## A CALL OF NATURE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Undermined by his own desires, Doyle licked his lips.

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

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

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

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

Insanity, not to leave.

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

Dangerous, to do it in a cottage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Guess what?" the man said.

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

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

mate, are nicked."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What was Bodie going to do?

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

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

Footsteps, loud in the deserted silence of the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you calling me a liar? Sir?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bodie blinked, slowly: yes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A CALL OF NATURE 00000 M. FAE GLASGOW 

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

"But-

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

"But—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You'll be missed yourself, Doyle."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

not bent the way you are, am I?"

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

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

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

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

"Like it rough, do you, butch?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How about a bit of loyalty, eh?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You finally done?" Bodie asked.

"No."

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

"Oh, the packing's done."

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

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

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

"I've been thinking."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not even for Jimmy Keller?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Got it in one."

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

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

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

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

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

"You owe me, Bodie."

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

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

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

be it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Simon was one of your..."

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

"No, don't suppose you have."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bodie."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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