimes tell you a hell of a lot more than words ever could."

Even to a lay observer it was clear that Bodie was very tense; leaning back in his chair he nevertheless managed to look as if he was on the verge of drawing a gun on his tireless questionmaster.

"—do you find him attractive?"

Bodie's voice was low, cool. "Yeah, I suppose so. Gets his share of the birds, anyway. Suppose that pathetic look brings out the mother in 'em."

"I said—do you find him attractive?"

At this point, Cowley could only admire Bodie's restraint. Instead of landing one on her, Bodie pointed a finger at his own chest, looked pitying, superior, shocked.

"Me?"

"You'd say you feel no sexual attraction towards your partner?"

Bodie still looked pained. "I dunno whether you've noticed this—easy mistake to make, what with the curls and the bangles an' all. But Ray," he said, slow and clear and mocking, "is a fella. No doubt about it. I've seen his—passport."

"But some men do, of course, find other men attractive."

"Maybe," Bodie growled. "But I'm no poofter, Doctor."

Bodie's face a study in grim refute, Ross froze the image there, then killed it as she turned back to the other two men in the room. "You can see that the difference is very marked. He isn't happy with the subject, he's dodging round the question. He doesn't actually lie about it, which is in itself interesting, but he comes damn close. I tried a few more angles, but it wasn't leading anywhere, and he was so uncomfortable with it he was getting more and more defensive."

"I thought myself the man was remarkably restrained," Cowley said, all brighteyed challenge, "considering how much he must have yearned to tell you to keep your nose out."

The Major, more at home with the honing of bodies than minds, was following all this as best he could. "Wouldn't it just be easier to say to him that

you know that he's carrying on with 4.5?"

Kate Ross shot him a cold, cold look of condescension. "Easier in what way? I know he's having sex with 4.5, and he knows it too. He doesn't know that I know that, of course, but that's the only missing fact, and scarcely a relevant one." She continued, spelling it out, carefully and precisely, for her IQ deficient audience, "The point of interest is not whether or not he is in fact having a sexual relationship with his partner, because we know that he is, but why he is at such pains to make the very idea seem unthinkable."

"Well, and what are your conclusions?" Cowley asked her briskly. "Is he ashamed of it, is that it?"

"I don't know why, yet," Kate Ross replied. "Although of course I could make a guess. But until I know for sure, I strongly suggest you keep a 'watch' notice on those two, despite their apparently good condition, and don't hesitate to call them in for a reappraisal ahead of schedule if you've got the slightest worry."

THIS particular photograph never made the papers: Cowley had strong views on his agents appearing in the press. So Bodie calmly relieved the pressman of his camera, spooled out the film, and handed it back.

"You can't—" protested the media man, astounded.

"Just did," Bodie said, flashing out his ID and then palming it away again. "D-Notice."

"As of when?" The photographer glowered at him, and Bodie smiled affably back.

"Five minutes' time." He wandered over to join Doyle, guarding the door to the Minister's apartment.

"Pity," said Doyle, watching the exchange with a laconic eye. "Think he got my best side."

"Nothing to choose between 'em, darlin'," Bodie drawled, pocketing the film.

"Anyway, I could always take it to be privately developed."

It might even be worth it. There was Ray Doyle, disrespectfully leaning on the door with his arms folded, legs crossed. Jeans, a scruffy linen shirt, cuffs folded back, one thin silver circlet drooping down his left forearm, he looked about as tough as you could get, on high alert, on line to whip out his gun and kill anything that tried to get past him, and yet there was something unusual about him, something exotic, fey perhaps. The contrast was fascinating.

"Don't let this get in the way of your draw, will you." He picked up the bangle off Doyle's wrist

between finger and thumb—and found himself looking down the business end of Doyle's Browning. "Just testing, just testing."

Doyle spun the gun lefthanded and rehoused it. "What's going on in there, anyway?" Bodie nodded at the door.

"Go in if you want to," Doyle gestured him past. "Old man's got Forensics in there, but it looks like the usual."

"No suspicious circumstances?" Bodie queried. At that moment Cowley appeared at the door, his face grim and set— "Bodie!" and Bodie wagged his eyebrows at Doyle.

"Love you and leave you."

"What's the password again?" Doyle called after him.

"Sal's home phone number," Bodie's reply floated back to him, and Doyle grinned to himself, and closed the heavy wooden doors with the big brass knocker and leaned against it again, on guard, ready to defend it to the death from thrillseekers, pressmen, gossip columnists, all jostling for the details of the death of a Minister in circumstances widely rumoured to be sordid.

He joined Bodie in there later, once Forensics had done their stuff and the ambulance men had carried out the red-blanketed body on a stretcher, and the press presence had dwindled to one or two night watchmen.

Inside, the flat was very swish in a Mayfair kind of way, all mahogany and dark carpets and cabinets of porcelain ladies. "Ah, Doyle," Cowley greeted him, "I'll leave the clearing up to you and Bodie.... More your style than mine, I think."

The old man had his glasses off, was rubbing his eyes; only for a brief second, but you could see he was tired. "Any message for the press, sir?" Bodie was asking.

"Och, it'll come out soon enough. Leave it."

"Any foreign connection?" Doyle asked, wandering over to join Bodie by the wardrobe.

"No sign so far. Looks like a straightforward suicide. Reason or reasons unknown."

Bodie turned round with a large brassiere in his hands. "Oh, I don't know, sir. If I were a 44-inch E-cup I think I'd feel like topping myself, wouldn't you?" and while he and Doyle cracked up, Cowley gazed at them with distaste.

"He was a good man, in his way," and they sobered under his quelling eye. "Good in his job, a good family man. Look through everything—with

respect, if you can manage it." And with that he left them alone in the dead man's flat.

"All very well. But how can you respect a man who thought he looked good in a ballgown?" Bodie produced one with a flourish, huge red satin frills, on a hanger. Doyle ran the stuff of it absently through his fingers, poking his head around the door of the wardrobe. It was a transvestite's paradise in there, wigs, dresses, corsets, very large sling-back shoes.

"I've never understood this," Bodie pursued the matter with distaste. "How could any fella get a kick from dressing up in women's underwear?"

Tired of mucking around—he wanted to get home, start ringing around for a date—Doyle pulled out a drawer, began a systematic search for anything Cowley might be interested in—blackmail notes from the Eastern bloc being top of the list.

"Well, it's sexy, innit?"

Bodie's question had been rhetorical. "What is?"

"Women's underwear." He felt Bodie's gaze on him and wheeled around to meet his eyes. "Isn't it?"

"Only," Bodie said economically, "on women. Christ, Doyle! he must have weighed 15 stone. Can you imagine what he must have looked like?"

Doyle looked at the enormous suspender belt Bodie dangled at him and had to agree, it looked capable of strapping up the Eiffel Tower. He laughed some more when Bodie slipped into a huge pair of red patent highheels and tripped about with his hand on his hip.

It was a long time before they had searched everything to their satisfaction, and then it took some time to replace everything in order. All ready for the relatives. Well, they had some surprises coming.

"How did he do it?" Doyle asked, shutting the wardrobe door on the finery within.

Bodie, who had seen the body, grimaced. "Strangled himself. *Not* a pretty sight." He was closing drawers with a firm snap.

"Funny way to go. If I were going to top meself," Doyle mused, "I'd go for a nice quick bullet through the back of the head."

"Yeh, but he didn't leave a note. My guess is he didn't mean to do it. Strung himself up for kicks, and it went too far."

Doyle shuddered. "Now there's a kinky way to get your thrills."

"It's the pressure," Bodie said seriously. "Gives you one hell of an erection."

"Tried it, have you?"

"—so I'm told."

Doyle stood in front of the huge dressing-table mirror and frowned at himself. "Nope, I still don't fancy it."

"You'd prefer the women's underwear?" Bodie asked behind him, with no particular emphasis.

Doyle grinned at himself. "No question."

"I worry about you sometimes."

"You don't have to, it doesn't bother me."

"Doyle."

Doyle answered him, in the same deadly serious tone. "Yes, Bodie."

"—forget it, it doesn't matter."

"Yeh, c'mon, say it."

"I said, it doesn't matter."

"No I haven't," Doyle said, amused. He could see Bodie in the mirror behind him, a dark and brooding presence hovering there.

"Haven't what?"

"I thought you were goin' to ask me if I had a deep dark secret. Like, pink Janet Reger underneath me Levis."

Bodie exhaled behind him. "Well, can't blame me for wondering."

The room was darkening as dusk drew on, the heavy drapes at the tall windows caught back and bunched at each corner. There was by now a certain quality of silence in the room. Doyle said to him, low:

"I think you really go for the idea. Don't you, Bodie? It turns you on." And as he said it he entertained for a mad moment the idea of dragging Bodie over to the huge fourposter bed and having it there and then. The thought that Forensics might yet be back, pick up on it, was the only thing which stopped him.

Bodie was right there with him in thought too; Doyle closed his eyes as his partner took hold of him, bruised his lips with a searing kiss. and when Bodie broke the kiss and whispered to him, just his name, no more than that, there was an urgency, a raw longing in the harshness of his voice. For a moment, the facade cracked, and a depth of yearning yawned between them—

"Doyle—"

Doyle wiped the back of his hand over his mouth. "Wha—?" he murmured. Opening his eyes he looked full into Bodie's face, catching an expression there which astonished him: a sort of hunger, a despair even, the like of which he had never known nor understood. "What is it?" he said, soft. "What's the matter?"

"I want you," Bodie said abruptly, almost coolly,

but his body was hot and hard, demanding.

Doyle broke away after a moment, having to fight seriously for freedom, backing off— "Bodie. *Bodie*," fending off the hands which reached for him, "Leave it. We can't do anything here, just use your bloody brain."

"No," Bodie said, quite sensibly, but he followed Doyle and was all over him again. Breathing in the heady scent of Bodie's aftershave as Bodie kissed his throat, his cheek, his ear, Doyle briefly entertained the notion of tossing Bodie off where they stood— probably wouldn't take long—then he shoved Bodie away again, hard, meaning it.

"Look, we must be mad. I wanna keep this job, it's the best I'm likely to get. Bloody press outside the door, Cowley might take it into his head to come back any minute, Forensics going over the place with a microscope. Come round to my flat."

"Time?" Bodie asked through compressed lips, his hands falling empty to his sides, clenching into fists. He was breathing as fast as a runner in a race, his pale skin flushed and damp with sweat.

"Bedtime?" Doyle suggested; the look he flashed his partner was very come-hitherish, and they walked to their separate cars alone, tense, disquieted, simmering.

"WHO is it?"

"Me," came the low voice over the intercom, from two flights down.

Doyle grinned to himself as he answered, "Which me?"

"Don't piss about, Doyle, it's pouring out here."

Bodie sounded plaintive, and certainly when he appeared through the door he was wet, droplets of rain running down the black gleaming cap of his hair and over his leather jacket. His lips were cool and wet, too, as Doyle came close for a kiss. "You eaten?" he murmured against Bodie's mouth.

"Yeah."

"Wanna drink?"

"No."

"Good. Come'ere, then."

He had no premonition of disaster, and anticipation had only sharpened his desire. Bodie's too, it seemed; it was as if the intervening hours had never happened, Bodie's hands, his mouth, as demanding as they had been in the Mayfair flat. On the stereo some mournful voice was softly singing to someone that they looked wonderful tonight; a sad, sweet,

eerie tune that forever after when he heard it brought Doyle back to this night, to now, to the clothes he wore, the scent of Bodie, the dark sexual tension in the room as Bodie's possessive hands swept over him, inside his shirt to roughly caress his nipples, and then, inside his jeans.

Apprehensive, he closed his eyes in sheer, heartstopping delight as Bodie's arrogant hand pressed through the satin, his bonehard cock sliding and slipping inside, blissful, silky.

Bodie made a noise, some inarticulate sound; he wrenched at Doyle's jeans in a frenzy and Doyle kicked them off and away; his heart was pounding at Bodie's extreme reaction, and yet this was the very thing he had courted. Because he had seen straight away in the Mayfair flat that this was an intense thing for Bodie: maybe, who knew, the deepest, most hidden desire he had ever had. Playing with fire he knew it had been, but he had counted on himself to be able to handle Bodie. He could always handle Bodie. Only not this time.

And as the man sang sadly that it was late in the evening, Bodie threw him almost casually to the ground, came down on top of him, eyes glittering, snatching a fierce and hurting kiss that left his mouth bruised; then moved down his body like a trail of lightning to kiss his cock through black satin, Bodie's eyes falling shut as he mouthed him through the silky stuff over and over.

Winded, breathless, Doyle lay flat on his back, violently excited, way beyond caution himself. Even when Bodie yanked the damp panties down to his ankles so that they manacled him, pushed his knees back to his shoulders, Doyle only squeezed his eyes shut until he saw stars, heard the music wail in his ears, love, longing, loss. And stars exploded inside him too as he felt Bodie's cock thrust at him and into the tight entrance to his body; and that was all it took.

The violence of his orgasm shook his whole body, lifted him and racked him with white-hot ecstasy; he was still coming in small, sweet throbs when Bodie scooped Doyle's own come off his chest and roughly wiped it on his own cock, the scent of it rising all around them, sweat and sex.

Won't be enough, Doyle's waking senses warned him, but it was enough, at least to get Bodie inside him with one hard plunge; and Bodie came almost straight away, five, six, short and brutal thrusts and then his cock shuddered inside Doyle's wincing, tender body.

"I love you. Oh christ, Ray, I love you," Bodie

murmured into his ear as it happened, quite lost, quite beyond himself; and Doyle heard the words but lost them afterwards forever in the face of what happened next.

For one moment, there was peace in the room. His heart pounded strongly in his ears. Bodie was heavy on him, hot, sticky.

My darling. You were wonderful. Tonight...

Then Bodie scrambled up and away from him as if he could not bear to touch him at all in the horrid aftermath, painful, awkward. His body raw and stinging, Doyle watched his partner thrusting himself back into his clothes in indecent haste; his own ankles were manacled still by the scrap of twisted satin, and he kicked it off. Bodie turned then and knelt and picked the panties up, looking at Doyle with a hard, cold stare, a face of stone which chilled Doyle's heart.

"These yours, are they?" Bodie asked.

Doyle cleared his throat, tried out his voice.

"Come off it, mate. Sandra's, I think."

"Pity," Bodie said, in that same dead, cold tone.

"They suited you. But then, they're tart's knickers, aren't they? And you—"

"Bodie—" He was getting to his feet now, touched, clouded by Bodie's dark, tumultuous emotion, finding his jeans—

"—are a tart, aren't you, Ray?" His mouth smiling, his eyes violent, Bodie slid the words out like silk, but every one struck home.

Doyle grimaced, raising his hand in a gesture of utter rejection. "Just fuck off, Bodie, if all you can do is spit filth." His voice rose. "I don't wanna hear it, okay?"

And the strongest will in the world could not prevent the wince as he moved, because Bodie had bruised him somewhere inside, and Bodie did not miss it, tracking his expression with a flicker of his eyes, his own face twisting as he said, "That's what you get, Ray, if you play dangerous games."

Doyle held his chin up, stared Bodie out bitterly. "I'm not complainin', am I?"

Bodie spoke softly, contemptuously. "You could have got your guts ruptured, *mate*."

"Yeah, well, it's a good job you only lasted five seconds then, innit?" He turned away from Bodie, weary, low in body and soul.

"You got what you asked for, Doyle."

"Yeah, and like I said, I'm not complainin'. Now fuck off, will you, and leave me alone."

"Are you okay?" Bodie said abruptly, staring at

his back.

“Oh yes, bloody wonderful, never better. Thanks for all the kind words.” He turned and went to the bathroom, slamming the door loudly behind him, giving Bodie plenty of time to leave.

Which he did.

DOYLE was in ahead of Bodie the next morning, already in Cowley’s office, perched against a radiator by the wall. Bodie’s eye leapt to him and wouldn’t leave. Doyle was pale, heavy-eyed, the session he had had in the bathroom that morning not one he looked forward to repeating. He met Bodie’s eye with cool steadiness and then looked away. Cowley took something off his desk to show them, took stock of them then favoured them with a glare over his glasses.

“Och, wake up the pair of you! You both look half asleep this morning—” and the briefing began.

In the car afterwards everything was much as normal; they had always, right from the start, been able to divorce the job from personal emotions. They did the day’s work. And the next. The weekend came and went. Nothing.

Well, Doyle was wary now, keeping his distance. Bodie had used him, then blamed him; the age-old story. Doyle wasn’t setting himself up for that again, thank you very much. Bodie’s fury had had something unnatural about it, something disproportionate. Okay, they had dabbled in deep waters. Doyle didn’t see that a lifetime’s purdah was necessary, even so.

Soap opera would have had him say, with a deep and earnest tone, “We’ve got to talk about this, Bodie—” But soap opera wasn’t dealing with characters like Bodie, who, if he did not refuse pointblank to talk at all, could not be relied upon to say what he meant, always assuming, that was, he had the necessary insight into his own reactions to know what he did mean; and certainly would let slip nothing at all close to his heart.

And what was close to Bodie’s heart—?

Loyalty, there was that. As partners they were just about as good as you could get. He and Bodie stuck up for one another, they looked out for one another; back to back against a world that was out to get them.

And Bodie fancied him; that was beyond doubt.

Half Bodie’s trouble, that. If Doyle led him on, he would follow.

So: in bed they were dynamite; professionally they were a perfect team.

In between these two extremes it seemed to Doyle that they had no common ground. A wasteland.

Bodie wanted it that way.

Doyle knew that to his cost: as happened when you sensed that here there could be something particular, some completeness of attraction, he had thrown in his line a few times with Bodie, just to see what he would get. But the line always came back to him empty. Message loud and clear. Bodie didn’t want to get involved.

So, no happy ending: no promises. No forever hints.

But then, what was he expecting? Bodie to declare undying love? That was a laugh.

All the same, the shock of it all had troubled him enough to make him consider, half seriously, telling someone all about it. Kate Ross, for example. After all, the woman knew him well, she was trained up to the eyebrows in human behavioural psychology and must have read all the right case studies. It might not yet be the thing over here, but in the States finding yourself with the map supplied by your therapist was considered not a mere luxury but essential to a fruitful life.

And how would he put it?

“*Thing is, Dr, we went a bit too far—*”

“*We had this thing with women’s underwear—*”

“*—yeah, I know, sounds bizarre, but—*”

“*See, the thing is, Bodie really went for it. In a big way—*”

“*He all but raped me, to be honest—*”

“*And then he couldn’t face up to it. Couldn’t take his share of—*”

Well, we’ve all been there, Doyle recognised: the delight of the really dirty act, the thrill of the taboo. The joy of, say, a four-year-old, pissing secretly in the sand—Doyle himself, aged seven or eight, playing doctors with Melanie Seaton next door—She had taken her role of nurse very seriously, probed his cock with various instruments culled from her mother’s manicure set, so exciting him that he had had a delicious, terrifying orgasm and fled the garden shed, feeling for days afterwards not only sore but a dogged sense of shame. Like any cheap thrill, it had not been worth it.

But it was Bodie’s reaction which had made it cheap, nothing else. It could have been—wonderful. The most intense things shared were the most special.

Obviously it hadn't been that special for Bodie.

DR Kate Ross looked measuringly at the young agent sitting across from her.

"I'll be honest with you, 4.5. Any breach of confidentiality here I take upon myself—"

Doyle said unsmiling, "I knew it. Cowley's got a secret woman. He's a dark horse, that one."

"—I'm worried about 3.7." she said directly. "Are you?"

That stopped Doyle in his tracks, made him draw in a sharp breath. He met her eyes, then slid his gaze away, wandering over the geography of the furniture. "Bodie's all right."

"4.5, you trust this man with your life. Every day of the week you go out there and it's him you're relying on to stop some assassin with your name on his knife. You don't lead a charmed life, you know; very often it's that man and no-one and nothing else standing between you and the underworld. So I'll ask you again: are you happy about 3.7?"

"Look—I trust Bodie to the hilt. Can't tell you any more than that. He's as sharp as ever."

Her gaze seemed to penetrate him, right through to the heart; he did not drop his own. Finally she relaxed it, looking abruptly away.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it. Your professional appraisal should be as good as anyone's; you're the one who has to work with him. How is your relationship off duty?"

He had known this had to be faced, but he winced none the less, clenching his fingers tight for one brief second.

"All right. Not seeing much of each other, but—" he shrugged. "Bodie's got several birds on the go—one for each letter of the alphabet, I reckon..."

"And you?"

"Yeah—one or two."

"So your sexual relationship with 3.7.—"

He groaned, put his head in his hands. "Look, do we have to go through all this today? I'm not in the mood."

"All right," she agreed, surprising him. "Let's go on to other things. Last week, for example. 3.7 was knocked out by a bomb blast, is that right? There was a trembler. 6.9 set it off with a wild shot when you were investigating a bakery on Ruston Mews—"

His face tightened. "Stupid fucking bastard. But Bodie was okay."

"—minor concussion, they just kept him in

overnight for observation, am I right?"

"Yeah. But he's fully cleared for duty again now."

"And, going back to the incident, you were there at the time, weren't you?"

"Yes—" He saw it coming. What a bloody marvelous day this was turning out to be. "It's all in my report."

"Have you anything you'd like to add, to me?"

"No, goddamnit." She saw the crease of serious anguish deepen in his cheek: he was upset about this, and no wonder.

"I wondered if, with hindsight, you might be able to shed some light on the matter. I think you'll agree, your behaviour was difficult to understand, to say the least."

"I can't explain it," Doyle said, tightly. "I've thought about it. But I can't..."

She pursued him relentlessly despite the signs of distress. "Your partner, knocked out by a blast ten feet away. Lying unconscious. Severely injured for all you know. What did you do?"

"You know fuckin' well what I did," he muttered, strung out.

"Yes, it's on several reports, including your own. Ignoring the most elementary safety guidelines you rolled your injured partner onto his back and shook him. Now, if he had internal injuries—an injured spinal column—"

"I know, I know. For chrissake, I *know*. D'you think I haven't thought about it?"

In every nightmare since, from the look of him. "What was going through your mind at that point?"

"I was worried sick, damn you! I thought he was—"

"Yes, I appreciate that. But losing control in the way you did—"

"Look, I've already had the bloody lecture from Cowley."

"It's not my brief to tell you what is and what isn't acceptable, 4.5. I'm simply looking for motivations."

"I really wanted to finish Bodie off, is that it? Turn him into a wheelchair case?"

He was at simmering point, ready to explode. Time to pass on. "Let's look at something else. When you go in as a team, let's say the old textbook standard, 'place where there may be a gunman in ambush'—who goes in first?"

Diverted by the quick change of direction, he looked at her. "I do."

"Why?"

"Bodie's a better long-range shot. Can give me

better cover than I could give him—”

She shook her head decisively. “Not on these scores, he isn’t. The difference is marginal. You can check them if you require confirmation.”

“Well, that’s the way we’ve always done it.” Narrowed eyes searched her, trying to get the point of this, see what she was probing for.

“Do you think it might all be part of the same pattern? Could it be that he sees himself as the dominant partner in your relationship?”

From the faint colour which had hit his cheek she guessed she had come close to home on that one, but then again, perhaps not, because he shook his head decisively enough in answer to her next question: “And is that how *you* see it?”

“No,” he said, “Can’t say I do.”

She abandoned that line of questioning and gave it to him straight. “The problem is, 4.5., despite the fact that many things are still going okay for you, all the indications I have are that the relationship is deteriorating, and the partnership in danger.”

“Oh, wonderful,” he said, listlessly. This interview had been a hard one for him. Kate Ross consciously relaxed her deep frown into a small smile for him.

“Don’t look so worried. It’s my job to worry about these things, not yours.”

Which was about the most human thing he had ever heard her say. “It’s my life,” he muttered ironically. “I have to worry about it.”

She was looking at him earnestly. “The thing here—you see, 4.5, I get the impression from you, consistently, that you care about your partner quite a lot. You enjoy being with him, you worry about him when he’s in danger; you actually prefer, quite often, his company to that of a female, or indeed, to anyone at all.”

“Nothing wrong with that, is there?” he said, offensively boldeyed.

“—I’m just saying that that’s the picture I get from you. But I get a very different picture from 3.7.”

It took a moment to sink in. He felt suddenly winded, as if she had lowered his guard then punched him in the stomach. His expression deepened to a scowl. “I get it. You’re saying you get the impression that Bodie—doesn’t care that much about me.”

Kate Ross noted with a frown of her own the way one hand came around himself, hugging his stomach absently. She felt abruptly sorry for him; this was a matter so delicate. So much pride and discretion and confidentiality on the line here. But she said what she could.

“It’s very difficult to get much out of 3.7 at all—”

He laughed, bitterly. “Oh, I can imagine.”

“—But you have to remember that for anybody at all, the most difficult things to talk about are the things which are the most difficult to face up to—”

He was off on his own tack now, scarcely hearing her. “No wonder the partnership’s deterioratin’, then; perhaps what he wants is a new partner altogether.”

And his smile was hard, artificial, every line in his body tense as he sat there not listening to her, mind racing on his inner concerns.

“Pay attention, 4.5,” she said impatiently. “That really isn’t what I’m saying at all. Since he can’t or won’t talk about his feelings, we can only use our intelligence and look at what’s there in front of us.”

“Well, what *is* there in front of you?” Doyle demanded, his eyes fixing on hers, searching. “What exactly does he tell you about me?”

“I can’t tell you that, you know I can’t.” Kate Ross regarded him with something like pity, but like all her emotions it was utterly detached. “And if I could, it wouldn’t help you much. Far more telling—”

“What?”

“—are the things he *doesn’t* say.”

Dr Ross took a deep breath. She rifled through her pages, pulled one out at random. “13th March 1979, oral sex in 3.7’s car. 17th March, similar incident off-duty. 25th March—training session—sexual incident followed—”

She looked straight up, straight into the hard green eyes blazing out of his pale face framed by those blessed curls— “I stopped detailing these incidents once they had established themselves as a regular occurrence. But every date, every time, every detail, I got from you, 4.5. 3.7 has never, not in any of his interviews with me since his sexual relationship with you began, given me any hint that it existed.”

DOYLE hefted down the most serious smg he could find in the armoury, took it out into the practice arena.

So, all his searching for complex explanations had been a waste of time: it was, in fact, all perfectly simple. Blind. He had been such a blind, stupid fool.

He faced the target, swung the gun up to his shoulder and kept his finger on the trigger, rocksteady as the recoil beat a pacy tattoo on his collarbone, the power of the thing vibrating in his hands as the bullets sped away and scythed through every target in turn.

Then he broke it in half, reloaded, lifted it again.

The pounding in his ears, the sounds of splintering wood right, left and centre, didn't antagonise him one bit. It was better, after all, than thinking.

Above the arena, looking down through a one-way glass window, Cowley rested his hands on the ledge before him and watched in silence.

"I hope it was the right thing to do," said the woman behind him.

"Aye. So do I..."

"But there really wasn't an alternative. You've seen 3.7's latest psychological evaluations, which I'm sorry to say only confirm my earlier predictions. He's in really quite a disastrous downward emotional spiral, and the relationship with 4.5 is not only not helping in its current configuration, it's actually making things worse. They have to break apart, resolve all these conflicts."

Cowley mused, looking down at Doyle decimating plywood with high-velocity magnesium flashing. "Can they do that?"

Dr Ross came to stand beside him. For a moment she too looked down in silence, watching. Then she said, "He's intelligent. Sensitive. Though today he was missing the point by miles."

"He'll get there," Cowley said.

"Let's hope so." She turned to go.

"Look," said Cowley. "Come here and look at this," and she joined him again at the window. A tall dark man was moving out behind Doyle and as they watched Doyle turned, a conversation took place. It was of the briefest: then Doyle shoved the gun against Bodie's chest, hard, hard enough to make him take two steps backwards, and pushed past him, hands in his pockets.

"They have to go back before they can go forwards," Kate Ross said, but Cowley had turned away from the view, away from her, and left.

"Don't talk to me." Doyle thrust the gun into Bodie's arms, hard enough to hurt him, and pushed past.

"—Ray—?" Bodie said, astonished. Murphy had come over to join him and they gazed together at Doyle's stiff-shouldered retreat.

"What's up with him?" Murphy raised an eyebrow.

"Wrong time of the month," Bodie quipped, but it was the wrong joke, the wrong time, the wrong man. After a frozen moment Doyle turned around. His eyes on Bodie were very direct, chill as winter, a white line of pressure around his mouth.

"Never give up, do you Bodie?" He stepped in closer, fast, delicate. Seeing it coming, but unbelieving until the last possible moment, Bodie raised crossed fists in front of his face, blocked the kick, but the fast following punch floated through under his guard and thudded solidly, with all Doyle's weight, into his belly.

With an 'oof' of pain Bodie went down. Doyle spun immediately on his heel to deal with Murphy, who was moving in on him to restrain him, knocking his hands away, ready for more. The other agent backed off before the light in Doyle's eye.

But Doyle's smile was sunny, almost sweet, his hair flying in the breeze as he asked, "Done laughing, Murphy?"

"I'm not laughing," Murph said very slowly, very calmly: deliberately turning his back on Doyle he bent down to see to Bodie.

Doyle turned away from both of them and left, moving fast for the exit, not looking to one side or the other.

It was after midnight when his doorbell rang. Just Bodie's usual time. Jarred awake, Doyle unpeeled himself from the sofa and then sat back down again, heavily.

Christ, he was tired. Drunk.

Had thrown himself with more than usual gusto into the mad disco beat of a London nightlife underworld, and it had helped him forget, for a while. But he had come home alone; didn't trust himself with anyone, not tonight.

The doorbell again. He crossed to the intercom. "Go away, Bodie."

"The hell I will. Look, Doyle: enough's enough. Let me in."

Bodie looked in no better shape than himself, whitefaced, red around the eyes, whisky on his breath. "Where've you been all evening? I've been trying you since six."

"Madder music, stronger wine," Doyle answered, pleased with himself. "You know—dancin'..." He groped about for the rest of it, found it delightfully to the point. "*Pale lost lilies*, and all that."

Bodie stared back at him without expression. "What are you going on about?"

"Dowson—"

"Oh, I know Dowson, all right. Surprised at you, though."

“Why—got a monopoly on literature, ’ave you?” Doyle was pleased with the way he had got the tricky words out. “Whoops. Wait a minute. Isn’t it supposed to be a girly sort of thing, poetry? That won’t do, Bodie.” He wagged a solemn finger. “Won’t do at all. You’ll have to give it up—take up the dogs instead. Ge’us a drink.”

“Haven’t you had enough?” But Bodie complied anyway and Doyle gulped at it in relief, feeling the fiery fronds warm the chill cast around his heart like a spell. Bodie came close to him then, too close for comfort. Doyle swung away, went to sit a distance away, gazed up at his moody dark partner with brighteyed malevolence.

“What you doin’ ere, anyway? Feelin’ frisky, were you?” He laughed, not pleasantly. “Stupid question. Why else would you be ’ere? Well, you can forget it. I’m not doin’ business tonight. If I’d been sittin’ in the window, red light on, hitchin’ up me stockin’s, well. Would have been different—”

“Stop it, Ray.” Bodie’s voice cracked out like gunfire.

“Well, you fuck off then,” Doyle said, and took another long pull at his glass. It really seemed to help. Pity the effect was so temporary—about thirty seconds a sip, he reckoned. And if he stopped pouring it down his throat, then nothing would hold back the tides of hurt and anger; sadness...

“What’s wrong, Ray?” Bodie paced round the room, hands in his pockets, very reined in.

Doyle hooted. “Oh, good one, Bodie, good one. Ask me what’s right. Would take less time to tell you.”

Bodie said in a tight, clipped way, “Is it what we—what I did the other night?”

Bodie had the guts to look at him anyway. Doyle pretended to consider, cradling his glass on his chest. “What was that then?” His eyes, mocking, ablaze, held Bodie’s hard. Bodie took a step towards him.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. On my life, I swear it.”

Doyle made a dismissive wave in the air. “Least of my troubles. Want to do it again, do you?” His hand went to the buckle of his jeans, opened them, halted. “Oops, wai’a’minute. You need me to wear the women’s panties, right? Ge’ me another drink and maybe I’ll put them on. Suspenders too if you like. Drink first.”

Bodie was watching him now with a hard, drawn expression; his mouth twisted. “You’ve had enough.”

“Haven’t had any at all,” Doyle said, and laughed, and hiccupped, delightfully. “Maybe I should just get

back to me beat after all. Turn on the red light, sit in the window awhile. Slack Alice, they call me, round the docks.”

Bodie turned away; his shoulders slumped wearily. “Ray, you’re not making any sense. I’ll come back—”

“Don’t bother,” Doyle said, and hurled his glass, with all his strength, at the opposite wall, right beside Bodie. “Not if you can’t even get me a fucking *drink*.”

In the aftermath of the explosion Bodie just stood there, brushing broken glass out of his hair. “Look, Doyle. The things I said the other night—I was—shocked. Didn’t know what I was sayin’. Shocked by what I did,” he added, staring dispassionately at his bloody palm, “Not you.”

“Yeah, you meant it though, didn’t you? Said it enough times. Think I’m a bit of a tart, don’t you, Bodie? You’re always sayin’ it. Ask Kate Ross. She knows.”

“Knows what?”

“Oh, but you don’t talk to her, do you? Made me look a right bloody fool, you did—” Bodie was turning his back on him, going out of the room. Doyle leapt to his feet, prowled after him, the rush to his head making him momentarily dizzy.

Bodie stood with his back to him at the kitchen sink, rinsing blood and water away. “And what exactly do *you* tell her, Ray?” The smooth, dangerous lilt was back in Bodie’s voice.

“Oh, I tell her everything, me. I thought that was the whole bloody point. I didn’t know it had to be a deep dark secret, stupid of me, I know.”

Bodie stood there, very still, with his back to Doyle.

“Yes it was. Very stupid.”

“Slackmouthed, that’s me,” Doyle remarked. “Slack everything, you might say. Turn around.”

And after a moment Bodie did, his face paper white, a deep bright vein of temper in his eye. Doyle took Bodie’s hand, looked at it: one quite nasty cut at the base of his finger, bright blood welling as he watched. He put it to his mouth, sucked it away, rich, salty sweet.

Then he dropped to one knee on the floor, looking up at Bodie’s face, provocative, dæmonic, Bodie’s blood on his lips. “What d’you want then? Blow job do? Be quickest. I tell you what, come in under a minute and I’ll let you have it on the house.” He rubbed one hand over his face, sniffed, sitting back on his heels all attentive for Bodie’s reply. Compliant and dutiful. Like the whore Bodie thought he was.

“You bastard, Doyle,” Bodie whispered, that terrible brightness back in his eyes and spilling over into his voice. “You bastard.”

Doyle was fully expecting a kick in the face, was braced for it, victory of a sort.

But Bodie simply pushed past him, gently enough,

and left. Doyle stayed where he was for a moment, listening to Bodie’s footsteps, the door slam, and far off, a car engine exploding into life, roaring away.

He leaned his head against the kitchen cupboard, sick, tired, dizzy. Well, that was it then.

End of the affair.

PART 2
WILDER JUSTICE

ANSON LOOMED BEHIND HIM AND WHISPERED IN HIS EAR, “I HEAR YOUR PARTNER’S gone seriously off the rails.”

“Yeah?” Doyle was pulling off his black balaclava, stuffing it in his locker, getting out his biking helmet, gloves. “Well, for what it’s worth, Rob, his scores were still up on 95% of the section.”

Anson wasn’t impressed. “Word is, they’re considering standing him down.”

“Well, if they do—” he turned and gave Anson a blazing smile—“play your cards right and it could be you an’ me, sunshine.”

Anson shuddered visibly. Word had it that Doyle was only one degree less off the wall than his psycho partner. Doyle was rumoured to be holding the partnership together—just. Cowley’s favourite team were flying wild, close to the wind, at present. But they were still flying.

Doyle didn’t watch Anson go; he was looking forward to getting home, stripping off his clothes, getting into a hot bath. Afterwards he had in mind a pizza out with his current girl, followed by a session at one of the all-night dance clubs—

“Ray.”

He straightened without hurrying, turned around to see Bodie there. Doyle regarded him for a moment: Bodie was tense, preoccupied, wired-up, and whatever it all meant it sure as hell wasn’t helping his field performance.

“You wanna watch yourself, mate,” he commented, not unkindly. “Cowley and Macklin got their eye on you. Just a friendly word of advice.”

“Yeah, right. Doyle—I need you to do me a favour.” Bodie’s nostrils were flared, his eyes sparkling, fairly fizzing with energy.

“What sort of favour?” They were walking out now, towards the carpark. Doyle turned towards his Norton, slipped on his gauntlets and straddled the

broad leather seat, swinging his helmet by the strap as he waited for Bodie’s reply. Bodie patted the saddle behind him.

“I want you to ride in a race for me.”

“What for?”

“No questions, Doyle. For old times sake—okay?” Still on that high of suppressed excitement, agitation, Bodie gave him some scant details and took himself off, leaving Doyle pensive, restless.

Old times, eh.

Oh, Bodie. What went wrong with us?

“SHUSAY’S opinion is that Bodie is very sick.”

Kate Ross spread her hands. “Haven’t I been telling you that?”

Cowley gave her a sharp glance, and made his reply as wordily pedantic as he could. “Indeed you have. But I feel I must point out, Doctor, that although you originally attributed 3.7’s emotional problems to his inability to come to terms with his sexual relationship with 4.5, the termination of that relationship has not brought about any noticeable improvement.”

“In fact, it seems to have accelerated some sort of a crisis,” Kate Ross agreed with him calmly, noting that Cowley sounded almost aggrieved. Just as if he thought that psychiatrists actually planted the emotional problems instead of simply reporting on what they found.

“So this doesn’t surprise you?”

“Bodie has a lot of conflicts to resolve before he can make any sensible decisions about his life, and at the moment, that doesn’t appear to include 4.5. In fact, both of them are pursuing new affairs—heterosexual ones—”

“Ah yes,” Cowley agreed. “Miss Jennifer Black...

Unremarkable, I thought.”

“I don’t imagine he has any long term plans for her.” *A smokescreen. Like Doyle’s girl, and the one before, and the one before that. A little cipher of normality, safe and unthreatening.*

“Women’s Lib would not approve of 3.7 and 4.5,” she said aloud, and Cowley darted a piercing glance at her.

“What’s your outlook on all this, Doctor?”

“I’m not in the business of haphazard prophecy, Major Cowley,” Kate Ross said severely.

Cowley sighed and resisted the temptation to criticise: for all he knew, he would have liked to say, 3.7 and 4.5 had been handling the matter in their own way without interference, however well meaning. Now what was he left with—? One good man, the best, a handsbreadth away from compulsory standby status; and one step away from the breakup of the best team he had ever had.

Sad times.

“Do you feel he harbours any resentment towards you?”

Doyle shifted in his chair. “I don’t know... Not on the face of it.” *He damn well would if he knew Cowley’d dragged it out of me that I wouldn’t be including him in my projected assault team—*

“And yet, in some ways, nothing seems to have changed—”

“Well, not for the better, no,” Doyle agreed ironically.

“—taking, for instance, the matter of the water pistol—”

Doyle groaned, hands flying up to rummage in his hair, tired of this one. “Look, we’ve gone over this before. He didn’t mean anything by it. It was a *joke*, for chrissake. I didn’t take it the wrong way or anything. Just Bodie’s odd sense of humour, thassall.”

The look she gave him was very direct. “You say you didn’t take it the wrong way. I’d say perhaps you did...if you accepted it as a simple joke.”

“Don’t tell me it had some complex hidden message. That’s the trouble with you lot, everything does. If I blew my nose you’d trace it back to something happened when I was five, wouldn’t you?”

“I can’t believe you’re so naive, 4.5, that you don’t see the symbolism,” she replied quite coldly.

“Look, you’ve spent a lot of time this year convincin’ me that Bodie really doesn’t like me all that much. Well, okay, I’m convinced. So when he

shoots me with a water pistol, what he’d really like to do is shoot me for real, is that it? Well okay, I’ll buy that. If it keeps you happy.”

Kate Ross only shook her head. “You’re still missing the point, 4.5. And since quite frankly I don’t see any chance at all of matters improving before 3.7 resolves this current crisis of emotion—one way or the other—I see no virtue in continuing. All your reports confirm you as fit for duty. Mine will concur. This interview is terminated.”

She spoke these last words into her microphone, then snapped it off. Still he lingered, wandering over to the window, then back again to perch on her desk. Dark head down, she was writing furiously. He couldn’t decipher it.

Couldn’t decipher any of it. He only knew Bodie’s obsession with these bikers, with the red-headed girl, was bad news, indicative of some deeper blacker turmoil within.

“Are you worried about Bodie?” he asked her abruptly.

“Very seriously worried,” she replied. Well, that was reassuring.

And as he reached the door her last words rang out behind him:

“If you want my advice—”

“It would be?” he said without turning.

“Don’t let him out of your sight.”

Over a half of bitter in the pub Doyle frowned to himself, replaying the interview in his head over and over, worrying. *“Don’t let him out of your sight.”*

All very well for her to say. He didn’t see that much of Bodie any more. Doyle had his own life now which he pursued with energy, and Bodie wasn’t a part of it any longer. He saw that as much Bodie’s choice as his own.

Mind you, he missed it. Wasn’t a day went by when he didn’t look at Bodie and be taken by surprise; his body remembered, too well, even though his intellect said no. Remembered the days he could throw out any little spark and Bodie would catch fire from it.

The sex had been magic: but what else did they have?

Well, what else was there.

Doyle did not even know, any longer, just what he was looking for.

“Do you think he’d have killed me?”

Bodie was referring to Cowley, walking away from them at this moment, getting further away all the time.

“Yeh, I reckon he might have.” Doyle crouched over, recovering his breath.

Bodie exhaled, long and hard. “And since he didn’t—” Bodie turned to look at him, not really taking him in, very far away.

“Since he didn’t, *I’m* going to bloody well kill you!” Doyle exploded.

Bodie clearly didn’t understand this, looking at him as if he’d flipped, which was ironic, considering.

“Look, Bodie, I didn’t want to be any part of all this. It was *your* thing, your personal vendetta, your war, and I don’t pretend to understand any of it. But we’re—partners, so for godsake, I went with you some of the way. Nearly got myself killed for you in that stupid race—and just so you could score some sort of a point off a man with even less brain cells than you. And then I’m bloody stupid enough to throw in my lot with you, in *your* fight, when I see you’re way outnumbered. Well, just whose fuckin’ side did you think I was fighting on, eh Bodie? Eh?” He punched a vicious finger into Bodie’s chest, eyes positively sparking with fury. “I was risking a heck of a thumping, I knew that—eight big mindless thugs and only two of us. Of *us*. Hah. And then I hadn’t even reckoned on being swiped by the bloke I was wading in to help.”

Bodie had cottoned by now, was shaking his head. “Didn’t hit you—did I?”

“Of course you did, you dumb crud. Walloped me with a bloody great tree trunk when I was coming in to help.”

Bodie’s navyblue gaze was focused right on him, very direct, very serious. He rubbed the side of his nose as he said, “I swear it, Ray, I never meant to hit you. Just lost my head a bit, that’s all.” He tried to smile but it didn’t work as a smile, came across more as a cry for help.

Doyle grumbled, “Yeah, you’re not kidding. You need to get yourself together, you do, mate.” He glanced across at Cowley, deep in conference with Kate Ross. “An’ funnily enough I know just the person to help you.” Bodie looked that way and grimaced.

“I’m off,” Doyle said, leaning down, plucking his jacket off the ground. As he came back to the vertical he glanced at his partner and caught his expression. Bodie was pale, tightlipped, face set. “Ah—don’t look like that,” Doyle said, voice dropping, but the eyes

which flicked up to meet his were still shadowed, haunted. Doyle moved in closer, the old, sick hunger in him, and he closed his fingers around Bodie’s muscular forearm. Bodie was trembling, deep and fast.

“*Bodie*.” Doyle enfolded him in a hard embrace, not caring if Cowley was watching. “Look, mate—if ever you need me—You know where I am.”

Bodie didn’t move at all, and didn’t move in his grasp; his nostrils flared a little, his lip curled as he looked down at Doyle. So Doyle let him go, slowly, and loped off through the woods to his car without looking back.

He thought about Bodie, that night, alone in his flat standing by the window, sipping at a beer, looking out into the night. Hell’s Angel. As an alter ego, it would have suited Bodie, whose alabaster skin and dark good looks were set off by black leather, huge gauntlets, a great bike throbbing between his straddling thighs. Anyone’s dream man, Bodie would be. So much power: and a soul touched by shadows. Magic. The black kind.

And not only that: Bodie intrigued him, yes, because he had that dark vein of otherness somewhere in him: but at the same time he was funny, amusing, silly in a way which appealed to Doyle. And in bed, he had seemed to answer Doyle’s every want, not always in a dramatic kind of way, just naturally, as if it came easily to him. Bodie and himself: the ideal partnership, in bed and out of it.

Doyle’s lips twisted in a savage little smile. Pity Bodie hadn’t seen it that way.

And yet, today, he had made the offer not out of desire but of simple pity. Bodie had looked so—alone.

But even tonight, Bodie didn’t come.

For the first time, Doyle knew he had lost Bodie, lost him for good.

DOYLE felt numbed, slowed down too much for any but the most mechanical of tasks; his insides felt heavy and tense with some dread that dragged him down so that he was dangerously close to drowning. Having followed him home Bodie said, “Make us a cuppa, mate,” and obedient even to the falsely normal tone of Bodie’s voice he trailed into the kitchen, picked up the kettle, took it to the tap, filled it, returned it to the hob.

His eyes felt full and heavy: his vision kept blurring, he had to keep blinking to sweep the haze

away. He took down one mug, and then another, and then simply stood there, disbelieving. She had left him. She really had. He had loved her so much, and he had told her that over and over. And still she had left him.

"You look all in, mate. I'll do that." Bodie's voice came from behind him, rough with sympathy, and he took the mugs from Doyle and began to put together drinks with an efficiency Doyle could only detachedly admire. He kept breathing in, trying to ease the deep, sick feeling in his belly, but it stayed there like a lump of stone.

"Siddown," Bodie said to him. "Drink this." Some man on the radio was bemoaning in lugubrious tone—*somewhere, somehow, somebody must have kicked you around some...* and that was exactly how he felt, just as if he had been kicked. Kicked hard in the guts by some flying punch, kicked and left for dead or dying from some unstoppable internal bleeding.

He sat, mind numb, body in dread, hands wrapped around the hot mug of coffee Bodie had set in front of him.

"You look done in, Ray," Bodie said again. "I'd get an early night if I were you."

Yes, well. Certainly there was no point in going out on the town to celebrate.

His eye caught sight of a mark on the table. Tomato sauce. Not ketchup—the real thing. They had had pasta last night—he had made it himself, whistling as he put it together in dashing chef's style. In return Ann had offered to clear up. Looking round, however, he could see that not only could she not cook, cleaning didn't seem to be her forte either: he jumped to his feet, fetched a cloth, and wiped the table to remove the errant sauce stain, and then began on the cooker, which had either been done very sketchily or not at all. But then, they had had better things to do last night.

Bodie was watching him uneasily. "Look, Ray, don't bother with that. I'll have a bit of a cleanup for you if you like. You just go and get your head down."

"Comes to something, dunnit," he said, head down, still scrubbing. "When two bachelors make a better job of it than some bird."

"Yeh, well, struck me she was far too much of a lady to get her hands dirty."

Doyle absorbed that, heard the note in Bodie's voice and something slipped into place for him:

"*Look, I like Ann, okay.*"

Bodie had been lying. He didn't like Ann, not anything about her.

"Reckon you've put your finger right on it, Bodie. Yeah, that's it. An' if she'd have stayed with me, she'd have got her hands dirty all right, wouldn't she?"

CI5, killing people, blood on his shirts that she'd have to wash out.

"—And she wouldn't have liked that." Head hanging down, cloth stilled, he stared at the cooker.

Bodie said, looking past him, "Can't really blame her for that, Ray. How many of us find someone who sticks around for long? It's not a job you can leave behind when you come in the door."

"S true," Doyle agreed. He chucked the cloth into the sink. "And I obviously wasn't worth giving it much of a try."

Bodie said with an edge to his voice, "Not to her, no." And when Doyle turned hard on his heel to catch his gaze Bodie faced him out, bleak and determined. "Well, someone had to say it. Truth is, Doyle, anyone could see little Miss Prissy Knickers wasn't going to hang around longer than it took her to work out she wasn't going to be able to change you into the sort of bloke she really wanted—9-5, white collar, 20K a year and a membership to the golf club. She wasn't right for you, Ray. Writing was on the wall from the start."

"Oh yeah," Doyle said, and repeated it, anger, something, making him shiver violently again and again; "And what would you know about it? *Did you bug my bedroom?*"

Bodie met his eyes, unflinching. "I didn't need to see she was a bitch. Just a bitch, Ray. Like that other frigid cow you hooked yourself up to—one who made out you were too low to touch her tits."

For a moment Doyle's mind flashed back to that night in Scotland: Susanna might have been frigid, he and Bodie had paid her back for that, rolling riotously in the muck till dawn. And had she guessed—? No; but she had sensed—something, and he hadn't cared, had flung that not-caring in her face: *you may not want me, darlin', but someone else, someone better, does.*

Until Bodie had dumped him too, of course.

A long line of failed affairs: Susanna. Shelley. Sophie. Annabel. Claire. All the way down to the only ones who had really mattered to him: Bodie. And Ann.

He turned away from Bodie deliberately, saw himself in the mirror, watching himself without mercy: pale face, marked at one cheek by violence, too-wide eyes huge and overbright; unless you liked the frog resemblance, nothing special, not in any way.

"Yeah, should be used to it by now, shouldn't I?"

Quite right, Bodie. No-one hangs around with me for long, christ, you'd think I'd have learned that by now. Should learn to keep me 'ands to meself, shouldn't I?"

He saw Bodie's sudden movement behind him, and Bodie said sharply, without pity, "We all go through it, mate. Listening to you, you'd think no-one else knew what it was like."

"Oh yeah?" Bodie, who only had to lift an eyebrow to bring the hordes running, any female you cared to name, Glad the tea lady, Mike the night porter, Cowley who loved him better than Scotland. Doyle looked at Bodie with a sort of envy, really looked at him, took in the classic beauty of his face and his eyes, the strength of his hands and his body—"Don't pretend *you* know what it's like, mate, because I'll just throw up on you. It never 'appens to you."

He had bid for Bodie, in the past. And lost.

"Of course it does," Bodie said, cold, distant. His eyes swept darkly over Doyle. "You think you're the only person who falls for someone who couldn't give a toss for you when it comes down to it?" He waved a hand in the air. "Ah, come off it, Doyle. Rough justice, I'd say myself."

For the life of him Doyle couldn't see why Bodie was taking this line with him. It really was almost funny. Still, better anger than sympathy, any day. In another moment they'd be fighting, and that was just what he felt like. Yeah: slug it out with Bodie, nice end to the day. He'd get to sleep anyway; one good punch to the jaw from Bodie's solid fist should do it.

"Thanks, Bodie. Ever thought of joinin' the Samaritans? You'd be a natural. I'm telling you." He went to the fridge. Wrenched it open. Knelt and looked inside. "Only trouble is, you're supposed to be talking us away from the the overdose, not recommending a good all-night chemist." Two cans of beer at the back. He reached in.

Bodie was right there behind him, voice unexpectedly low, almost gentle. Trying—"Look. I'm sorry Ann's gone. I know you're feeling terrible. I wish—"

"—what?" Doyle prompted. Carrying the cans he rose to his feet and turned to find himself pinioned in the circle of Bodie's arms. And at the last moment Bodie did not move away. *I wish—*

Instant reaction. Doyle struck him off with a force and a violence which threw them apart like 10,000 volts.

"Ah, Bodie—*don't start all that again.*"

It had cost him, after all, so many nights and days of struggle to come to terms with it, to realise that there was going to be no happy ending, that Bodie

was never going to walk back in the door, hang his hat on the hook and come back to him. One little touch...was all it took to remind him. Bitterness. Hurt. And loss.

Strangely it was those very things he saw mirrored in Bodie's eyes, before Bodie took a deep breath and struck at him—

"You little bastard. I wasn't coming on to you. I was just—trying to be nice to you, for godsake."

"Nice," he sneered, rocking on his feet. "Well, don't bother on my account. I'm not used to it. Shock might kill me."

He paced around the kitchen, so restless, simmering, dangerously close to the sort of outburst he knew he'd regret and didn't care, announcing to the room: "What a bloody perfect day. The girl I wanted to marry dumps me. And my ex-lover offers me a mercy fuck."

He was flirting with danger now, actually courting Bodie's fury, but Bodie had his own little spurt of violence well in hand now, answering him quietly, black eyes ranging over him, "Yeh, I know. Hell of a day for you. Have a drink, Ray. Get to bed."

Bodie took the cans from him and set them down, reaching instead for the whisky bottle on the shelf. He poured them both a tumbler-full, and Doyle watched him, feeling suddenly desperately, threateningly tired. Trouble was, anger kept him going, flying out on a high taut line; but Bodie's softness he knew he could not take, he was in danger of letting go, to fall. To throw himself into Bodie's arms for the sheer...comfort of it. He sensed it was there, his but for the asking. It would be so easy.

And then he would lose every last shred of pride he had and weep out loud.

Not possible. Not allowed.

The drink helped a bit; he wandered, glass in hand, into his little lounge, sat on the settee where he and Ann had looked at photographs together. Before he had positively registered that some of the shivers which racked him were due to cold, Bodie was there throwing a sweater at him.

"You're blue. Not a pretty sight. Put that on." And Bodie sat down, safely on the other side of the room.

"I really loved her, you know," he said, struggling into the sweater.

"Yeh, I know."

"Why didn't she love me? Wouldn't have hurt her to try, would it?"

"These things happen."

"What do I do now?" He laughed, bitter, empty.

Bodie got up and filled his glass without being asked. Doyle drank it down and realised after a moment that Bodie was talking to him, answering his question:

“Give it a bit of time, eh? You’ll find someone else. One day.”

“No point to it though, is there? I keep on tryin’. Can’t do any more. And it always ends up this way.”

The alcohol released all his tight control in a rush; when he shut his eyes this time it was to stem the flow of angry tears. He felt the settee dip beside him and Bodie’s arm go around him.

“Look, it might seem that way tonight. You’re getting maudlin, Ray, it’s the drink. Just because one tight little bitch dumped on you doesn’t mean you’re high and dry forever. Just means she wasn’t right for you. I keep telling you.” Bodie’s voice was very warm, very close.

He leaned against Bodie’s shoulder. Pressed his lips tightly together to stop the involuntary quiver of his mouth. “Look, I wanna tell you something. When I think about it—you want to know something, Bodie? No-one’s ever loved me. What do I do wrong?” Steeped in his own misery, a parade of people who had failed to love him stretching back as far as his mother and sisters, he took a while to realise that Bodie had left him. He opened his eyes to see Bodie standing in front of the window, back turned to Doyle, legs apart, hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Bodie—?”

Bodie said without turning: “You’re a selfish bloody bastard at times, aren’t you?”

“What?” Doyle said. His eyes and his nose and his throat were blocked with tears. He dragged his sleeve over his eyes and sniffed.

“Look, I’ve got feelings too, you know. Though sometimes I wondered if you ever knew that...”

“What are you on about?” The change of pace had left him utterly confused.

“Obviously I wasn’t in her class. But didn’t I count?”

“Count what?” He felt dizzy now, befuddled.

Bodie twisted around then and looked at him, darkly enigmatic. “Didn’t I count at all? I loved you.”

Doyle’s heart began to pound unexpectedly, turning over sickly in his chest. He gazed at Bodie without saying anything. Bodie continued, looking at him, through him, into the past, “May not have been what you wanted. I know that. But you can’t have it all ways. Can’t sit here moaning *no-one’s ever loved me* and expect me to nod my head and sweetly agree. Because I haven’t forgotten...though

maybe you have.”

A new shock: he felt number than ever. An arrowstrike right in his heart: he would not feel the pain of it till later.

“I never knew you—”

Bodie interrupted him harshly. “For chrissake, Doyle. Of course you *knew*.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Ah, come off it, Ray. Everyone knew. Cowley knew. Kate Ross knew. Wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a note on it in the Kremlin somewhere. The whole bloody world knew.”

“Well how the fuck was I supposed to know? You never said anything.”

Bodie was looking at him, eyebrow quirked, a little quizzical, as if not quite sure whether Doyle was having him on or not. “Look, Doyle, I didn’t need to stand singing under your window for you to get that I was hung up on you in a big way.”

“Look—I’m telling you—I *never knew*.”

Bodie tossed down the rest of his drink, harshly. “Well, now you do.”

Doyle looked at him, quite silent. Bodie met his eyes in a reckless, devil take it all sort of way. “Might as well spell it out for you, since your brain seems to have switched itself off. When I say, *loved you*, I’d have lain down and died for you. Come to that I still would.” He tipped up his glass again, found it empty, and looked into it, frowning as he said quietly, “Is that good enough for you? You didn’t win her, but you had me. Maybe you don’t reckon that counts for much, like I said. But there it is.”

Bodie’s voice was so quiet Doyle could hardly hear him. He couldn’t seem to think of anything to say. “I never guessed.”

Bodie cast him a look of irritation. “Don’t keep saying that.”

“Why did you ditch me then?” Doyle said thickly. He got to his feet and took the bottle from Bodie. Bodie didn’t let go of it. They stood there holding it between them.

“Get real, Doyle. Had to stop sometime. You were just leading me on, it was just a bit of fun to you.”

“I—” Doyle started, and shut his mouth on it, too fuddled to order his thoughts into coherent speech.

“So you’ll understand,” Bodie said smoothly, “not having managed to get over you entirely, I wasn’t too thrilled when you announced undying love for little Miss Prim, stars in your eyes, opening your big mouth and expecting me to give you a sympathetic ear. Knew *I* couldn’t have you, you didn’t want me,

but that didn't make it any easier for me watching her dangling you on a string."

Yet he had said nothing. Been expected to align himself on Doyle's side and fight George Cowley for the privilege of her hand. Even come round here tonight, because Doyle was miserable, because Doyle needed someone and had not had the grace to say so. And that must have been the bitterest thing of all: watching Doyle's distress because he loved Ann Holly and could not bear that she had left him.

But Bodie had had the courage to do it.

Was that love—?

He was so desperately tired. Tired and sad and drunk. He rubbed his eyes with his hands, fiercely, alone in the middle of the floor.

"Go to bed, Ray. I'll see if I can charm George into letting you have the day off tomorrow." Bodie's voice was getting fainter; he was leaving.

"And if you can't?" he yawned, swaying, asleep on his feet.

"Then it's business as usual, sunshine."

ALMOST usual, anyway. No day off granted, Doyle looked at Bodie sideways once or twice and wondered if he had imagined it.

Well, it made a perverse kind of sense, he could just about see it, how Bodie's longing had reversed itself and denied itself so that it would never show. Rejection hurt. Doyle could testify to that.

Too raw, too vulnerable. Too proud. Too many failures in the past, Marikka, Claire. Yes, you could see why Bodie hadn't exactly laid it on the line.

Doyle hefted the pint up from the bar counter and drank deeply, thoughtfully. The barman dropped change into his hand and Doyle muttered a syllable of thanks.

"*Everyone knew.*"

But he had not.

Had Kate Ross tried to tell him? All but written it down for him? He didn't think so. Highly unethical, that would be, and she was nothing if not relentlessly by-the-book. But she was, however, always telling him tartly that he was *missing the point*. Probably it had all been there for him, if his eyes had opened just a little wider.

"Penny for 'em."

Doyle started. Murphy, big and blue-eyed, swung himself onto the stool next to him and grinned. Dark and handsome. Like Bodie. Only unlike.

"Buy you a pint, Ray?"

"Thanks." Doyle rapidly lowered the level of beer in his glass, swallowing fast.

"You okay?" Murph asked, studiedly casual. Instantly Doyle's senses flipped onto alert. Murphy was here to check up on him. Make sure he wasn't drinking himself into oblivion.

"Oh yeah. Fine. Just another bird, wasn't she, when all's said and done? Plenty more on the tree."

"Good lad," Murphy said with satisfaction.

"Thanks, Barney." He handed over the money and lined up another pint next to Doyle's near-empty one.

"Yeah," Doyle said, "After all, they're all the same, aren't they, when the light's out?" He drained the first pint and closed his hand around the one Murphy had bought him, acknowledging it with a "Cheers."

"Cheers," Murphy said. "That's my boy. Go out and knock 'em dead."

"What, the way I always do?" Doyle agreed caustically. It was on his mind to ask Murphy—

"*Everyone knew*"

—but then again.

"Seen Bodie anywhere?" Murphy was asking, obviously psychic, head swivelling from side to side.

"We're not joined at the hip, y'know." Doyle heard his own voice snap out and catch Murph unawares. Well, so be it. The other man had done his duty: here Doyle was, on CI5 premises, ungassed, undrugged, undead. He fell into a silence, frowning as he stared at his glass.

"Well, better be off now," Murphy said kindly, uneasily, sensing the shutters closing. He finished his beer quickly. "Don't mind, do you? Promised Stuart a game of pool. Join us if you want."

"Thanks," Doyle said, not intending to.

And where was Bodie, then?

Still freezing him out, obviously.

Par for the course.

DOYLE awoke from a shattering dream in which Bodie's mouth, artificially reddened, surrounded his cock in a scarlet 'O'.

Or maybe it was his own mouth around Bodie's cock. Either way it had lit unholy fires in him; he finished the job with a few trembling strokes, his whole body tensed and hushed and thrilled as the easy come shot away from him into his own fist.

He lay with his heart thudding, hand flung up over his eyes. Wonderful. A bizarre erotic dream about Bodie wearing lipstick on the morning he was due his regular quarterly interrogation with Dr Kate

Ross. Word had it she was psychic—well, she was in for a treat then, wasn't she?

He yawned as he threw back the covers, every pulse in his body echoing still with a far-off sweet and sensual note. In the shower he washed the sweat and sex away.

Lipstick. He couldn't ever remember adorning himself with lipstick prior to blowing Bodie, though it was possible: they had done some pretty weird things when the fancy took them. He did remember Bodie finding some stuff under his couch—rolled there from some bird's handbag—and outlining Doyle's nipples in a shocking shade of crimson. He couldn't remember what, if anything, it had done for him, but Bodie had obviously found it a turn-on. And Bodie unleashed was always such a thrill to him, that little nagging sense that Bodie out of control was dangerous...

He shivered as he stepped, naked and dripping, out of the shower feeling defiantly reckless. Let Kate Ross sort it out. He was just in the mood for her today.

But as always, the cold reality of her presence imposed on him the usual sense of obligation: a duty to be honest, or the whole thing was a cheat and only himself to lose in the end. Maybe she *hypnotised him* or something. Whatever it was she did to him it obviously didn't work on Bodie. Bodie who had dodged every which way to avoid any embarrassing disclosures. In any case, she smiled at him this morning, pleased with him, nodding.

"Field scores—exceptional. Fitness rating—in the superior range. And—" she paused, letting the paper drop pointedly to the desk— "*partnership* scores, the highest of the division."

"Well, that's something." He could not repress a grin of pride.

"I'll be making a formal note that the reteaming of yourself with 3.7 has been a success."

"Right—"

"—that's if," she amended, "what I learn from you today doesn't conflict with those statistical findings."

"Right," he agreed, more faintly.

"Statistics maketh not the man," she sermonised gaily, drawing forth a scathing stare from Doyle: christ, but she was frisky today.

Her manner became at once more serious. Not unfriendly, just getting on with the job in hand.

"Perhaps you can tell me why you think there's been such an allround improvement? What's changed in

your life since I last saw you?"

What's changed. A confusing jumble of thoughts popped up into his head. He tried to sort them into some semblance of order and meaning.

"Things have settled down..." he said in the end, vaguely: "The job's—okay; doesn't get any easier, but maybe you learn to deal with it better..."

"Oh, 4.5. A man who reads Hegel? I'm sure you can do better than that."

She certainly seemed to be in a rare old humour today; even verging on the playful! Unbelievable. He ventured a smile at her: just a small one, and was a little disappointed when her expression cooled unmistakably.

"Well, 4.5. I have no worries at present regarding your mental health in respect of your ability to perform your job."

"That's all right, then." He made as if to go.

"So let's move on." And he sank back with a theatrical groan.

"For one minute I thought you were going to let me get away early. Would've been nice. Cowley doesn't allow lunch *and* therapy." His eyes fell on her small rosebud mouth, and lingered there. Lipstick a dark plum colour. Very different from the dream Bodie's. An erotic flash tingled in his nerves as the shadow of the dream touched him; for a moment, he was fully taken by the fanciful vision of Kate Ross going down on him, neat hair tousled, icy skin a little flushed as she mouthed the tip of him—gulped down greedy spurts of come—

Well, are you psychic, Madam Ross?

Evidently her powers in that direction had been overrated, because she remained quite unmoved by any visionary erotica, her composure exact as it ever was as she waited for him to speak.

He had completely forgotten the question, anyway.

...For Kate Ross' part, she was noticing that agent 4.5, name Raymond Doyle, was looking more relaxed today, more like the days of old before he had learned the rules, when he had tried to flirt with her: give her that smile of his which would set out guileless, then metamorphosise into pure or impure seduction: he couldn't help it, she didn't blame him, it was just his nature to try it on. That little, devastating smile which would crease his cheek, the droop of heavy lashes over those eyes—her mother would have called them *bedroom eyes*, and Kate Ross had long ago decided that nature had designed Ray Doyle as her surefire secret

weapon in case the human race ever looked in danger of extinction. It really wasn't his fault he was always out there spreading his sperm around: it was Nature's. Nature had formed Ray Doyle deliberately to be irresistible. It was hard to put your finger on exactly what it was. But, for example: whatever he wore he looked good in it, whether smart, or scruffy as today, in well-washed navy sweatshirt and faded pale denims: he smelt delicious, looked enticing from whatever angle, even when he was tired, even when he was angry, even when he wasn't trying. She would bet money that no-one could resist him for long. She would bet money that no-one could be in the same room with him for long and not have sex cross their mind. Whatever it was, Doyle had it. In spades.

"Sorry," he was saying. "What did you ask?"

She had forgotten, too. She looked down at her notes.

"What's changed, 4.5? What's good in your life at the moment? Tell me about it."

"I wouldn't say anything's *good*, particularly. But I suppose I've come to terms with things, that's all."

"What things?"

"Losing Ann. Losing Bodie..."

Now they were getting there. "Yes, you were engaged for a short while, weren't you?"

No attempt at commiseration, he noticed, and thank god for that. "Only to Ann," he said caustically. "Me an' Bodie, somehow we never got round to it. Couldn't decide on the ring, you see."

She took no notice at all of the sarcasm. "Do you see the two things in the same light?" When he didn't immediately reply she continued, quoting from her notes, "'*Losing Ann. Losing Bodie*'. Let's take Miss Holly for a start. What would you do, 4.5, if she came back tomorrow? Let's say, she'd had time to think—? Realised she'd made a mistake—?"

He opened his eyes wide at the unconscious cruelty of it. "I'd be over the moon," he said slowly, deliberately. *You stupid cow*.

"No second thoughts, then, on your part? The engagement would be on again—" she held up a hand— "Don't say anything for a moment. Just think about it for a little while."

Inwardly mutinous, Doyle shut his eyes, crossed his arms and sulked. But after a while of calm silence he grew bored of the inner view of his eyelids and summoned her up, after all.

There she was. Cool, pale, beautiful. Cool even in bed; it was half her fascination, engaging all of his

most aggressively male instincts in the battle to one day break through that moonlight cool and bring forth all her inner warmth and passion—

And what a typical male fantasy *that* was. He could see it now: she would be a Susanna. How long would it be before they got back from the opera or some cultural book-binding event, and he would turn to her, in love, to be met with '*don't let's spoil our beautiful evening, Ray*'—

Well yes, she was essentially cold. And would not hesitate to be cruel: he knew that already.

Would he really want to spend a lifetime with her?

And the damning answer came: no.

Three years, perhaps, before he was looking elsewhere for the warmth and passion denied him at home: she would not look outside, not she, she'd be too taken up with their two pale cool children, George and Olivia, and her part-time career, and her evening classes in interior design. So then there would be an amicable divorce, conducted with the same impeccable civility and restraint threaded throughout her entire life: they would lose touch almost straight away, write one another off as one of those mistakes, she still up there on her higher plane of art and culture, himself slipped back again, down into the underworld of his life that was not hers, death, blood, sweat, lust, *life*.

He opened his eyes wide as it all flashed before him like a dream, and it could have been true. Feeling Kate Ross' curious gaze on him did nothing for his temper: he felt disloyal, to Ann perhaps, but most of all to his own eager idealistic self which had begged Ann to marry him as if his one chance of happiness depended on it.

"What do you want me to say?" he snapped, and she deflected him calmly.

"I don't *want* you to say anything. I just asked you to think about it."

And then his temper broke as he slammed both hands down on the table in front of him. "All right. It would never have worked. So it's turned out for the best. Then why do I still feel so bloody lousy about it?"

Kate Ross regarded him unsmilingly. "Only you can answer that, 4.5."

He was ready for that one. "Five bloody years of training, and you can't give me an answer?"

"—because it wouldn't help you if I did."

"Try me." His eyes were bright with challenge.

"The only conclusions worth anything at all are the ones you draw for yourself. Of all the people I

work with in here, I'd say you were the closest to understanding that, 4.5."

"Doesn't say much for the rest of 'em, then," he jeered.

"But you know I'm right."

He took a deep breath. "All right. Write off Ann. So now you're going to tell me—no. Now you're going to *help* me *discover* just how much better off I am without Bodie?"

"Well, that depends, doesn't it? At the beginning of this conversation you seemed to equate the two circumstances: *losing Ann*. *Losing Bodie*. But are they in fact the same?"

Her calm manner, unchanged throughout his own fluctuating moods, was doing its job, bringing him down rapidly from the peak. He put his head in his hands, rested his eyes against his fingers for a brief moment.

"I can't think any more. Tell me."

She took pity on him: "What I'm suggesting, what I want you to think about, is the reasons for you throwing yourself so wholeheartedly into a relationship you can see now would never have worked."

Why had he?

The answer came clear and cold: because he had been burned by Bodie, that was why. On the rebound. What a cliché. But like all the best clichés, it had the merit of authenticity.

"I took the next best thing, after Bodie, that came along. Just to prove—"

"It's a very easy trap to fall into," she soothed. "Quite typical. And some people, of course, never recover from that. It becomes a downward spiral, and it repeats itself over and over again, falling from one failed relationship to the next without any real thought as to whether it might work or not: as if it's enough to be seen to be succeeding, for however brief a time; and, are you listening to me 4.5? We don't want that for you. You can do better than that for yourself."

He sighed. All the weight of the world on his soul.

"So, as in many things, it's time to look *backwards*. To sort out what went wrong there, before you can move on to the future. So let's go back, 4.5. To Bodie." It was so rare for her to use their names that he looked up at her, his face blurred with chagrin. "After you and 3.7 put an end to your sexual relationship, there was a marked decline in your psychological profiles."

"Oh, that's a surprise," he said sarcastically. "Bet you needed to look that one up." His gaze canted

upwards to the ranks of thickest tomes around the wall, detailing between them, no doubt, every smallest facet of human nature and its cause. Including the fact that a final, terminating row with your lover could send you into a temporary decline.

"Did you miss the physical side of your relationship?"

"Yeh," he drawled, offensive. "Never been to bed with Bodie, have you? Ah, shame." Bright, bold eyes sought out hers, attempted to engage her in provocation. But she simply looked at him calmly, dispassionately.

"But you made no effort to resume it."

"No."

"Why was that?"

His hands gripped tight, tighter, on the corner of the desk, a small gesture she did not miss, weighing his obvious tension in her mind against the benefits of continuing. But it was time, really. All this had gone on long enough.

He said at last: "In some ways, it seemed the best thing..."

"Yes?" Looking at her, he got no clues as to her thoughts. He went on: "It was goin' the wrong way—we didn't see eye to eye about a lot of things—And I didn't realise—"

"You didn't realise what?"

"Look, I didn't realise Bodie saw it as anything more than an easy lay nights he was too lazy to go out and pull some bird."

"Is that how *you* saw it?" she probed, gently.

He gave her a smile, flirtatious again, even. "Yeah, sometimes."

"And at other times?"

"—other times—" he shrugged. "I dunno... I had this feeling, stupid really, we'd be all right together. Just the two of us, you know? No-one else. But Bodie never seemed to want any more than what we had. I mean, he fancied me. Oh yeh, he *wanted* me all right. But somehow I never guessed it was any more than that for him."

She was careful not to let anything show, not by so much as a flicker of one eyebrow. "And was it more than that?"

He flicked a glance up at her. "Well, you should know. Can't see why he'd lie about it. According to Bodie everyone knew, including you." He didn't say it in an aggrieved sort of way: Doyle knew the rules. But it would have been only human of him to hold it against her.

So. When the breakthrough had come, it had been

that easy. Somehow, some time when she was not looking at them, not checking them, had her attention on some other problem from the many Cowley threw her way, Bodie had made that leap in the dark. Told Doyle what had been obvious to Kate Ross for many months. And found, she hoped, some peace.

"4.5." She recalled him from his thoughts. "We've made a lot of progress today: I think you'll find it useful. Just one more thing—"

She was looking at him quite nicely for her, not sympathetic exactly, but warmer than usual. Doyle suddenly had the impression that she liked him rather more than he had ever realised. It was enough to make him grin at her, leaning back and stretching in his chair, raking a hand through his hair. "Haven't I coughed up enough for you to get off on yet?"

"Just one more thing," she repeated. She had never, by word or implication, come close to this before. But it was time. Get him past this, and then he could move on by himself.

"Why did you and 3.7 decide to split up?"

He only looked at her, no grin now. She continued: "You had—not a perfect relationship, but a workable one. More workable, as we've seen, than the one you had with the woman you asked to marry you. You had regular sex together and very often you preferred that, both of you, to sex with your girlfriends. What went wrong, 4.5?"

He took a deep breath, but did not reply straight away.

"Can you tell me about it?" she asked, definitely gentle now.

"It's not easy..."

"Take your time."

He was frowning now, staring down at his own hand resting on the desk in front of him, tapping his fingers restlessly. "Bodie—couldn't handle it."

"Mm?" she said to encourage him after a moment.

"Well, you know he couldn't. You told me yourself he never could admit to you that he went to bed with me." He stared up at her, those strange green eyes narrow, focused. "He had a kind of thing about queers—poofers, call 'em what you like. My guess is, he couldn't stand to think of himself like that."

"Are you saying, you were 3.7's first male sexual partner—?"

A small, involuntary smile. "Oh no, very unlikely." The smile went out. "But you see, Bodie—and people like him, I've met 'em before—they think it's okay to—" Dr Ross smiled inwardly as she watched him scrolling down his vocabulary to find something

suitable for her—"to grab a bit of sex with another bloke. Quick and easy, no strings, no words if you don't want to bother with 'em. I expect Bodie was used to that. Army days, and all that. But—"

"But it wasn't like that?"

"Sometimes it was," he said directly. "And sometimes—"

She let the frowning reverie he had fallen into carry on for some time before she prompted him—"Sometimes?"

He roused himself, looked her unflinchingly in the eye. "I think Bodie was getting in too deep. And he couldn't take it. Ah, you know him. You know how he has to be alone. He has to be independent. Just that bit further out than everybody else. He was backing off, and I didn't want to let him. And then—" He looked at the window briefly, brought his gaze back to Kate Ross silently waiting, a little defiant, a little angry now. "We did a few—farout things. It worried Bodie. Disturbed him. He liked it—but then he didn't like it, if you know what I mean."

"Bondage?" she asked, perfectly cool. "The sexual politics of power?"

He was looking quite disconcerted. "Not really."

And she had it, just like that. "Or *gender*, perhaps?" Instantaneous. His eyes shot into narrowed slits, and she knew she had it. One nail, well and truly hit on the head.

The little silence that followed gave Kate Ross time for thought: *so, what was it then? I imagine—what do I imagine?* Raymond Doyle, tarted up a bit, would probably be irresistible to a man of 3.7's inclinations, and plenty more besides: he had that way, rare enough, of transmuting anything he wore into yet another elusive hint at his own ambiguous sexuality. And that was a thought in itself: possibly, probably, there had been some experimentation with female clothing, not an unusual fetish even in the quote, unquote '*normal*', and Doyle was not that. A line constantly drawn over and over in 4.5's psychosexual profile was of some gender ambiguity. Not that it worried 4.5 at all.

But it worried the hell out of Bodie. Oh yes, that must have been how it was. Bodie had liked the hint of thrilling perversity, Doyle dressing up for him, pretending to be a woman for him, or however it had been: he had liked it too much. Hated himself for it. Cut himself off from Doyle and kept away. It wasn't okay to love Doyle at all, and it certainly wasn't okay to love Doyle as some pseudo-woman.

All these things drew themselves in Kate Ross'

diamond-sharp mind like lightning flashing across the sky; and did not show in her face by so much as a flicker of her eye. She laid down her pen and allowed him a little smile. There he was, watching her, a little crease of worry between his eyes.

"I think we'll stop there."

Every taut nerve in Doyle slumped with relief, but he pulled himself up again quickly. "Unless there's anything else you want to tell me. Or ask me," she added.

The worry smoothed itself out, and the crease flashed instead to his cheek as a smile. "Plenty. But you wouldn't answer the questions I want to ask, would you?"

She ignored this and told him instead: "You're doing very well, 4.5. Really very well indeed."

"Yeah?" he said ironically. He was already on his feet, alert, fit, taut with energy. "Well, if you say so it must be true, mustn't it?"

Bodie was, if not exactly hanging around, not far away. He fell into step beside his partner on the white-pebbled drive between the ranks of cherry trees, still leafy green, as Doyle acknowledged him with a lift of the eyebrow.

"Get on okay?"

Doyle shrugged. "I dunno. How d'you tell?"

"Did you pass? is what I mean."

"It's not a test, Bodie, like you *pass* or *fail*."

"Oh, I think it is, Doyle," Bodie said, dark, enigmatic. "Whether you know it or not."

"In that case, I passed. In fact, she was panting over me today. So much, I was lucky to escape with all my clothes. Fancy coming for a run? Down the Brompton?"

"Yeah, later."

"We could go for a drink afterwards."

Bodie did not immediately reply. "Well?" Doyle prompted.

"Look, don't push it, Doyle. We'll do the run—okay?"

Evidently Kate Ross had wound him up more than he'd realised, because that made him snap, just like that, taut and fragile as a web of glass.

"I just asked you to go for a fucking *drink*, not any fucking thing else."

"And I said no, okay?" Bodie said coolly. "Don't make a big deal out of it, Doyle." And he lengthened his strides to pace on and away from Doyle, leaving him further behind with every step.

So that was how things were.

Doyle lingered behind, a lump of stone inside him, a chill around him in the pretty springtime air.

Kate Ross had misled him. There was no way back.

It was very late when Bodie rang the bell of Doyle's Tottenham Court Road apartment, certainly too late for any usual social call in any ordinary life, but then no such things applied to them. Doyle was barely awake, sliteyed, wearing a rumpled shirt and worn blue jeans, bare feet. He smelt of sweat and sleep and fading aftershave. Bodie followed him into the narrow hallway, turning to set the locks with automatic instinct, one which Doyle seemed to lack; he was forever forgetting to do it. He went through to the living room, pausing on the way outside Doyle's bathroom, where Doyle was standing flatfooted at the toilet, the torrential downpour evidence of more than a pint or two consumed earlier in the evening.

When Doyle came into the living room he threw himself into a chair and spread the fingers of his right hand over his eyes. Not in a dramatic sort of way; a tired, had-enough sort of gesture.

"You been drinking?" Bodie asked.

"Not really. Fell asleep. Come to call me on duty?" He didn't remove the hand from his eyes and his voice was blurry.

"Don't think you're fit for it, are you?" Bodie asked ironically. He slid himself to the back of his seat and picked up a magazine from Doyle's coffee table. He opened it at random. *Autocar*.

Doyle took the hand away. Ice in his eyes flaring across the room. "You really suggestin' I'm unfit for duty? That's a serious allegation, you know. Wanna take it any further?" Definitely contentious. Looking for a fight.

"All right, all right," Bodie returned mildly. "So I just broke into your beauty sleep, point taken."

Doyle glared. "Yeh. And if you've not come round here solicitin' my ninja skills, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me get back to it." Fully awake now, he looked over at his partner who had made himself very much at home, feet up on a footstool, deep inside the pages of *Autocar*.

"Just exactly what *are* you doing here?" he asked, and all the warning signs were on.

Bodie did not answer the question directly. "Had my session with the delightful Doctor Ross."

"Oh yeah. And you *passed*, of course." Steeped in irony.

Bodie laid the *Autocar* down, looked across at Doyle, all hard flippancy himself. "What did you expect? One of these days she'll give up trying to find anything wrong with me."

"Must be nice to be perfect. Only, of course, you don't tell her everything, do you? Very selective with the truth, I've heard."

Around the mouth Bodie was suddenly white. "That's professional indiscretion, Doyle. You wanna be careful if you don't want to lay her open to a nice malpractice charge."

Doyle tilted his head, and the slow contempt of the look he gave Bodie froze him into silence. Doyle was very soft as he said, "Oh, you needn't worry. She doesn't mention you much these days. Hardly at all. After all, you don't exactly figure large in my life any more."

Bodie said nothing.

"Enjoyed the run, though," Doyle added as if in afterthought, into the ugly silence.

Nobody said anything more for a while. Doyle, very tired, very depressed, tipped his head back on the settee. In the absence of the taunt of his gaze, Bodie's eye ran quickly over him, taking in the hollows of his throat above the opened shirt, the faded jeans soft with wear, the bare feet. Doyle's eyes opened then and trapped Bodie's watching him. Bodie looked away.

"Ah, don't worry, Bodie, I'm not about to make a pass at you." Doyle said, cynical with contempt. "I've got the message, okay? From you and everyone else."

Watching the sudden distance in his eyes Bodie said with a real anger, "Well, poor old Ray. I shouldn't worry about it, though. Might do you good to give it a rest for a while." Lately Doyle had been burning his way, at great speed, through an excessive number of women even for Doyle.

"Well, while we're on the subject," Doyle said, smiling still, eyes struck in steel, "there's something I want from you, been bugging me a lot lately."

"I don't owe you anything, Doyle." Bodie was on his feet now, angry.

Doyle was up there with him in one bound. "Oh no? Well, perhaps you don't, Bodie, I'm not going to argue with you. But—" he took a deep breath, lowered his eyes beneath his lashes, "—you *love* me, don't you. So you say. So you'll do it anyway."

Bodie turned away from him abruptly, hands stuffing into his pockets. "You're sick, Doyle."

"Oh, I don't think so. No more than anyone else. No more than you, anyway. *Love*." Doyle spat out the

innocent word. "Did I dream it? Did you say you loved me, for chrissake?" And when no answer came, "Did you, Bodie? *Did you say that?*"

Bodie turned to look him in the eye and his voice was low as he said:

"You know I did."

He had pushed Bodie for that. Had needed to. Needed to back Bodie into a corner and make him get it out into the open. But now he had, he found that after all it did not help: just opened up a new area to joust in. Doyle laughed bitterly. "And he says *I'm* sick. Loved me, did you? Oh yeah. I remember. Loved me so much you told one of your bloody birds that queers should be horsewhipped for filthy practices." Bodie had swung around, away from him: Doyle took one step nearer the broad hunched back. "Loved me so bloody much you denied for three years to Kate Ross that we'd ever gone to bed together. *Three fucking years*. Was it so horrible, Bodie? Eh? Was it? So disgusting you had to lie about it all the time?"

He shook his head into the resounding silence. "Loved me. Jesus."

Bodie's head was bowed: then he lifted it, chin up, to stare at the ceiling. He drew in a huge, shuddering breath before he said, "Ray, leave it. Please."

"You loved me enough to fuck me. Oh yeah, I remember that. And it was so good for you, it meant such a lot to you, that afterwards you kicked me in the teeth and dumped me. Isn't that right, Bodie?"

Bodie was very quiet, the timbre of his voice unrecognisable as he said, "You're remembering it wrong. It didn't happen like that."

Doyle sniffed. Rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. Wandered around a bit. He gestured with his hand. "Well, all right. Let's have your side of it. Amaze me, why not?"

Bodie looked at him very briefly, then turned away again. But not before the sadness, the bleakness of his expression hit Doyle like a stone in the face. "I came round to try and sort it out. Remember that? You were so angry. I didn't really know why. I thought it was because I—"

Doyle could not speak, did not try, still recovering from the look on Bodie's face. Bodie looked at him without seeing anything, and added quietly: "It doesn't matter now, anyway."

Bodie paced around restlessly, a hard, fit man, Paras-trained into a fighting, killing machine, body encased in black leather, heart encased in stone. Yet Doyle knew what he had seen in Bodie's eyes. And

what he had heard in Bodie's voice. What could words do, beside things such as these?

He buried his face in his hands. "I'm sorry."

Bodie stopped, looked at him, steady now. A wry smile tugged at his lips and was gone. "Sorry for what? It's not your fault you didn't feel the way I did. I never expected you to."

Doyle swallowed. He felt sick. Bleeding with pain, both Bodie's and his own. Bodie was looking at him now with worry narrowing his eyes, trying to work out what was going on in his head. "I was angry—" Doyle said, and stopped, and tried again. "I thought you hated me."

"Just because I never poured my heart out to Kate Ross?" Bodie sounded amazed.

"You were always going on about queers. I thought you were ashamed of me." No, that wasn't it. "Ashamed of us. But especially me. I was the one with all the wild ideas."

"I got used to it," Bodie said, hard and fast.

Doyle wanted, needed, to touch Bodie. To get close to him, step in and rest his weary head against the solid warmth of Bodie's shoulder. And all that would follow: he yearned for it with every beat of his heart.

Instead he turned away. Said without looking back:

"What now?"

And Bodie answered him, "I don't know."

"Well?" Cowley enquired irascibly, but Kate Ross shook her head.

"There's no easy resolution to this, you know. I can't believe you were expecting them to walk off into the sunset and start doing the shopping together." She sounded tart.

Cowley made a face of distaste, his bright eyes sharp as knives in the sun.

"Indeed not."

They were sitting together in his office. Despite appearances his mood must be generally favourable; he had gone so far as to offer her a nip of whisky, which she had accepted, and poured himself a meticulously identical amount.

She took a sip before saying, "Their professional partnership seems to be on a very stable course, however. Which should please you. The immediate crisis is over for them. Which way their personal relationship goes from here, well—" she indicated with a gesture of her hand that it hung precariously, tilting this way and that.

"Have you ever discovered the reasons behind all this?"

She shook her head, then changed it to a nod. "Something sexual, obviously. Many dark hints about Bodie getting in too deep, and not being able to handle it—"

"—I don't want to hear any more," Cowley said with even more marked distaste, some anatomically correct vision obviously forming horribly in his mind. Ross shot him a faintly scornful look and continued,

"—some incompatibility of gender attitude. I didn't want to press 4.5 too hard for details; he was getting fragile at that point."

"And who can blame him?" Cowley said acidly. "It can't be easy for them, having some woman doctor poking her nose constantly into the minutiae of their bedroom habits."

Dr Ross was nettled by this. "I wouldn't have to probe their bedroom habits, as you call it, one whit so intensively if it wasn't such a preoccupation of *theirs*," she said, tarter than a spring gooseberry by now. "3.7 and 4.5 both have extremely high sexual profiles: Doyle in particular, and Bodie's not far behind him. They both have what you might call dramatic personalities, they frequently see themselves five seconds away from an early death. Combinations don't come much more explosive than that. But it doesn't take all of your operatives the same way. With some of your people—more stable, well-balanced individuals—it's hardly ever necessary to discuss their sex lives at all."

That would annoy him. He was allowed to have a kick at the 3.7/4.5 team: no-one else was.

"Which of my people might that be?" Cowley demanded, prickling.

She was ready for him. "Anson. Murphy. Jax. Lucas. All individuals with a perfectly uncomplicated sexual attitude. Sex occupies exactly the right place in their lives, neither too much nor too little. I mention *your sex life?* to Murphy and he spends two minutes describing his latest girl, trips to the cinema, and how important it is to him to satisfy her in bed. Mention it to Ray Doyle and I know I'm in for half an hour of increasingly bizarre revelations about his thought-provoking sexual preferences." She paused, to give her next phrase dramatic emphasis: "But even *that's* preferable to Bodie: mention sex to Bodie, and that's it, after a bit of macho posturing he's gone, and it's deep silences and heavy sighs for the rest of the session." She took another gulp of whisky. "I don't believe there's another pairing in the A-squad

capable of anything like the tangle your favourite team have got themselves into.”

“Och, I don’t have favourites.”

She ignored this as pure tokenism. Everyone knew about Cowley and his Bisto Kids. “Well, at the moment they’re back on women again. Though what hope there is for them in that direction I really wouldn’t like to say—” She drained her empty glass, set it down, shaking her head. “—Two men who can take two pretty girls away for the weekend and then spend every moment they can in bed with each *other*: well.” She stood up, smoothing down her skirt.

“Is that what they get up to?” Cowley shook his head, more in awe than disapproval. “Well, thank you, Dr Ross. It all makes me glad, aye, very glad, that I’m not young again.”

A moment ago, there had been Bodie, easily and cosily making a cup of tea.

Now here they were, fighting for their lives with little on their side except what they could do for themselves..

Shattering glass. Shouts. Bullets whining around. All dropping to the floor. The girl on one side, Bodie and Doyle crawling to fit up their guns, grimaced, conferring at a rapid pace:

“Tactical withdrawal?”

“Tactical or strategic.”

“Have you *got* a strategy?”

Doyle grimaced over his gun, slotting in clips. “Might delay ’em a bit.”

Bodie, very on edge, snapping, “Can’t delay ’em without reinforcements!”

He didn’t need to say it. Obviously they were hopelessly outnumbered, from the sounds outside there could be ten, fifteen well-armed men. And what the bloody hell for? One poor whitefaced girl, crying in the corner, not because she was not brave; bravery was meaningless in a context such as this. Doyle crouched in a corner, turning it over and over in his mind, a sort of pattern almost there, almost—

“They want her dead. They want all of them dead, and quick. Maybe that’s the question: *why the big hurry?*”

Bodie did not care, did not even want to think about it. “If I’m going to die for a meaningless cause I want to go with a clear head—” Grim, brutal, he bashed in the window with the heel of his gun and began to let loose a fast steady stream of fire. The response was immediate, and terrifying: volleys of

answering fire, echoing and ricocheting around.

“Save it,” Doyle told him, an ugly look on his face.

And Bodie exploded at him, “Look, we can’t get out of here, why drag it out?”

Adrenalin protected him from disabling dread, but he knew Bodie was right: their number was up. Well, plenty had gone before them. They were as brave as any whose names adorned the roll of honour. Didn’t take any special talent to die. He and Bodie would be okay. And, at least, together.

“We’ve ’ad it,” he said prosaically, sorting out ammo clips, pressing them in with fingers as fast and precise as ever. He hardly heard the girl’s reply, protesting, “No you haven’t,” but he replied to her automatically, harshly, “Keep still.”

“They only want me—”

“Keep down.”

Like a film he was watching something not happening to him: she rose, a pale despairing figure, she walked like Lady Macbeth past the window—

The response was immediate. And in a blaze of spontaneous, excited gunfire, she died.

“*DIANA...!*” His voice swooped and howled all around them, and the only thing he recognised in the chaos was Bodie’s arm, solid and tight around him, restraining him—

“You rotten—” Bodie’s grip was around his neck, keeping his firing arm down. He grabbed at Bodie’s arm, and hurled it viciously away from him. *Fucking bastards.*

Bodie said grimly, ironically, “Leave ’em, they’re withdrawing.” And as Doyle’s heart pounded and his arms shook with delayed shock his fingers were actually trembling: couldn’t get in much of a shot now if he tried.

“Look, they’re just acting under orders. They’ve probably got just as much idea of why she had to be killed as we ’ave.” Oh, typical Bodie, that: every sympathy for creatures who were paid to kill. Creatures like themselves.

And at the moment he felt sick with himself, sick with it all, because he was no better than they were, and Diana Molner lay dead and finished on the floor. Bodie was looking down at her too, without really seeing her, saying softly, “But at least she knew what she was fighting for. They were against her, and that’s all she had to know...”

Doyle slumped on trembling legs beside the girl’s body as Bodie went again to look out of the window, systematically checking. Her face was very peaceful, very lovely. He reached out with a thumb to remove

the droplet of blood at the corner of her mouth. Bodie came back, knelt beside him, looked at him then down at the body.

“She’s beautiful,” Doyle said, barely audible. “Isn’t she?”

“Yeah, well, beauty’s no magical shield. Though it seems to be working pretty well in your case,” Bodie said shortly. “If those guys had been called off thirty seconds later, you and I’d be lying there too. End of the line, Sundance.”

Bodie’s voice was low, dispassionate, whereas Doyle knew himself to be dangerously emotional, the adrenalin backlash emptying his head of blood, leaving him dizzy. His body was still on alert, pulse racing and uneven: he looked at the pale, beautiful skin of the dead girl, blood draining away from it inwards already, his pity and grief at such an intensity that that his body was at feverpoint, running all his emotions at a pitch he recognised, with shock, as sexual desire. Yet he had felt nothing so extreme for her while she was alive: a little liking, a little concern maybe, pale things compared to this sudden essential need—a wish, perhaps, to breathe his own vibrant life back into her crumpled pose of death, but whichever charitable way you tried to look at it, you could not escape the truth of it, that he was turned on like nothing else, as fierce a feeling as he had ever had.

Okay, so he knew what it was. Battlefield Syndrome, they called it. Soldiers got erections as their mates around them thrashed in blood and died. But to want what he was wanting—

This bloody job was getting to him. Turning him weird.

He remembered like a whipcrack in his mind a far-off conversation about necrophilia. With a sudden, convulsive movement he buried his palms into his eyes as he crouched on the floor, thighs cramping with fatigue.

“Jesus, Bodie.”

He felt Bodie look his way. “What?”

“It’s a good job you’re here. Otherwise I’d be tempted to give her a poke, now that’s fucking sick, isn’t it?”

“It’s shock, Ray, that’s all it is.” Bodie’s voice was unemotional, but his attention had been thoroughly caught for all that; he was watching his partner closely.

“Mortuary attendants do it all the time, you know. Always on the lookout for a goodlooking stiff. And that’s all we are at the moment, innit—? Mortuary attendants? We were fucking useless at protecting

her. Couldn’t save her. All we’ve got to hand back is a body. Don’t you think she’d like one last fuck before they burn her up?”

“Stop it, Ray. You’re getting hysterical.”

“Well, you know me. Any excuse.”

“Let’s get out of here, go call Cowley.”

Not paying him any attention Doyle picked up the girl’s hand and turned it over in his own, noting the well-shaped nails, unpolished. Although it felt cool already her body would retain its internal heat for some time. His guts churned sickly with horror, desire, despair.

“Get up.” Bodie, suddenly intense, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Get up, Ray.”

He shrugged off the hand angrily. “Leave me alone.”

But before he could stop it, Bodie had plucked him up to his feet and was manhandling him, struggling and swearing and fighting all the way into the next section of the carriage, out of sight of the poor, brave, pathetic body.

He wrenched his arm out of Bodie’s grip. “What the hell are you doing?”

Bodie’s teeth showed in a smile of no humour. “Unhealthy, Ray. Don’t let it get a hold on you.” And he stood there, blocking Doyle’s view and his way past.

Amazed and angered by Bodie’s arrogant behaviour to him, Doyle tossed up for one moment whether to fight or give way. After a moment he too smiled, relaxed all his resistance deliberately so that Bodie’s tight hold on his arm dug into soft skin, looked up into Bodie’s hard blue eyes.

“Okay. It’s up to you then, innit?”

Bodie’s eyes darkened as he surveyed Doyle, noted the malicious intent of his partner’s expression, the flinty green of his eyes as he gazed up into Bodie’s face, and his grip shifted on Doyle’s upper arms but did not cease.

“Serious, are you?”

“Just watch me.”

And as Bodie, trouble in his eyes, did not move, “Come on Bodie, time was we’d have been at it five minutes ago. Lost count of the times we did that. Best therapy of all, coming off, didn’t we always used to live by that?” He moved himself closer still, imposing his body on Bodie’s personal space, hustling him, eyes shining, lips parting, and the tables were turned now, Bodie the one deciding if to fight or if to run.

“Lie down,” he urged, softly. “Come on, Bodie, that’s all I’m asking you. Look, I’ll make it easy for

you. You don't have to touch me. Just be with me while I do it." And at that very moment he was unzipping his jeans. "C'mon, don't be shy," he said, viewing Bodie's averted gaze with some black amusement, "Nothing you 'aven't seen before, is it?"

Unspeaking, Bodie lay down with him on the dirty carriage floor. Doyle kicked over, astride him. Jeans undone just far enough, he straddled Bodie's belly, taking his own weight on his thighs, and cradled the familiar warm length of his cock in his hands, pulling himself slowly in the familiar hand over hand motion, head down and watching himself so that for a moment his attention was entirely absorbed by himself. And then although his hands did not cease his head snapped up, caught Bodie staring up at the ceiling, blankeyed, distant. "Watch me." And Bodie, obedient, brought his eyes to dwell on the flushed cockhead appearing in and out of Doyle's grip. Doyle crouched up a little, aiming it like a weapon for Bodie's face. "See, it took me a long time, Bodie," he whispered, losing his breath a little now, "but I worked it out now. What Kate Ross meant."

"What did she mean?" Bodie asked distantly; he propped one elbow behind his head the better to watch the blurring movements of Doyle's swift hands.

"You did this with that bloody water pistol. Remember?" And his look turned inward, now, onto some inner glory, chin tipped back, his face taut with rapture as he hit flashpoint. His hands stilled, fell forgotten away from himself as the white blizzard hurled itself away from his body to scatter like damp scuds of snow on Bodie's chest, and then he collapsed on top of Bodie, face hidden in Bodie's shoulder.

Bodie lay there, feeling Doyle's weight press the wetness through Bodie's shirt to his goosechilled skin. It had been a long time since he was so close to Doyle like this, close to the warm scent of his hair, of his skin, of his sex. And he felt, too, the tremors which racked Doyle from head to toe.

"It's all right, Ray. It doesn't matter."

"Well, you won't tell Kate Ross, anyway," came Doyle's voice, more robust than he had feared. Doyle pushed himself up then, looked down into Bodie's face for maybe ten seconds, then rolled away and onto his back with a sigh.

"Christ, Bodie—what can I say? 'Sorry?' That was sick."

"Nah," Bodie demurred. "Hell of a day. Something's got to give somewhere along the line."

Fighting for their lives out on their own, abandoned by Cowley to the wolves who had closed in, and killed.

The girl who lay dead in the other carriage, broken glass and bulletfire and blood spattered all around her.

Doyle's eyes opened. "Okay. But it was still sick." It came to him, not for the first or only time, that without Bodie he could not last in this job. There were times when Bodie alone was his lifeline. It was a crucial thought.

Bodie perched up on one elbow. "Sick, I don't mind." His hands went to the zip of his cords; with a little flutter of excitement Doyle watched him pull it down. "But you couldn't even get it right, could you Doyle?" And Doyle watched, eyes slitted in pleasure, as Bodie unbuttoned his shirt and pushed his clothing out of the way and knelt up over Doyle's sprawled body, his erection so close to Doyle's face he had to squint to keep it in focus.

"Didn't even come close, did you?" Bodie whispered raggedly, eyes hazing as his own expert fingers roughly pulled on himself in haste, and at the end, the very last moment, he pressed his cock downwards, aimed it with his fingertips so that come flew out softly, hitting Doyle's eye, his cheek, his throat.

Then he dropped his forehead, knelt on all fours over Doyle, panting rapidly, recovering his breath and his wits.

"That's style, Bodie," Doyle said from a long way away. He touched Bodie's hair, a brief caress, and then it lingered. No more words were necessary.

They cleaned up at the sink, looking out at the empty tracks, the abandoned carriages.

"Cowley'll be wondering where the hell we've got to."

"Let him fucking wonder," Doyle said viciously. "Cared so much he landed a fucking Susie on us, didn't he?"

Bodie was pondering on that abrupt withdrawal. "Yeh, but I just wonder if he wasn't the cavalry after all."

Doyle eyed him with ill temper. "For that, *you* can tell him the good news."

They left the body behind, no backwards look.

DOYLE'S eyes snapped wide open when the door did. All he could see was the tiny black eye of a gun, aimed at him.

"Ah, put it away," he said, waving it off.

And there was Bodie coming round the door, shoving his gun underneath his jacket. "Thought it must be you."

"Been looking in that crystal ball again?"

"No-one else uses that scent." Bodie crossed the room and came to sit down near him, looking across. Too soon to judge his mood. "What do you want, Doyle?"

Doyle crossed his ankles in front of him, stretched his arms high up and yawned. "Thought it was time I paid a midnight call on you, instead of the other way round."

"It's late, Doyle."

"I know what time it is." There was a silence. "The other day. When Williams had that gun on me."

Bodie didn't say anything.

"Did it cross your mind, just for a minute, to see what happened? See if he 'ad the guts to shoot?"

Bodie was shaking his head. "Come on."

"Just for a second?"

Bodie moved convulsively. "Of course it bloody well didn't. I was just getting the timing right."

"Seemed like a long wait."

"Well, it would, wouldn't it? Anyway, what you grumbling about? Here you still are."

Doyle grinned, then. "Yeah. But I still think you were getting off on making me wait." He got up, crossed the room, making straight for his partner. Bodie's halfshut eyes tracked his approach.

Doyle knelt in one quick movement beside Bodie's chair, leaning his arm on the rest, looking up into Bodie's face. "Just reminded me, the other day."

"What did? Seeing Williams wetting himself at the thought of killing you?"

"After the Molner girl died." His eyes moved over Bodie, flinging everything of warmth and of passion he could summon into the look he brought to bear on him. "You're always there for me, aren't you, Bodie?"

"Yeah?" Bodie said, voice somehow hollow, and Doyle nodded, eyes never leaving him.

"I need you in my life, Bodie. I can't do it without you."

Bodie did not reply. Tense. Reined in. Waiting.
Sink or swim, Bodie.

He said what he knew Bodie was waiting for, spoke the words aloud: "I want us to be together."

Bodie's breath came out in a rush as if he had been holding it; he moved his head, and the words came out almost hoarse: "I dunno, Doyle."

"Truth is...without you, I'm finished in this job."

He laid his cheek on Bodie's knee. Just rested it there, feeling the thud and pulse of blood from his heart. "Did you never know what I wanted, Bodie?" he whispered, so softly they could pretend he had never said it if they had to: "Did you really think I was just in it for the kicks?"

Bodie said nothing.

"Let me stay, Bodie. I'll do better for you this time."

He had counted on Bodie's not being able to deny him anything when it came to it: but he realised now, at this moment, in the doubting, brooding silence, that it was a closer-run thing than he had ever dreamed.

But Bodie let him stay.

"LOOK AT this," Doyle said with his mouth full of chips. He pointed out to Bodie a huge pair of newspaper tits nestling around the mound of junk food they were sharing, wrapped in *The Sun*.

"Mm." Nostrils flaring, Bodie admired them.

"Tear it out, eh?"

"Nah, too greasy. Just feast your eyes, old son, and then say farewell." Doyle wiped his hand down the front of his shirt and shoved the rest of the chips Bodie's way. "You finish 'em." He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes.

Stuffing, Bodie mumbled, "What you going to do, then?"

"Wait for you," Doyle said cryptically. The bedroom had every comfort, a bathroom off, a TV perched on a shelf so they could watch it from the bed, which was kingsize and white. Bodie had struck lucky with his flat this time.

There was a scrumpling noise beside him as Bodie jettisoned, probably reluctantly, the rest of their supper. Doyle could hear his own stomach making gurgling sounds as it had a go at digesting the huge mound of carbohydrate he'd just shovelled down to it. Well, he needed it. Ten mile run, perfect end to a perfect day: Cowley had them in training for something big. Best not to think about it.

Live for today.

The bed bounced about a bit. He felt Bodie's lips touch his, and twisted his face away with a grimace. "Don't like the taste of fish?" Bodie's voice said into his ear.

"Not these days," Doyle said; and made a start, as Bodie undressed him, constructing an elegant and rude little fantasy in his head. "Bodie." Off came his

shirt; he obligingly half sat up to assist his partner. “Remember that massage parlour we raided the other day?”

Bodie snickered. “Did you see Anson’s face? When the bloke begged him to hold off just five more seconds?”

“And Anson said, sarcastic, like a joke, ‘shall I go out and come in again?’”

“And Cowley said—!” Incoherent with laughter they finished it together, “—*I think that’s his line, don’t you?*”

Snorting, Bodie said, “And you always say the old man’s got no sense of humour.”

Doyle said, “Think he ever uses a massage parlour?”

Bodie grimaced. “I’d rather not know—!”

“You ever been to one?”

“As a customer?”

Doyle laid one hand, light, on Bodie’s where it was set to dip into the hollow between his belly and the waistband of his jeans. “Wonder what it’s like?”

“Tired old tarts thump your shoulderblades for ten seconds then they ask you if you require anything further,” Bodie’s voice swooped low. “Sir.”

“And then?”

Bodie’s breath touched his ear. “Then they get the gloves on and jack you off.”

Doyle shivered, thrilled, tense, as Bodie touched him, found him hard and wanting. “Got any rubber gloves anywhere?” Bodie murmured to him, exciting him beyond belief; he had hardly hoped—

“First Aid Kit.” He opened his eyes when he heard Bodie coming back into the room, pulling on a thin white pair of safety gloves. His heart gave a jolt and his cock leapt at the sight; Bodie, hands encased in rubber, his forearms bare above to the sleeves of his white T-shirt. It reminded Doyle of the way Bodie looked sometimes when they had a victim in the cells, and Cowley would threaten Sparks and his box of tricks, and Bodie would pull on the gloves slowly, and wait. Tough, silent, beautiful. Menace incarnate.

His cock wept silently, pulsing with urgent little expectations of its own. Something cool and sticky flooded over it, seeping down over his balls and into the crack of his arse. Probably the lotion he used himself sometimes for masturbating, especially when they watched each other. Now Bodie’s hands gave his desperate cock what it wanted, pulling on him, sweet and strong and slick, sensations so utterly delicious he wanted it to last. Forever, if possible. And when he felt himself dangerously close his hand

shot out and gripped Bodie’s wrist to stop him.

“Hang on a bit.” When he got his breath back enough he eyed Bodie, decided yes, Bodie could take it, said: “Do they offer anything—kinky?”

“Look, sweetheart, they’d paint you blue and stick a chicken up your arse if you’ve got the cash up front,” Bodie said, with the beginnings of a grin.

Doyle waved at his jeans on the floor. “Wallet’s in there. Take what you want.”

“Okay. Consider it done. Chicken is it, then? Or what?”

“Very wasteful with that stuff, weren’t you? Went everywhere, it did.” Bodie’s eyes flicked over him. “Even inside,” Doyle said to him, soft. “Want to see?” And he rolled onto his stomach, presenting himself, exposing himself utterly.

Bodie’s hand landed there a moment later. Parted his buttocks quickly, not particularly gentle, like a doctor examining him in a perfunctory way. Then stroking him. The glovetipped finger felt unnaturally smooth and silky against him. Bodie always knew exactly what he wanted; after a while playing with him one of the fingers tickled round the rim and probed the opening.

Brilliant sensation. It flashed through him, melting his insides completely; so good he was almost shitting himself with the pure excitement and tension and bliss of it. He moaned, and thrust his hips upwards. “All the way in.”

Something cool, more lotion, fell on his back and buttocks and anus; and the finger pressed it inside him. “Okay?” Bodie whispered to him, and the glove slipped slowly in and out.

Doyle pressed back involuntarily. Asking for what he really wanted seemed indelicate. He surprised himself sometimes; he heard himself say:

“Wider, okay?” and Bodie slipped another finger past the knot of muscle, all the way inside, and scissored his anus gently open and shut. Impossibly, instantaneously, Doyle felt himself beginning to come; he fought it for a little while but it wouldn’t stay away; he half-turned to one side in a desperate haste, grabbed Bodie’s free hand and pressed it to his cock. And with Bodie’s rubberclad hand squeezing him in front, the fingers opening him behind as orgasm swept through him, harder, intenser, sweeter than ever before, and also a sensation deliciously shameful and at the same time the most liberating he had ever had, he erupted back and front, everywhere, and he didn’t care at all.

Bodie got a towel afterwards and soap and

cleaned him up.

“God, that was incredible,” Doyle sighed.

“No need to call me that,” Bodie quipped modestly; and while Doyle cracked up he stared at him curiously. “Can’t imagine what you got out of that, Doyle.”

“I told you, it feels good. Don’t know what you’re missing, do you?” Bodie’s head came up at that, his eyes, Doyle would swear to it, the exact blue of a night sky pricked out with stars. “And you don’t have to, mate,” he avowed. “Each to his own.” Someone, some earthy grizzled marine ten years older than Bodie had probably tried to get up a younger Bodie’s prim little arse, even succeeded, perhaps, succeeded certainly at humiliating and hurting him, thereby landing Bodie forever with an anal hangup which Doyle was grateful not to share.

But then again, he could be wrong, because Bodie immediately picked him up on it: “Look, I didn’t say I wasn’t curious.”

Doyle stretched, an immense satisfaction stealing through body and soul, and grinned at him. “Are you telling me you’re going to let me do that to you?”

“If anyone could make it worth my while, you could.”

“Not tonight, though—okay?”

Bodie flicked a derisive glance over the slumped sprawl of his exhausted cock. “Not up to it, Raymond?”

“Got other plans,” Doyle told him succinctly. Enough rest: time to get moving. With a growl of appreciation he rolled over to kiss Bodie, thrusting his tongue arrogantly into Bodie’s mouth, down his throat as far as he could get; licked his nipples into peaks, gasped his cock and jerked it in the way Bodie liked, paused to admire it—

“Ever measure this? You could make a fortune in porn movies, sunshine.”

“Yeah, probably, but I’d lose my day job.” Bodie had his eyes shut.

“Nah, we’d find a way round it. They wouldn’t need your face, after all.”

“Get on with it Doyle, will you?”

Doyle grinned, very white teeth, one chipped in front. “Getting impatient?”

“Oh no,” Bodie told him impassively. “But just pretend I’ve got a Luger on the back of your neck for the hell of it, will you?”

“Nice idea,” Doyle said, straightfaced. “But, just for tonight—I want something from you, mate. Special treat, you might call it.”

He knew that Bodie understood him at once. But he knew nonetheless that this was deep water: something they had not really touched on before. Except once. And Bodie, remembering that once, might be shadowed by the past. And indeed, Bodie said slowly, “I dunno, Doyle.”

He brought all his will to bear on Bodie, would not let Bodie’s eyes escape the demands of his own. “You want to. C’mon, Bodie, I *know* you fancy this.”

Bodie’s lip curled, an unwilling smile coaxed out of him. “Know me too well, then.”

“I can feel your eyes up my arse every time I climb a flight of stairs.” Doyle leaned back, all supple willingness, and smiled a very special smile.

Bodie was leaning over him, stroking him in an absorbed kind of way, kissing him every so often, small, soft kisses beside his mouth. His eyes when he raised his head to reply were dark with trouble and desire. “Sure *you* fancy it? It hurt you last time, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, it hurts I suppose,” Doyle met his eyes. “Not the same sort of pain as being hit in the face with a lead duster, mind you. It’s—special—” He kissed Bodie again, long, lingering, savouring every taste he could discover in Bodie’s mouth. Then he settled back on the pillow, and held out his arms for Bodie to come into them. “C’mere a minute, Bodie, just lie down with me for a bit. Listen. I’ll tell you what I want.”

“Let’s hear it then,” Bodie said when he had settled his head on Doyle’s chest, and Doyle’s fingers wandered in his hair, playing with it.

“Okay.” He took a deep breath, shut his eyes, summoned it up. When he spoke his voice was low, soft, hypnotic. “You get here, to my flat. You don’t know me all that well, we’re just mates, that’s all. You can’t see me at first, can’t hear anything, lights out, and so on. Then you find me. On the floor, asleep. Face down, no clothes. You come over. Look at me. And then you—”

“Then I what?” Bodie’s voice speaking right into his ear was intimately deep and sensual.

Doyle smiled without opening his eyes. “—You know you shouldn’t. But you want to. So you open me up back there, and you have a really good look. Maybe you even—touch. You know?”

“Can’t help but think you’d wake up at that point,” Bodie said critically. “Most people wouldn’t sleep through it.”

“Not asleep then,” Doyle rectified. “How about—unconscious?” The idea made him shiver. “Oh *yeah*.”

That's even better. Yeh. I've passed out cold. You *know* I'm not going to wake up."

"Okay, passed out cold. Wouldn't I be going through the First Aid routine by now?"

Doyle rolled his eyes. "Look, Bodie, this is a sexual fantasy. We're not talking responsible citizen here. We're talking man who's always wanted to get a secret thrill looking up his mate's arsehole."

"Okay," Bodie murmured, amused. "I get it. No resuscitation procedures. Go on."

"Where did I get to?" He knew perfectly well.

"I was about to go where no man has gone before, I think."

"'ey, don't jump the gun. You don't want to stop, because you know you'll never get the chance again. You know I'd kick you in the teeth, make you eat my gun or something, if ever you tried to get your hand up my arse—"

"Like a sleeping tiger—" Bodie was getting into it now.

Doyle had his hand on Bodie's cock, just a friendly touch. It was hardening beautifully, waking up and stretching itself and doing little pressups, getting ready for action. "—So then you think, god, he's not going to wake up *whatever* I do—"

"And I—?"

"—you do whatever takes your fancy." Doyle opened his eyes, twisted around to look into Bodie's face. "Hit me about a bit. Stick something else inside me. Whatever. You decide." He stopped, to breathe, to snatch and savour a kiss. "—then— Whatever you do next, it's got to lead to the point of you making up your mind to go the whole way. There I am, dead to the world. You've had a look, and a feel. But it's not enough."

"I start thinking 'rape', do I?"

Doyle kissed him again. "You've got it. Let's get up for a bit, have a drink or two."

Mahler 6 on the tapedeck. Moody, tragic, demanding. Perhaps not ideal. But he loved the passion of it. And once into it he could not switch it off before it came to the end, those three masterly hammerblows of fate. Wearing only his jeans, undone, he read the newspaper and sipped at a Scotch and let the music swell his mood.

Bodie, fully dressed, watched TV and drank slowly from his glass. His fine, well-muscled forearms, downed with dark hair, rested on his thighs. He was a very attractive man. Doyle felt conscious, all the time, with every heartbeat, of the brooding,

powerful presence, the life and vigour of the man, reined in, ready to surge and overpower him. He was so deeply, intensely absorbed in their own little private world that when the doorbell rang, he jumped.

"Better answer it," Bodie said. They were on a case which required off-duty hours; but it turned out to be Murphy and Stuart, out for a free drink.

"It'll 'ave to be a quick one," Doyle said, consulting his watch as he held the door. "Bodie and I got reports to do." He was careful not to stand too close to Murphy as he passed; wearing only the jeans and nothing beneath he was conscious of his own body odour, not unpleasant, sweat and sex none the less. When Bodie joined him in the kitchen he handed Bodie a fresh bottle of Johnny Walker. "Look, they're your mates. Get rid of 'em soon, eh?"

"I'll do my best, Lord."

Bodie was looking particularly beautiful tonight. Irresistible. Doyle put the bottle down, took him by the hips and leaned in for a kiss. Wearing no underwear his cock pressed itself to Bodie's through soft denim. Bodie kissed him back, hands tangling in Doyle's hair to tilt his head so that Bodie's tongue could enter his mouth, the gentleness and the ardour of it taking Doyle by storm. He murmured some endearment, close to Bodie's cheek. Hearing a noise behind him he drew his mouth away, lingering, unhurried, and turned to see Murphy there. Doyle picked up the bottle off the side and extended it towards him.

"This what you came for?"

"Thanks."

"Help yourself."

As Murphy disappeared rather rapidly into the lounge, Bodie met Doyle's gaze, half amused. "Cool, Doyle. Very cool."

"Maybe now they'll get the message and go."

"I want to kiss you again," Bodie said, standing in close, breathing in the warm, lustful smell of him.

Doyle leaned back against the breakfast bar. "Go on then. It's not a sin." He moved his body languidly against Bodie as Bodie kissed the side of his mouth, whispering to him,

"Oh, it is, Doyle. Believe me."

Damned, then. But somehow he could not care: he would take his thrills here and now. There was no heaven, save what you could find on earth.

Murphy and Stuart did not seem to want to hang around for long. Doyle shut the door behind them, bolted it securely, and turned, his hands already

going to his jeans. “Were you thinking about this all the time they were here?” he said, head bent as he pushed them down and kicked them off.

“All the time,” Bodie said, and his eyes were ablaze, no tenderness there now, only passion, and a hard, decisive energy: “All the time.”

Doyle lay face down on the carpet in the hall, head turned to one side, cat-like senses alert—waiting—

When he heard the soft sounds of Bodie’s approach his heart kicked off the blocks for a fast sprint; he bit his lip in the most exquisite anticipation, conscious of the pounding in his chest, the rough feel of the mat against his cheek, most of all his naked bottom thrillingly exposed to the air.

Footsteps halted behind him.

The longest, sweetest silence he had ever known.

And just when he could not bear it any longer, something even sweeter: a touch on his skin. A palm, rubbing. And himself being split slowly, the cool air rushing in to bathe his heated inner skin. Now his heart seemed to have stopped entirely. He could see it all so clearly in his head, the man crouched behind him, wanting to see, needing to, eyes feasting hungrily on the forbidden.

And then the moment came when seeing was no longer enough.

Something, a fingertip, tickled around the edge of his anus, sending little rills of pleasure and excitement zinging through his nerve endings. When the tip slipped inside him he couldn’t help but press back against it.

A stinging slap on his rump sent sweet little aftershocks of pain along his skin. “Not allowed, Doyle,” Bodie’s low voice said to him. “You’re dead, remember?”

Perhaps the first word which had come into Bodie’s head: or, perhaps, hints at a very dark fantasy indeed? Interesting. Bodie’s two hands pulled his cheeks wide apart then, no more teasing, he was as wide and open as Bodie could stretch him. He could feel the burn of Bodie’s gaze against him and it struck a line of iron right down through his cock.

Anticipation. Fingers pinching his cheeks hard, still holding him wide open, Doyle was expecting the invasion of something cold and hard, he was tensed up for it: but instead something beautiful, soft and wet. Bodie’s tongue. At the same time his insides went, just like that, a gutsweetness stealing all through him and melting him throughout. It felt—*so bloody wonderful*—he couldn’t keep from letting out a

little whimper of pleasure, but Bodie didn’t pick up on it this time, just settled there between his thighs and gave him the unholy kiss of all.

Oh christ... so good, so sweet.

Bodie’s weight left him and Doyle shot his head up, lifting himself up on his palms like a man doing pressups. “Where the hell are you goin’?” His voice sounded hoarse, unused.

A tube of lubricant in Bodie’s fingers appeared in front of his nose. “Ah, get rid of it,” Doyle said roughly. “We don’t need it, okay?”

“Yeah we do.”

Strung out to the last degree, Doyle snatched it and hurled it across the room. “Look, I’m just in the mood to do it without, okay?” He wanted to feel Bodie’s cock inside him with nothing between them. And he wanted Bodie to have to fight a little bit to get it in there. His eyelids slammed shut again when the weight of Bodie’s hand slapped down on his cheeks for the second time, and Bodie wasn’t being gentle. If he could only see himself he suspected there would be a red, sore mark raised by the blow.

“Shut up and keep quiet,” Bodie’s violent whisper came.

Brilliant.

He lay still and quiet as the dead and felt at last the head of Bodie’s cock nudge between his buttocks, rub up and down the crack a bit, long and hard, slipping sweetly in Bodie’s spit. That felt nothing but good, just the most beautiful, simple pleasure. If Bodie kept it up long enough, up and down and round and round like that, massaging his sensitive opening the way he was doing, he was going to come fast and that was that, already his cock was weeping its joy onto the rug below.

But then there was suddenly a change in the mood; he knew what was coming and screwed up his face, fingers clenching on the rough wool of the mat. And he winced as Bodie leaned in on him, cock straining for entry, no-one could help it, it felt impossibly large, hard, as if it would split him in two. Bodie stopped then, wound an arm beneath his chest and waited, giving him time he didn’t want; so he shoved himself upwards, hard and Bodie took the hint. One quick violent poke from Bodie’s cock and pain ripped through him; he kept still and bit his own forearm to distract himself, deadly afraid that Bodie would stop if he cried out. He heard Bodie draw in his breath: *yeah, bet that felt good for you, sunshine.*

“Come on, do it,” he hissed aloud. “Hard as you like.”

The shock of entry was over. He was widening, stretching all the time to accommodate Bodie inside him, it was getting easier with every stroke. Doyle picked up the rhythm of Bodie's thrusts and withdrawals and moved with him, but urging on the pace until Bodie was going at it fast, his hard quick breathing falling on Doyle's neck, one arm still beneath him, pulling him back against his belly; he could feel their bodies pressed so close together, Bodie going so deep inside him he kept touching the very heart of him, the pain a different note now, sweetening the pleasure. The tenderness and the violence of his own feelings astonished him, and he opened his eyes wide as orgasm ripped through the very centre of him, racing like starfire down tiny intricate passages to shoot out of him, and every thundering, trembling pulse of it squeezed Bodie tight, tighter, until the answering throbs of it hit him deep inside, soft, sweet, oh *yeah*...

Bodie was stroking his hair, rubbing his wet forehead in a gentle sort of way, just waiting for him to come around. Doyle locked eyes with him and nothing was spoken aloud. It had been rough, violent, nasty even. And yet that made the *afterwards* more tender, more close. For a while there was nothing secret between them, they understood everything.

Special. Magic.

While he was showering and washing his sweaty hair, Bodie popped his head around the door. "You staying the night?"

"Might as well. Half asleep—" yawn— "already."

He yawned again as he came through the bedroom door, vigorously towelling his hair. "Don't just drop it on the floor," Bodie said critically, watching from the bed.

"Would I," said Doyle, hanging it exactly and precisely over the back of a chair, fussing over it this way and that, until Bodie laughed at him, told him point taken, and get the hell into bed.

Bodie had obviously made the bed again with fresh crisp sheets and army corners. It felt wonderful. Doyle slid his weary stinging body in with a sensation of the purest bliss, and shuffled close to the warmth of Bodie. Felt Bodie's arms go round him. Turned his face up so that Bodie could kiss him, which he did, for a very long time, in a way unmistakably loving. Then he reached over and switched off the light.

"You always used to go home," Bodie's voice was

quiet in the darkness.

"You always used to want me to."

"No. I wanted you to stay."

Doyle smiled in the darkness, Bodie's possessive arm across his belly. "Yeah, well, you must have wished on the right star this time. Now shut up. I'm tired."

But sleep didn't come to him straight away.

"Bodie? You awake?"

"Mmm?"

"Got any thoughts about us moving in together?"

By some change in the quality of silence he knew that Bodie had opened his eyes. "How?" Bodie asked eventually.

"We could take up an option on a double flat next time one comes up. I was looking at the board today, there's one going in Kensington."

"Very handy for the palace, m'lud."

"Or—" he reached down for Bodie's hand and squeezed it tightly— "We could get a mortgage. Get on the property ladder."

"No-one's going to be queuing up to give us a mortgage, Doyle," Bodie said tightly, ironically. "Did you see the new insurance proposals the other day? Cowley 'ad 'em on his desk, I had a quick look. Want to know the average survival term for a CI5 agent?"

"No."

"2.7 years."

"So they repossess early," Doyle shrugged. "Our money's as good as anyone else's, while it lasts. Dunno about you, but it's coming in faster than I can spend it these days."

"We'll think about it," was all Bodie said; but as Doyle turned over and curled on his side preparatory to sleep Bodie's arm wound under his and over his chest to bring him in close and sleep came easily, bringing no nightmares, only dreams of the strangest kind.

37 was looking very handsome today, dark hair shining, shoes polished, dark suit and tie, which brought out the best of his looks, never inconsiderable. He was no friendlier, however: Bodie more than most resented this, had done from the very start, and made no secret of it. Hard work. Dodged every which way, by turns flippant, ironic, or uncommunicative; made her fight for every damned little thing.

In the end, though, she would get there.

"—all your scores are well up, as usual—"

"You're surprised?" Bodie gave her an immodest

grin. "I keep telling you I'm perfect. I was born that way. Big, brave and—beautiful—"

The funny thing being that of course he did not truly believe that. Had never really believed that. Was only just beginning now to trust the stroke of good fortune that had given him what he wanted.

"You're still working solo?"

"Yeah, shouldn't be for too much longer though. Doyle's gone for the final checkup today, the full works. If they pass him he can be A-lined again starting tomorrow." Bodie had a clipped, efficient way with him today. She had the feeling he wasn't giving her his attention at all. Scanning for body language, her quick eye found him a little on edge, fidgety, his gaze constantly flicking to the window, but whatever the cause of his anxiety it wasn't the simple fact of his being here for this interview; he was hardly listening to her, had no interest either in what she had to say nor in his own answers.

Which was, believe it or not, good news. Clearly he had nothing to hide from her today!

"How long is it since 4.5 was shot?"

"Eight weeks tomorrow," Bodie answered her, and his eyes were fine, direct, clear.

They had survived.

"And you answered the emergency call, didn't you? It was you who found him there. Have you found that hard to deal with?"

"No, absolute breeze," he returned ironically.

"It hasn't caused you nightmares, anything like that?"

He shook his head: no nightmares. Well, she could take a guess at why not: why should there be nightmares, when he could open his eyes any time he wanted, see the face next to his on the pillow, watch his chest rise and fall with life, feel the breathing soft on his own skin—

"I see from the *change of circumstance* forms that you've moved in with him."

"Yeh." No reaction.

Come on, Bodie. Give it to me. I need to hear it, just once.

"Why?" she asked bluntly.

"Just seemed easier that way. They let him out of hospital early on the understanding he had someone around to keep an eye on him. He's got no family, so—" Bodie shrugged.

Ah, what a saint you are. No family, so you got the job of looking after him. Not that you wanted to, of course. Not that you'd have fought anyone to the death who tried to get between you and Ray Doyle. Oh no.

There was a little rattling sound on the window pane. It got all Bodie's attention at once; he was prickling like a cat, stretched to the limits in the effort to see out.

One more try. Just one.

"You're in his company almost all the time now, aren't you, now that you—live together? How are you getting on? After all, it can be difficult living with anybody, even a close friend. Has it changed the way you feel about him at all?"

"Oh," Bodie said, attention all outside now on the vision he could just about glimpse in the drive, "about Ray? Love him to death. I want to marry him and have his babies, okay?"

He spoke it with the lightest of ironies, just a catchphrase, after all, doing the rounds. He meant by it absolutely nothing.

And yet—

Her heart pounded; she felt a little lightheaded. Slowly the taut silence was penetrating his attention; he turned his dark head to look at her, eyes narrowed in a black gleam as he tracked down the moment of change, ran his own voice again in his head—

She held her ground, despite an intuition that this must be exactly how this proven killer looked at the *coup de grace*. And today was her day. She won. At last, at long last, she watched his eyes unfreeze: the tiniest, most reluctant of smiles began to change the sculpted line of his lips and she asked him, smiling herself,

"Can I have that in writing?"

He inclined his head towards her, cool, defiant. "Yeah." It was out. The sky was still there, and the sun set in it. And Ray Doyle was out there waiting for him, on a day when summer began.

"Have any damn thing you want. In triplicate. Can I go now?"

And that was it.

Another file closed.

He even reached out, boldly, and shook her hand. Then the door slammed on him and she could hear his footsteps for a little while, down the staircase and away. She had the maddest urge to leap on her chair, to fling open the window, to take up precious piles of paper and hurl them into the air.

Instead she stood by the window watching; and there he was outside, Ray Doyle, looking good, trudging about in the drive, kicking around a bit on the white pebbles, hands in his pockets, waiting for his partner between the pink glory of the flowering cherry trees.

And Bodie, now, suddenly bursting out of the door beneath—

The door to her own office opened— “Dr Ross— thought you might like to know, 4.5 has been passed for duty, starting tomorrow—”

“Quick,” she said. “Quick. Come and look at this,” and so it was that George Cowley was there with her to witness it, Ray Doyle whipping around at the hurried approach, face alight, fist leaving his side and punching up high and hard into the air in a gesture of

triumph and joy and sheer physical release: And Bodie was there by now seizing Doyle and lifting him high into the air, laughing up at him as Doyle laughed down, in the most uninhibited exhibition of pure, boundless exhilaration she had ever seen.

Spoken or unspoken, it hissed through the air—

“YESSS...”

They were together. Whole. Alive.

The swallows were still flying in the sky. And the summer: about to begin.

—July 1995