GUINEA TO A GOOSEBERRY

Guinea to a gooseberry is a reference to long odds. Here it refers to the chance for a happy ending after the stormy finish to "A Summer's Outing." Yes, yes, the Glaswegian swears up and down that she hates to do sequels and happily-everafters; you'd be a fool to believe everything she says. Devices and Desires picks up the story about ten years later. This places it in the late '80s-a very different world from the decade before, as you shall see...

DEVICES AND DESIRES

M. FAE GLASGOW

FOR HIS OWN GOOD—WHO WERE THEY TRYING TO KID? For his own good—fat bloody chance. If this was supposed to help lower his blood pressure, then it looked like it was going to be a complete waste of time—not to mention money. He was leaning on the railing, watching with abstract anger as the dockers unleashed the ship, setting it free to sail upon the blue sea. It was a glorious day, hot sun blessing him after the dankness of an English spring, cloudless sky of deepest blue, pretty hillside villages of the picture-postcard variety, but instead of easing his tension, all of it was just adding to his simmering fury.

He didn't want to be here—he really didn't want to be here. It was absurd, typical bloody bureaucratic crap to order him off on holiday after all, if Cowley, at his age and with his duff leg could keep up with the work load, then it was downright stupid to send a man half his age and the picture of health off on some useless holiday. His body had more sense than his head, though, choosing that moment to send a twinge of pain across his chest, an unnerving reminder that all was not well, regardless of his protestations of the opposite. Absently, he rubbed at his chest, unable to ignore the pain or to forget the day it had happened. Funny-it was the one time his strenuous excising of Bodie failed him. He invariably had that moment of doubt, of wondering if it would have been different if he and Bodie had still been partners, if Bodie had been there to watch his back. Death had almost got him that time: another half inch and he would've been dead before he hit the

floor. Or if disturbed by the banging and the thumping, that old bat who lived downstairs hadn't gathered her ire to her large bosom and come upstairs to moan at him about the noise he was making, only to find his door open and him lying in an ever-widening puddle of rich, heart-red blood. If only...

But rubbish like that wouldn't get him any- £3£3£3 where, would it? He prowled along the deck, 109 neatly sidestepping white-jacketed stewards, £3£3£3 scowling at their professional smiles, keeping a predatory eye on a nicely turned buttock or wellfilled crotch. It was the one good thing about this holiday, he supposed, grudgingly conceding even a modicum of benefit to this farce. Good looking men everywhere he looked, and if they weren't available, they were at least just as bent as he was. Rounding a corner, he stopped, propping himself against the railings, staring at the cornucopia of flesh displayed in front of him. The pool—another stupid idea, he thought, considering they were in a bloody boat floating on a bloody sea-was already beginning to fill with gambolling men too anxious to start their holiday to even wait until they had cleared the harbour proper. Scraps of red and black and white dived and surfaced, precariously wrapped around lean hips, genitals perfectly delineated, there for anyone who chose to window shop before deciding what to take home. Laughter was rising, a little self-conscious, the over-loud enthusiasm of the newly released. The whole thing reminded him of the seconds after the bell rang to signal the end of term and roiling hordes of

youth would cheer the onset of freedom for a whole summer. The difference this time, of course, that the freedom here, the release here was from the strictures of societies that barely tolerated their sort, frowning on them if they did anything so uncouth as to display affection for each other in public. But here, on this particular ship, with this particular shipping line, there were no such constrictions.

An exceedingly Adonis-like steward gave him the eye and Doyle wondered if everyone on this bloody boat was gay. And if they were? He took his white jacket off, rolling his shirt sleeves up, tugging his silver bracelet back into place over a wrist that was, like the rest of him, too pale. Face turned to the sun, he considered what it would mean if everyone on this ship were gay. No coming across someone who disapproved. No-one asking if he were married yet. No-one wondering why he was still a bachelor. No-one to pat his hand and assure him that not to worry, he'd meet the right girl one day. In other words, no explanations to be given, no excuses to be made. For once, every single person he met $_{\pounds 3\pounds 3\pounds 3}$ would assume the truth and not bat an eyelid 110 over it. And there would be no minor skirmishes £3£3£3 engendered by him proving to straight people that he was just as much a man as they, or just as good as they, or just as undeserving of discrimination.

> There was, he conceded, a slim chance that this holiday might actually be good for him after all, especially after the exceedingly vicious battle with the new Minister. He felt the nip of the sun on his nose and recognised that if he weren't careful, he'd end up doing nothing more on this holiday than lying in his cabin covered with camomile lotion. So down to his cabin then, off with his light-weight suit, on with the suntan lotion and then back up on deck.

> His suitcases were already stacked neatly in his cabin, with a list of ship rules laid on top. He scanned them quickly, noting all the usual information, quick mind automatically memorising the emergency procedures. One item brought the frown back to his face, a quick flash of anger at the last thing on the list, at the end of 'General Comments to Further your Cruise Experience': a reminder that condoms were placed 'for your safety and convenience' in the bathroom and that more were on sale in the

gift shop, in the public toilets and that the stewards would be happy to bring some to one's cabin at any time of day or night. He shoved the stark rectangle of laminated cardboard into the nearest drawer: he was here to escape ugly realities, not to be reminded of them. And as if he needed reminding: he'd heard the reports, seen the statistics. But even as he packed his clothes into the shallow dresser-drawers, he forced himself to not ignore it, to stop shoving it to the back of his mind. He had never thought the day would come when he'd be glad of the discretion the job had forced on him, but it had kept him off the gay circuit, making him stick to people he knew very well, men who were just as careful as he was, thanks to positions in the Ministry or the Department, or whatever other 'sensitive' situation they were shackled to. Plus, as the man who was grooming himself to one day take over from Cowley himself, he had to be very careful. Oh, they all knew he was gay, had done ever since that débâcle too many summers ago, but it was political—and promotion—suicide to rub any noses in it. So no living with someone less than perfectly presentable, no public displays of affection, no effete young men hanging on his arm, no whooping it up at nightclubs or baths. All that loneliness had paid off, with slow but steady promotion, until the only thing keeping him from heading CI5 was Cowley's continued existence—and that certainly wasn't something he wanted to change, not by a long chalk. Old bastard he undoubtedly was, but Cowley had become the truest friend he'd ever had in his life. One other person excepted...

He took his clothes off, standing naked in the heat drifting in through his open port-hole, slowly covering his winter skin in lotion, paying considerable attention to the job, paying more attention to the changes in his body. The scars on his chest from the shooting were effectively covered by his body hair, the pattern permanently disturbed now, always looking as if someone had just run his fingers through it. It had taken months after the last of the operations for him to get used to the new lie of his hair, before that funny feeling of hair not quite sitting right had left. It still came back, even now, making him itch and thoughtlessly smooth his hair in a direction it could no longer grow. There was grey in his chest hair now, the premature

grey that so often accompanies red or auburn, but he always thought that with him, it had rather more to do with the pressures and adventures of life itself. He'd never be fat, he preened, stretching, but his muscles had massed with the passing of the years, most of the fawn-like litheness disappearing beneath a layer of slender strength. Facing himself in the mirror, he looked at all the lines and wrinkles that could tell his life story to anyone who cared to take the time to read them. He, obviously, knew every tale and thought with an uncommon pang of self-pity how clearly they showed the smallness of happiness he'd had. Oh, there were laughter lines aplenty, but there was also the furrowing of his brow, the deeply delineated frown marks standing like soldiers between his eyebrows, the faint droop of his mouth. But most of all, there was that hollowness of his eyes he always found so depressing, for it reflected what was left when you subtracted his job.

For a while, he thought that he and Mark might last, but not even Mark had finally been able to understand the hours and the secrecy and the constant, all-seeing security. But Mark was part of the past now, over-he looked at himself in sudden shock—a year ago in the past. That year had slithered by without him even marking upon its passing, another year with nothing but the job and pleasant friendships that were never quite enough, nor ever quite right. And if nothing was ever quite right, compared to Bodie, where did that leave him then? For look, he said to his reflection, where that relationship ended up.

Resolute, he turned his back on his own face, not choosing to see the answer to his question, refusing to think about Bodie. That was the worst thing about the prospect of having 10 whole days of nothing but free time on his hands: he knew he'd end up spending an inordinate amount of time thinking about relationships gone awry, and a love that had been drowned at birth like an unwanted kitten.

But the first day of a cruise—no matter how resented—was not the time to spend regurgitating the past. There were attractive men up there, and this was a closed environment from whence no tales could be carried to Whitehall to ruin all the work he and Cowley had put into his career. Whistling, focussed entirely on the

present, the past and the future bedamned by the prospect of pleasure and he was on his way to the top deck, where his speedos would garner approval, albeit far less than the goodies they so scantly concealed. On his own in the lift, almost at his stop, he adjusted himself with studied intention, lifting his cock so that the long length of it was displayed as a separate enticement from the heavy roundness that showed where his balls were cradled safely by bright red lycra. His fingers found the small mesh pouch inside the briefs, one which he had always used before for keys he was unwilling to leave behind, but he realised, as the door opened on a banquet of attractive men, that it could have been designed as a place to stash a condom or two. And judging by the looks he was harvesting, it might be a hell of a good idea to make sure he carried some. He grinned to himself, just imagining himself asking for a 'gin and tonic—oh, and a couple of condoms, please. Prelubed and ribbed, if you have them'. Christ, this was a gay cruise run by a gay cruise line aimed exclusively at the gay market; they could probably supply the damned things in your colour £3£3£3 of choice. There was an extremely handsome 111 man, very tall, very dark, propping up the £3£3£3 pseudo-Caribbean bar and Doyle flaunted himself, making his interest as apparent as the bulge in the other man's swimming trunks. He doubted he was going to do anything quite so precipitous, quite so unwise, as to fuck the bloke five minutes after meeting him, but this freedom to flirt was intoxicating. He glanced around, marvelling on at the fact that every single man he could see was gay, that there was no need on this ship for the ultra-discreet, semi-secret code that was used in the world he inhabited. There was no reason here to check out the name of a favourite pub, to establish if there was even the minimal knowledge of the gay world, and therefore the possibility of what was euphemistically termed 'mutual interests'.

Casting around for a free lounger, he stopped for a moment, shocked into rudeness to stare at the couple. They were lying side by side in matching briefs, reclining on matching towels on matching loungers, their unity worn like a banner. But what had made him stare was the sight of one of them leaning over to kiss, lingeringly and very passionately, his friend, his hand

slipping down to press lovingly over the swell of crotch. In public—and he just come from the arrested stuffiness of Whitehall, where not even married couples did more than peck each other on the cheek. Small wonder he stared, unable to believe his eyes, his body reacting helplessly. With that throb of interest, his paralysis passed and he moved on, glancing around in furtive embarrassment that someone might have seen his gaucherie. Some had, but the reactions were more those of sympathetic comprehension, apart, of course, from those who were hawklike, staring at a possible chicken. A direct glower and that idea was dispelled: he might be a wee bit rusty when it came to the etiquette of public and enthusiastic homosexuality, but he was no virgin nor anyone's bottom.

There was a clump of empty lounges over by one of the gangways, so he headed there, claiming one and then standing beside it to scan for a steward. He might not be ready to order his condoms, but he could use a drink right now. The only word to describe the young man responding to his beckoning finger was pretty. $_{\text{£3£3£3}}$ Doyle found himself smiling in response to the 112 sweet smile and the approving assessment of £3£3£3 his body. Even if it were for the sake of a generous tip signed at the foot of the bill, it was still pleasant to be so openly desired. Someone else in the interim, however, apparently was dying of the thirst, too, and the steward paused, lowering himself with a grace that drew a pang of response from Doyle: he had been that limber and graceful, once. Oh, he was hardly a lumbering elephant now, but there were one or two things creeping into his workout now that he couldn't do as well as he once had. There were things that were taking a few seconds longer for him to do, the inexorable push of time nudging him towards the grave.

> Such morbidity, he reminded himself, was exactly the kind of thing he was on this stupid bloody cruise to escape. He lay down on the lounger, sighing in relief as the sun warmed him like the hand of a lover, tingling immediately into his muscles, beginning to work magic on joints he hadn't even noticed were stiffening. Age, he supposed, frowning again, that and all those years on the street, getting pounded, running and jumping and fighting on concrete. All that damage: he was lucky he had so few re

minders. But the day was beautiful, and the young man peering down at him with that smile was also beautiful, so he set his mind to enjoyment, trying to truly discard his work and the politics that made it both challenge and sewer.

"Gin and tonic, please."

Booze, at ten o'clock in the morning. He had an urge to sit here all alone and laugh, proving the old saying about mad dogs and Englishmen having rather a lot in common. Suppressed, the humour showed up as nothing more than a smile of singular satisfaction, reflecting his mood. He felt all of a sudden, as if all the the strings and ties and chains had been severed. G&T at ten in the morning—he really, honestly and truly was on holiday. Even if it was an enforced medical leave, he was still on holiday, on a glorious cruise that he wasn't even paying for.

A shadow didn't bring any coolness, but the chinkle of ice in a glass did. "Your drink, sir. My name is Philip, sir, so please don't hesitate to call me if you need anything, anything at all. And remember, sir, this is an all-found cruise, so everything is on the house. Everything, sir."

A blind, dumb and deaf cabbage would have got that message, loud and clear. Doyle smiled at him, kindly, but making it clear that he would flirt but no farther. "Everything? Then you'll be too busy to get up to much trouble on a ship this size, won't you? Thanks, Philip. I'll make sure you're the one I call when next I need a drink."

He almost regretted turning him down, watching that tight little bum twitch away amongst the loungers and tables, but if Philip were so willing with him, then god knew how many other men he'd been willing with. And in this day and age, he sighed, you had to be so bloody careful.

Eyes closed to keep out the sun and those interested in getting to know him better, he whiled away the time, doing nothing more than drifting with the sound of the sea and the rise and fall of laughter. He started, realising then that he must have fallen asleep, ambushed by overwork to which he would not own and by the long flight out from London to meet the ship. Sitting up slowly, rather welcome knowledge dawned on him: he wasn't stiff. He sprang up now, bending down to finish the disgustingly weak, warm but at least still wet drink, then he

stopped. There was something... A reawakening of instincts and training he no longer needed on a daily basis, but the prickling awareness was there, full force, without warning. Without him thinking about it, his hand had reached for the gun that wasn't there, and that was when he realised that it wasn't the situation, it was the personality. A split second, all this, and he was straightening, turning at the same time as the name burst into his mind—

—and he turned, full tilt into him. "Bodie!"

Hands smaller than he remembered grappled him to steadiness, his near-nudity plastered to Bodie's well-clad body. After that single word, they neither of them seemed to know what to say, Bodie holding him dumbly, staring at him, and he himself staring back, almost falling headfirst under the spell of the past.

But the cold voice of old betrayal disguised as ever-so reasonable rationality reminded him, the past was the past, dead and buried, over and done, long gone, kicked the bucket...

So why was he still standing there, to all intents and purposes in Bodie's arms, staring at him as if this were an old Trevor Howard film? Because, his honesty whispered at him, because it hasn't changed for you. You still fancy him. And he's still the one everyone else gets compared to and comes up wanting.

In the end, it was Bodie letting go of him that freed them both from the grip of memory. Odd, really, that he felt so cold: he had thought that was something that only happened in films and fiction. But it wasn't and the sun wasn't hot enough to convert this autumnal blast. It was the expression on Bodie's face that chilled him, that combination of fear and desire and pustulating agony.

"Fancy meeting you here," Bodie finally said, the kind of cliché one clings to, only to die of embarrassment later, when the phrase is remembered.

"Nothing odd about me being here, is there, Bodie? I'm the one who's supposed to be queer." Not only was he sinking in the quicksand of undead emotions, he was slipping back into the kind of language he hadn't used since the '70 s—since his time with Bodie. And how very much water had flowed under the bridge since then. Time had been less kind to Bodie than it had been to him, or perhaps it was just that life

had been more of a bastard to his ex-partner. There were lines on Bodie's face, and he took the time to read them, as he had taken the time to look at his own, earlier. He didn't like what he saw. Too much pain had lived on this face, with too little laughter and too much anger. Subtle changes, too, adding to the distortion caused by the wrinkling of skin that had once struck him as the most beautiful skin he had ever seen. Jowls were beginning, minutely, faintly, but for the first time, one could see how Bodie would look as an old man. All the signposts were there, as they were in his own face, but so much more clearly. The body was still trim, but stolid now, settled down into the stubborn build of a rugby player, all solidity and power. The skin was still as white, still as prone to sunburn, which was probably why Bodie was the only man on board this ship who wasn't exposing at least his legs to the sun.

Like a refrain from a half-forgotten song, a memory filtered into his mind: Bodie, that time they'd gone out to the country and travelled up the canal on a barge. He had ended up as brown as the proverbial berry, but poor Bodie had £3£3£3 ended up like a raspberry, almost purple with 113 sunburn and wincing in agony every time he £3£3£3 moved. That had been, the sadness of it ambushed him with unexpected intensity, only the weekend before they'd been outed, although they hadn't had that word back then. The weekend before, when it had seemed that time had only happiness to promise and that the biggest threat to their eventual romance was a stray bullet.

"You're looking well," Bodie was saying to him, fingers tugging suddenly, sweetly at one of his curls as if the temptation was too great to be resisted, "even if you have gone a bit grey. All brass and silver now, aren't you?"

He couldn't lie: Bodie did not look well. In fact, he remembered this look of old: exhaustion, emotionally drained, more than half defeated. "You look like you've been having an interesting time of it," was what he said, wondering if the old communication was still there between them after its long hibernation or if it had starved in the fallow winter.

"If you were Chinese, I'd say you were spot on."

"You've been all right, though?" "Couldn't've been better."

And the aching bitterness in that made him regret all the times Cowley had tried to talk to him about Bodie but he'd refused to listen, too afraid that he would end up lost again. It had hurt beyond bearing at the beginning, when Cowley had offered him reports and by the time the pain had receded to levels he could grit his teeth and bear it, the habit of mentioning Bodie had been broken, the name become taboo, the information lost. In the meantime, what was there to say to such a bald display of disaster? Nothing that was neither banal nor useless. So he settled for the trivial and the cautiously friendly. "The lunch bell just went. You coming?"

Even as he said it, he could have kicked himself, but Bodie let it pass, giving no reaction at all. "Yeah," was all he said, leading the way to the dining room. "All this sea air makes me starving."

They kept it up, the impersonal chatter of strangers coming across each other on a boat, as if it were no more than two Englishmen of similar ages and backgrounds bumping into a £3£3£3 kindred soul amidst the racket and intrusive 114 friendliness of foreigners. But it was less than £3£3£3 that, listened to less than even the usual expatriates' conversation, and it was far more than that, too. They were watching each other constantly, with a kind of morbid subterfuge, trying to find signs that the other had been missed, that life had been less worth living in the absence of the other.

> "So what've you been up to?" Bodie asked, the first to yield.

> "The same old mob. I'm Cowley's second now and when the Old Man retires, it'll be my hands on the reins." Said so blandly, with such apparent unawareness that his news could sting, Doyle didn't even hear the echo of Cowley's voice in his own.

> "That's nice," Bodie agreed, sounding like a man offered three root canals without anæsthetics. "How is the old bastard, anyway?"

> Doyle toyed with his food, feeling like one of the clocks in a Dali painting, melting into surreality. He'd stopped allowing himself to think about this moment, this re-meeting Bodie, but the cream-tea politeness was so bizarre, it was making his bones itch. And the hair on his chest was bothering him, as if it had woken up

to the fact that it was lying all wrong, as if the scars were bothering it, reminded of the time before by the sound of Bodie's voice. Then he actually thought about the question and his face darkened with the worry he had no-one to tell about. "Cowley? Old, and still a proper bastard."

Bodie looked at him with quick, bright eyes, the once-dead rapport slowly reborning. "And? What's the matter with him?"

And it was as easy as sitting with him at the Black Boar, discussing the latest gossip, passing on juicy titbits, worrying a problem like a bone. "His heart. It's been dicky for years, but it's getting worse now. Angina, tiredness, all that sort of thing. But you know the Old Man, he'll outlive the lot of us. Only..."

"Only what?"

He ate the last of his meal first, neatly balancing flaky fish and nubby wild rice on the back of his fork with all the finesse he'd learned over the years of working with Cowley and facing down those born with silver and gold spoons in their mouths. "Only," he finally answered, not looking up, "only George doesn't seem to agree with us. These past six months-Christ, anyone'd think he had a direct line Upstairs and God'd told him when he was expected."

There was a visible reaction to the use of Cowley's first name, a blush of pain, but it was gone before Doyle looked up. "Could be he's just making sure everything's all in order, you know Cowley." This time, Doyle did see the minute tightening around the eye, the faint compression of lips as the name was said. There was a wash of guilt over him, slow and deceptively mild before the undertow threatened his balance. He'd basically managed to never think about how Bodie'd felt, losing CI5 and Cowley, only going as far as comforting himself with the knowledge that if Bodie had really wanted it, he would have stayed and fought. Beside him, at his back, where they belonged, together...

He strangled that snakelike hope, telling himself that they had bumped into each other—literally—and that was that. There were too many years between them, and Bodie's marriage to consider. Regardless of the fact that Bodie was on a gay cruise, there was the fact of his marriage. The one and only fact he'd ever asked Cowley for, the one and only fact that had cut him dead cold and buried any chances he

thought he and Bodie might have had. "No," he said, bursting into speech, words tumbling quickly from him, trying to cover up the suddenly long silence when he'd been lost in thought, "no, this time's different. It's as if George's making his peace, tying up all the loose ends, the whole bit. I mean, look at what he did just last month. D'you know, he looked up an old army mate of his—from Korea—to pay him back money he'd borrowed way back when? Now that's obsessive. No, it's not just his usual—" the Scots accent had improved with age and much exposure to the real thing "-"a place for everything, and everything in its place'. I don't know, blame it on the old copper's nose. George doesn't seem to think it'll be long before he pops his clogs."

"It's hard to imagine George Cowley being dead. He's like the Queen Mum, been there forever."

Doyle looked at him again, watching the faint clouds of emotion scud over Bodie's face in muted contrast to the blandness of his words. He didn't know what to say: sorry for doing something I'd do again, sorry you ran away like a coward instead of facing yourself? "I don't think I'm going to bother with dessert, I'll have a swim instead. See you later."

And he was gone, out of there, where he couldn't see Bodie any more, plunged into the almost-silence offered by the pool water, swimming deep, under the surface, all the colours cut sharply by painter's knife, all the other bodies twisted and distorted by the folding and pleating of the water. He touched bottom, holding out for as long as he could before going back up and facing the world again. Actually, the world was a breeze: it was himself he didn't want to face. Under the water, he was buffered by the liquid satin, able to give himself over to the concentration of the physical: keeping himself on the bottom, how much air he had left, how his lungs were feeling, the way the water felt swimming through the hair on his head and chest and legs. His time was up. Left to the last second, his resurfacing was spectacular, his body shooting up to let him gulp in air. With the sting of air, with the heat of the eyes staring at him, came the anger. He was livid, unexpectedly so, almost unable to control the urge to take Bodie by the neck and shake and strangle and curse

him until the bastard was dead. Face impassive, he began swimming, back and forth, back and forth, a serious, intense discipline that had no place in this pool of dolphinesque Davids. Every lift of his arm, every kick of his feet, was like a blow thudding into Bodie, satisfying, heavy blows. He kept on going, trying to exorcise a demon by exercise, trying to face something he hadn't known about himself.

He hated Bodie for leaving him like that. Hated him with a passion. And loved him with a passion, still. Christ, he thought to himself, what a state to be in. So much for reducing stress and lowering my fucking blood pressure. He had never, ever been so angry in his life as he had been when Bodie had said that about George. An odd combination of insider talking about the head of his department and an outsider sticking him up on the pedestal of public admiration. And to say it in that tone of voice, as if nothing had ever happened, as if he'd never run out on him, leaving him to carry the can all by himself, clawing and fighting and struggling to prove that even poofs could be reliable, could be good operatives. Of course, he thought to £3£3£3 himself with an ulcerating bitterness, getting 115 married almost straight away played right into £3£3£3 our hands. Look, we said, he wasn't really queer after all. Just playing at it, just playing at it...

The burn of tears took him completely by surprise, for he'd never shed a single one over Bodie, not even when he'd been told about the embarrassingly hasty marriage. The swimming pool was proving useful, chlorine the perfect cover for eyes that were uncommonly red and bloodshot. He had lost the rhythm of his swim, some of the vengeful anger subsided, replaced by this stomach-leadening misery. He pulled himself out of the pool, grabbing one of the spectacularly garish towels provided by the ship and dropped onto one of the loungers. Forearm over his eyes, he lay there like the dead, missing only the coins to cover his eyes. His bracelet was digging into his forehead, but he ignored it, not needing to be reminded about Mark, not right now. Not when he had Bodie to cope with. Not when he was being pierced by the emotions that he had stuffed under the metaphoric carpet a decade ago. Something, the old sixth sense, the one that had warned him that Bodie was nearby prickled behind his eyes to join the tears. With

due caution, blinking rapidly, as if his eyes were a touch watery from chlorine and too much sun, he glanced around with patented casualness.

And there he was, standing in the shadow of the coiled, open-work staircase that led to the upper deck. All in white, which struck Ray for the first time, for Bodie had never been one for dressing like that. White shirt, very modern, white trousers, very well cut. Not expensive, not really, but not cheap or common looking either. Even the shoes were white, on a man who, when last he'd known him, despised white shoes for anything other than exercise or cricket. But these were soft leather shoes, the kind he'd normally expect to see on a dancer. Or a gay man. He'd come back to that. The question he hadn't asked over lunch, preferring instead such comments as the weather and how much hotter it was here than back home... Casual conversation or not, he had gleaned that Bodie had been abroad, only returning to England in the past year or so, that he'd had hard times, but was hoping that things were getting better, had come into some money recently from a relative he £3£3£3 hadn't even known.

116

And was standing there in the shadows, the $\mathfrak{L}3\mathfrak{L}3\mathfrak{L}3$ poor boy from the village staring through the drawing room window at the Earl's daughter, eyes so full of hopeless longing it cut Doyle to the quick. But his anger was there, at the core of him, festered away to the bone, and it met the look with harshness, with a gaze that said, 'you should've thought of that before you ran away and left me'. He closed his eyes again, covering them with his arm, pulling the towel up over that, a multi-layered barrier with huge great 'keep out' signs bristling from it. The only problem was that he hadn't been quick enough. He'd taken a quisling into his little den: the expression in Bodie's eyes upon seeing the hostility in Doyle's.

> It occurred to Doyle then, that perhaps he might have a hard time forgiving himself for what he was doing to Bodie. But then, his anger shouted at him, bursting the staves that had held it in for these many years, won't you have a harder time forgiving Bodie? It was probably the marriage that rankled most, second to the leaving itself. He'd always hated cowardice and always admired Bodie for his courage, so to have the one betrayed by the other and to abandon

him to face the wolves alone while Bodie went off and joined in with the rest of Society, oh, he'd be hard put to let that lie.

Even if Bodie had looked at him that way, hiding beneath the stairs, as if he had no right now to so much as look.

Always quick to tan, Doyle was turning the colour of sultanas already. Physically, he was aware the benefits of rest already beginning, but his mind was a rollercoaster tied in knots. One thing led to another, hurtling on at breakneck speed, only to come to a clattering halt at Bodie walking out on him, or on Bodie walking back in on him, with that secret look, hidden under the stairs. It was time to get dressed, he decided, closing the rollercoaster down for the night, go in to dinner, meet some nice guy, flirt a little, play a little, perhaps even find out if the stewards really are happy to deliver a condom to your cabin, any time, day or night. Bodie's disappearance had soured much of his life, but he'd be damned if he'd let this reappearance spoil his holiday. Spryer than most men half his age, he got to his feet, turned quickly—and caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. Someone, moving, stealthy speed dissolving into the shadows of the ship. But if he could recognise him with his back turned, then he could recognise him by a brief glimpse. Bodie. Stood there, watching, all afternoon? The implications shivered down his spine and took up residence in his boots, along with his heart. Bodie was back. Christ, not just bumping into him on a boat and letting it go at that. No, watching him like that, Bodie must want him.

And what the hell was he going to do about that?

There was the marriage to consider, and although he knew many a gay man married for camouflage and familial duties, he made it his policy never to get involved with them, unable as he was to put up with the lying and subterfuge and shame. He'd gone through far too much to ever skulk around in shame-filled secrecy again. But then, what if he'd been right after all, a decade ago? What if Bodie really were gay, but simply too scared and too repressed to admit it? What if it had been a knee-jerk reaction—run away and get married, that'll prove that you're not one of them.

And what if it were? It didn't change a single fucking thing between them, the thought billowed through his mind like the smoke from burning tyres. It didn't change a thing.

DINNER COULD BEST BE DESCRIBED AS AN EXPERIENCE. He was seated at at a table with five other men. one Irish, one Dutch, one other Englishman and a couple who were overflowing, unfortunately for Doyle, with talk of their 'marriage', a union taken in their church with the blessing of a God in whom they believed. They kept conversation going throughout every single course, not even beginning to wind down by the time coffee and liqueurs were served. Doyle was grateful to them: a single, small question from him and they'd be off and running, talking for ages, freeing him to ponder the man sitting three tables away. All he could see was the profile, a canvas both familiar and new. The chin was different now, heavier, the neck showing the passing of years. Self-consciously, he touched his own chin, feeling in himself the slight loosening of flesh that was beginning, just beginning to sag. Like Bodie.

We're getting old, he thought incredulously. My god, we're getting old! It had always seemed to him that life had stopped, to a degree, when Bodie had left. That part of their life, being partners, the sweet anticipation of becoming more, had always seemed to Doyle to simply exist, as if it were trapped in one of those glass, brasstopped Victorian viewing bottles Cowley had collected. To see that those times had passed, erased by lines of experience on faces and the heaviness of jowl, that shook him.

Of a sudden, taking a stranger to bed didn't seem quite so appealing. Apart from the emotional burdens he was suddenly shouldering, was the discomfiting recognition not of his own mortality—he had accepted that years ago—but for the first time, of the inevitability of it. And the creeping knowledge that before he died, he'd have to grow old first. Like Cowley, struggling every day against the hardships of increasing age, refusing to concede, refusing to yield—but getting his affairs in order. Perhaps, he thought, it's not that George thinks that Death is going to get him. Maybe it's that he knows that old age will.

He grabbed his brandy balloon, downing the heat in a oner, needing that sudden explosion

of life inside him. The stupid things men do in mid-life crisis were suddenly beginning to look quite sensible to him, very reasonable responses to a shakingly unreasonable life. Keeping his head downcast, he took another look at Bodie, seeing past the changes time had wrought, realising that to most people, the differences would be barely visible. It was just that he'd spent so much of his time memorising that face, staring at it, examining it in minute detail. He knew the profile better than the full face, the result, naturally, of many hours sitting side by side in the cramped confines of a car. His eyes closed, shutting out the present, taking him back to the past so completely that he could actually smell the old silver Capri, that odd combination of gun oil and food, after-shave and the fustiness of car heater. And Bodie, always Bodie, who managed to smell positively cordon bleu, despite summer's heat or winter's dampness. He took a deep breath to relive the memory, but instead caught whiff of discarded coffee and empty brandy glass. Not scents he associated with Bodie, but the view...

He went back to his contemplation of Bodie's £3£3£3 profile. It was subtly altered, and not merely by 117 time. There was something about the set of the £3£3£3 mouth that was different, the slope of the nose... Yes, there, the tiniest change, a mark that showed the nose had been broken at some point in the last decade, up near the bridge, where the frown lines spilled over from the forehead. He couldn't see the eyes, but there were differences there, too, almost as if they were more deeply set than before. Well, that usually happens when you get older, bags start, eyelids sag and, thinking of his own face, you get to the point where people start saying your face has 'character'. He hoped he didn't end up with as much 'character' as Cowley...

Bodie was leaning forward, listening with every evidence of intense interest to the man seated on his right and Doyle could see enough to recognise that expression: Bodie was bored out of his skull and about to start in with the pithy comments and sarcastic remarks. God, but that brought back some good memories! He could just picture old man Jackson, that day they'd been stuck bringing the ancient and cranky boffin in to CI5. Some of the comments that day had been really ripe, but no one could

top Bodie when it came to saying the filthiest of things without actually putting a foot out of place. Reprimand him for his comments and he would pin seraphic innocence on his face and leave his accuser feeling like they had a sewer of a mind, taking such harmless remarks as such terrible double entendres. He wondered what the poor blond was going to get pinned with. He found himself sinking back into the old habit without so much as a nod to the present, relaxing into his seat, waiting for Bodie to go into his usual routine. In the meantime, he would simply enjoy the pleasant view, watching the way he used to.

He could have Bodie, if he wanted to. The thought came, full-fledged and unbidden, echoing an afternoon long gone, razor edged with dreams longs since dead and ashen. He could. He could have him, right here and now. After all, if Bodie were on this cruise, if he'd booked himself on board, then he had to be available. 'Ready, willing and able, that's me', was Bodie's once frequent boast. Thumb rubbing his lower lip, Doyle considered that. Ready, willing and £3£3£3 able. Then the bitterness brought him back to 118 the present, to the man he was now, to the man £3£3£3 Bodie had become: willing, all right, but just don't tell the wife. He could see it quite clearly in his mind's eye: the wife, very pretty, very blonde, a very good cook—Bodie would insist on that—a couple of kids, nice car. The motorbike rallies were probably a thing of the past, although he probably still played cricket with his old mob. He'd take the wife and kiddies with him, the blonde wife drinking white wine while the kids consumed orange squash, all of them preening because they were with big, handsome Bodie who could charm Brigadiers and babies with equal ease. Oh, yeh, he could just see the nice little house, three up, two down, well-kept garden, toys put away before Daddy came home at night, everyone waiting at the front door when they heard the car drive up—he pulled himself up short, surprised by his own bitterness, not to mention fancifulness. Apart from anything else, he reminded himself, Bodie'd only been back in England for about a year, and no mention had been made of the family. But then, he didn't suppose sitting having lunch with an exalmost-lover on a gay cruise surrounded by gay men was quite the place to pull out holiday snapshots of the children. He didn't suppose the breakfast table had been quite the place to tell the wife that you were going on a gay cruise, either. Two separate lives, the way he always had. The bastard hadn't changed, not one bit, not where it mattered.

But then again, Doyle thought, fingertip tracing the silvered edge of brandy glass, listening as carefully to the sound as if it were his own inner voice speaking to him, it wasn't exactly fair of him to jump to conclusions, was it? Maybe Bodie was just another one of those blokes who swept half their lives under the carpet and then trod on the lumps when they became too embarrassingly visual. But maybe he wasn't. So a gay cruise wasn't the best place to discuss family, but what if the family wasn't there any more? The only actual fact you have, laddie, he said to himself in friendly mockery of his boss, is that Bodie married shortly after you and I forced him into a corner and elbowed him out of CI5. Which was nothing less than the truth, albeit spoken only once, the day before he'd left on this cruise. His eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion and the man opposite him started casting around for an alibi for whatever it was he was supposed to have done. Belatedly noticing the fair-haired man's squirming discomfiture, Doyle gave him his most reassuring, civil CI5 smile. Which probably explained why the man harriedly recalled that he had something terribly urgent to do.

The empty space he left behind left a tunnel of vision that ended at Bodie's solid form. He was in the well-known fawns he had worn so often, but these clothes were elegantly casual, a far more mature style than anything Doyle had ever seen him in. He was even, shock of shocks, wearing sandals, feet bared to the world. And it was hard, Doyle confessed, to remember why he was angry, with Bodie sitting there, lost in a world of thought, his mouth so sad and his back bowed. It seemed so unlike him, so much an attitude of defeat, where before there had never been anything less than bravado radiating from him. Then the more familiar body language returned, Bodie straightening up, spine and upper lip stiffening, the perfect picture of the stoic Englishman. Apart, Doyle noted, apart from the sadness around his mouth. It would be so easy, he knew, to go over there, invite Bodie to share a drink, sit together, reminisce, slide

easily and comfortably into sex: the very fact of being here was loud enough proof that they neither one of them was either innocent or unwilling. So easy... As easy as it should have been that summer? As easy as it all was, before Bodie made it clear that men were for fucking and nothing else? As easy as it all was before he realised that whatever his own feelings, whatever his own fantasies, Bodie's feelings for him were as shallow and pure as a puddle in rush hour.

Easy? Oh, yeah, that was always the word used to describe sexual conquests, wasn't it? He'd be easy all right—but the where, when and with whom were very much his own choice and no-one else's. No matter the temptation, he wasn't going to fall, panting, at Bodie's feet. And, he hoped with all sincerity, if he told himself that often enough, his balls would actually get round to listening to his brain. A few metres away, Bodie stretched his left leg out straight, the one he'd injured that first week on the job. He'd always loved Bodie's legs, envied the heavy musculature and the smoothness of the skin. He used to dream what it would be like to start at the long toes and work his way up, licking every inch until he got to the cock, which would be beginning to rise, filling with the heat of Bodie's arousal, and then he could take him in his mouth and-

—and if he didn't get out of here now, as in right now, he was going to embarrass himself. Not to mention fall, panting, at Bodie's feet. Thanking heaven and WilliWear for baggy trousers, he slipped from the room, not missing Bodie's quick start of reaction.

Across the plastic bamboo that bedecked the outside bar, a lush young thing had draped himself, the pose so provocative as to be almost absurd, were it not for the immediate response it evoked in Doyle's cock.

"Hi, honey," the young man, or not quite so young man, given closer inspection, called out to Doyle, cocking his hips and displaying his cock a little more. "It's the first night of the cruise, what say you we don't waste a single second?"

Temptation incarnate—were it not for the man sitting in the dining room all evening. Were it not for the man who had spent the better part of the day doing nothing more with his life than

watching an old comrade. Were it not for the fact that there was a man here who could turn his knees to jelly and his cock to steel by doing nothing more sexual than breathing.

"Sounds like fun, but I'm otherwise engaged," Doyle told him, giving the answer he would probably have given whether Bodie had been there or not. Sick humour being the only outlet, he and some of his clique in Whitehall, bemoaning the decorum their jobs required, used to joke at the beginning about how AIDS had put the final nail in the coffin of their sexual revolution. Now, he found that not even the sick jokes could make it funny for him. And nothing, not even a desperation for sexual release, not even the fear of throwing himself at his past in the form of Bodie, could induce him to risk a total stranger.

"Oh, come on, do. I'm really quite clean and very, very nice to know."

Doyle laughed at the way positively theatrical come on.

"I even," the man continued without missing a beat, hamming it up, encouraging the fun, "come complete with—" an abracadabra of his hand, a ribbon-wrapped condom flashing, "- £3£3£3 accoutrements. I used to be a Boy Scout, you 119 see. Always," he cocked his hips forward, show- £3£3£3 ing off just how prepared he was, "ready."

"So I see. And very nicely ready at that. But..." "But nothing. Come on, there are lots and lots of things we can do that are safe enough. We could..."

But Doyle was gone, chasing after a shadow he had seen, a wraith slipping off into anonymous darkness. There was no reasoning behind his actions, just the gut-level instinct that had always made him watch Bodie's back, right from the first day. It wasn't something that had grown, nor something that they had built up layer by measured layer, it had simply been there, as natural as Bodie's instinct to guard him had been. And he knew on a level he had rarely tapped in the years of Bodie's absence, that there was something wrong.

The first corridor was devoid of life, the second holding only a couple secluded in a door recess, mouths busy on each other. The Cabaña Bar was crowded, but Bodie wasn't part of the gyrating mass, nor was he one of the moonglowed bodies knifing into the pool. The amusement deck was equally useless, the gym deserted

by all but the most obsessed body builders. By now, he had slowed his search, walking calmly around the ship, checking all the public places, gradually accepting that Bodie had gone to ground. And when Bodie did that, there was nothing to do but wait until he showed himself again.

There was so much to do on the ship, everything from classic films being shown in the cinema to public, if cautious, sex on the aft deck. He backtracked his own perambulations of the evening, looking at everything going on, mind too distracted to become involved in any of it. He had ignored Bodie for almost ten full years: it was time to stop long enough to think about him. Most daunting of all, it was time to face his own rôle in what had happened between them. Self-righteousness is all to the well and good, he was thinking as he put his key in his lock and went inside to begin the bedtime ritual, and it'll even keep you warm, if you handle it properly. But it isn't much use when you're trying to sort things out, is it?

He got as far as teeth-cleaning, face-washing £3£3£3 and using the toilet, but stopped before picking **120** up book or getting into bed. Elbows leaning on £3£3£3 the open porthole, he turned his face to the zephyr that was mild and warm, even at this hour of the night. There was a wonderful combination of aromas, of the sea and flowers, of three of the world's four elements combining. The island off the starboard bow was prinked by the lights of small, bleached houses, the sea scudding past him was star-sparkled by the party lights of the ship itself. The air was heavy with moisture and scents, tying everything in together. It was, in spite of his inner turmoil, endlessly calming. He was an island-dweller, no matter how large the island, with the lure of the sea a part of his genes, enforced by the treat of holidays beside the sea, the ultimate treat for a child. Very calm, very serene, but without a single answer for him. He just didn't know what to do about Bodie. Oh, he knew quite clearly what he wanted to do about him, but then, that probably wasn't feasible. Bodie looked quite a bit too big to be swept off his feet and carried over the threshold.

> And that was a thought that stopped him dead, the breath jammed in his throat. Christ, he thought, wishing he believed, wishing it

would help to pray, that really is what I want. Forever and ever, Amen, even after what happened before. All because he's shown up on a gay cruise. And it's not as if he ever denied fucking blokes, it was the reasons behind it that got to me. Get involved with a bloke like that and you're in as much trouble as a battered wife.

He'd seen it before-in Bodie, for one-the inability to admit to being gay. Alongside it, graceless as an unfed cur, came dissatisfaction and loss of self-respect, snarling and curling round and round till any semblance of a happy relationship was purely accidental. When he'd met him, Mark Ferguson was still unyoking himself from the aftereffects of precisely such an imbroglio, starving for approval and distrustful of it when it came. Even experiencing it as second hand as Doyle had, had served to rationalise and entrench the visceral reaction he had had to Bodie's rejection of him as anything more than a bum-boy.

The zephyr had become a breeze, riffling through his hair, cooling him, telling him it was time for bed. Between the ubiquitous crispness of white sheets, he lay stiff as a board, mind circling endlessly on the past and on Bodie. As clear as the light of day, he could see Bodie's profile, softened by the romantic table-top lanterns. With greater clarity yet, he could see the trouble in that face and the woes, all the images of lunchtime and evening swirling around in a kaleidoscope that always settled into the pictures from the days when they were together. He could recall, with perfect detail, sitting with Bodie in the car, or side by side on the sofa, watching the match on a Wednesday night or the late film on BBC2. There were all the times on stakeouts, in grotty little flats or squalid cafés. There were the endless bum-warmings, sitting waiting for Cowley to finish some meeting or other. Double dates, too, sharing a table with a couple of girls, his real attention focussed on the other man, on the way the lights made his hair shine, the way his eyes shone when he laughed or seduced. Wondering what the reaction would be if he were to propose taking the girls back to the one flat and not splitting up when they got down to the serious action. Dreaming of suggesting picking up a single girl to share between the two of them, and where that would lead. Seduction was a fine art, one

he had mastered when he was very, very young, but he'd never tried any of his games on with Bodie. It had always been too important with Bodie to warrant messing about. Of course, he recognised with bitter mockery, it had taken him until Bodie left to realise exactly why he'd never wanted to play around with Bodie. Love really was blind, wasn't it?

Love. Bloody stupid thing to do, falling in love with my partner, he sneered at himself, left hand serpenting its way under the covers. Even more incredibly brilliant to fall for a bloke who can't get the guts up to admit he's gay: this, as he grasped himself, long slow strokes bringing languid arousal. But at least I had good taste: as he pictured Bodie at dinner, hand moving faster. Best looking bloke aboard: as he pumped himself faster, spreading his legs to give his right hand room to stroke his balls, his own musk warming the air under the summer blanket. Gorgeous, the way his hair's got that bit longer, and the way the muscles in his arms move, and his skin's as perfect as it used to be: this, as he stood fully erect, hips rolling, rubbing his buttocks on the sheet, hand rubbing cock.

Bodie, as he had walked away from him. Bodie, making it into nothing more than rough trade with him, Doyle, as the supplicant at the feet of the straight man. Bodie, big-mouth Bodie, ex-merc from an unpopular war, caring more about society's mores than he did about Doyle...

The movements of his hand were harder now, faster, desperate, the coming a joyless release of his body, cum spurting from him as misery flooded him. Unless the leopard had changed his spots, it was going to be a bloody horrible cruise. Snapping the bedclothes aside, he sprang from the bed, standing under the hot shower for the eon it took to rebuild his calm and to wash away the most minute residue of his wanting Bodie.

HE WAS, HE DECIDED, GOING TO AVOID BODIE FOR THE ENTIRE DAY. He'd have breakfast on deck, for Bodie wasn't one for getting up at six in the morning, not even for food—especially not when the food was available all day and he was on holiday. So breakfast would be undisturbed, then there was going to be a port of call, he could spend the day on that, perhaps with the American couple from dinner who had invited him to

join them. Lunch ashore, probably dinner as well, back to the ship a few minutes before sailing time and bob's your uncle-no Bodie. A whole day, without temptation, without the opportunity to make a fool of himself, without the time to get himself even more hooked than he already was.

And also, a small voice that sounded suspiciously like Cowley asked him, no time to hear Bodie's side of the story?

"All right, so I'm being bloody unfair and downright judgemental. It's not one of our operations, is it?" he shouted at his shirt, which looked at him blankly. "Oh, fuck it," he muttered, shouldering into the uncommunicative clothing, buttoning it up haphazardly and inadequately, scrambling to shove sun-screen and money into the small holiday clutch he'd bought at the airport on his way out. He'd skip breakfast, grab the first boat off the ship, buy some bread or something on shore. He wanted out of there, fast, before temptation could bite his head off and get him to do something stupid.

Or simply something he was scared of doing? the insidious voice asked again.

£3£3£3

He slammed the door to his cabin with un- 121 warranted violence, waking up half the deck, £3£3£3 starting up a cacophony of annoyed shouts that drowned out the sounds of his footsteps as he half ran topside.

It had been an unmitigated disaster, of course. Oh, he hadn't seen Bodie, in that respect he was completely successful. But physical absence did not a day without Bodie make. Every time he'd turned round on the island, he'd caught sight of something he would, in times gone by, have told Bodie about: the beach that begged nude sunbathing, the water that begged swimming, the handsome men who begged buggery. An hour on the island had displayed with bawdy enthusiasm why it was called 'greek style'. He could have spent a fortune on the glory that was on offer, or simply worn himself to a frazzle with gifted amateurs. The day wore on, lunching at a taverna that was both rustic enough and clean enough for the tourist in him. Sitting there, valiantly refusing to think thoughts carnal, when there he was, a direct descendant of the men who had inspired the artists to create Greek gods. Hair tightly ringleted, swarthy

skin, dark eyed, broad-chested, lean hipped and with prick and balls lying in bas relief under painted on trousers. The kind of come hither that was going on between them had nothing whatsoever to do with language of the spoken sort, although it was certainly oral, judging by the way the local licked his lips. So easy, of course, to go with him, up to the room that would be small and clean and face the sea, as every house in this village seemed to, as if scorning the former magnificence that frowned wrecked and pathetic upon the brow of the hill. A narrow bed, under the window, sun streaming in... And, he reminded himself with marked reluctance, I don't have any french letters with me, and much though I fancy him, I don't much fancy sleeping with everyone he's been to bed with. Stricken with the restlessness of unaimed anger, he strode from the taverna, money left behind to pay for the meal he hadn't finished, the locals left to mutter about how it was better in the old days, before the foreigners came and left their manners at home.

Hands stuffed in pockets, he eschewed all the £3£3£3 places one was supposed to visit, descending 122 down the steep hillside to the beach, finding a £3£3£3 small inlet where he could sit disturbed only by the cruelty of Nature busy feeding birds. He poured the white sand into little cones that melted away with the first slight meander of air over them, watching as it all came to nothing. Sometimes, no matter how hard he tried not to let it get to him, no matter how he tried to take some time off away from it, all the news reports and letters and sad, sad stories imprisoned him in bleakness. Even here, idyllic island in an idyllic sea, there was no room for dreams, only an ugly fact growing uglier. Use condoms, they said, for safe sex. But they recommended that condoms not be used as the sole form of birth control because the failure rate was so high. But go right ahead, trust your life to a sliver of latex, put your faith in a flimsy bit of rubber. Fat chance—he wasn't about to give up living for the sake of a bit of sex.

> Oh yeah? he asked himself, thinking about Bodie. And what would you do if he invited you into his bed?

> Go. The answer was complete in and of itself, not needing him to think it before it came to mind. He dug a hole in the sand, buried a

pebble, made a cairn on top. No matter how he looked at it, the sad fact was that he'd go, running at that, if Bodie asked him. And hell take the consequences, because he wouldn't think about them until later. He drew circles in the sand, decided they looked like planets, added more circles until he had the solar system there, the stars at his fingertips. Well, he wasn't exactly surprised that he'd fall into bed with Bodie at the drop of a hat-or trousers, as Bodie wouldn't be caught dead in a hat—so the next question was what he would do after, when the ship docked and they made their disparate ways to the airport and London. Always supposing that Bodie was living in London again, that is. For all he knew, he could have gone back to Liverpool. For all he knew, he admitted quietly, he could be divorced.

A single swathe of his hand and the universe was gone. If Bodie were divorced, and just said 'see you' when they docked, that would make it all the worse, wouldn't it? It was one thing to be fucked and left, when there was a wife and children and suburban propriety to consider, but when there was no barrier bar the disinclination of Bodie himself, oh, that was so much harder to take. And going by his reaction ten years ago, he wasn't much likely to take it at all.

Which brought him back to Bodie's attitude to having sex with men, which brought him back to their near-miss back then, which brought him back to his own reasonable fears, which brought him full circle, nothing resolved, nothing answered, nothing sorted out, least of all himself. He kicked the small cairn to pieces, scuffing sand as he walked, head bowed, paying little attention to the vista around him. The spring had gone out of the day for him and he regretted now the panic that had driven him from the ship before he had the chance to lose himself in a crowd, burying himself in the chatter of strangers.

A clamber up the hill, full concentration on the job of getting back up to the path in one piece and preferably with his clothing unripped, gave him pause from his mental contortions, the convulsive and compulsive worrying that he'd never been able completely subdue. From up there, he could see the gleaming white of the ship dazzling the sea, a beacon to follow. He

started off towards it, a decision made. If it was inevitable that he was going to leap into bed the second Bodie suggested it, then he'd be damned if he'd hand all the control over to him. Inevitable, yes, but not beyond his control, not entirely. He'd simply nod graciously to that which he could not evade and take the reins firmly in his own hands: he was going to be the one to do the inviting here. He'd be the one to inveigle Bodie into bed, not the other way round. The choice would be his, and that way, at least, he'd be able to keep some of his own pride intact. No whistle from Bodie and him coming running like a grateful puppy. Not for him. He'd take the lead in this, the dominant rôle and haul Bodie to bed—by the hair if need be.

It was quite a while, according to his impatience, before there was a boat to take him to the ship, him chafing at the bit the entire time. Now that the decision had been taken, he was churning inside, desire turning his guts liquid, his cock already beginning its hopeful journey, lengthening along his thigh. All sorts of questions were clamouring at him for answers, their sharp little voices banshee wails at the back of his mind. He shut them up, firmly, battening down the hatches, pouring the concrete of wilfulness upon them. He knew perfectly well what he was doing, he didn't need any screaming ninnies reminding him. Always one for a risk, always one to weigh up a situation to determine if the penalty was worth the prize, this situation, this cruise, had become a nice tidy box in the sea of chaos that surrounded his dealings with Bodie. It was, he had decided, worth having Bodie walk away, if he got to have him first. It was worth being nothing more than another notch on Bodie's belt—always supposing Bodie was able to reduce it to that. There was that fine thread glittering in Bodie's eyes whenever he watched Doyle that made Doyle question the current sincerity all Bodie's old arrogant 'straight' posturings and question, too, just how great a risk he was taking of being unwanted. As for disease, well, he'd find out just how happy the stewards could be, wouldn't he? If they managed to work through the supply he had brought with him, in case the spirit had been unwilling, but the flesh had overruled it.

Negotiating the other passengers returning from shore with their ungainly souvenirs and lobstering skin, he abruptly stopped dead in his tracks, the man behind him rendering imaginative comments about what, precisely, he could do to himself for stopping like that. Doyle barely heard, a lifetime's habit making him mutter the inbred British apologies even while he himself was singularly uninvolved.

Bareheaded in the sun, his moss green shirt billowing with the freshening breeze, feet planted firmly upon the steadiness of the deck, his insides were reeling.

He was going to have Bodie. Finally, after all these years when he had never-quite-been able to forget him, despite his loud protestations to himself. The sculpted lines of Bodie's physique had always made those more muscular unappealing to Doyle, and those more slender had always seemed effete. Before Bodie, he had always had a thing for blonds, but of course, after Bodie, it was the dark Celtic looks that had drawn him, hungry as a mouth for a flame. Flame. Heat was licking at his groin, tingling along his fingertips, tickling at his nipples, all the places where the fieriness of desire took him first. At least, it occurred to him, on this ship £3£3£3 no-one was going to complain if he walked 123 around half-hard, were they?

I'm going to have Bodie. It went round and round his mind, a triumphant madrigal, spinning and spinning until it had sucked all his doubts and fears into its whirlpool, drowning them with the possibilities of the present. The future, when it arrived, could take care of itself. He was sick to the back teeth of being mature and responsible and sensible: he'd been like that since the time he'd cut that other kid up and given himself such a scare. I'm going to have Bodie. All of him, spread out for me, and I can touch every last bit of him...

Making the decision hadn't been too difficult, love and libido doing that particular job for him, but finding the object of his desires proved to be considerably more challenging. Eventually, he admitted defeat and approached the Purser.

Only to find that Bodie had gone ashore, missing Doyle's boat by about five minutes.

He was going to have Bodie—always supposing someone else didn't get there first. There were a hell of a lot of mouthwateringly beautiful men on that island, and if Bodie's attitudes were the same as they had been before, the bastard

would be shagged out before he got back on board. Worry danced the clogdance on his spine: and what was he going to do if Bodie had been heedless of the warnings they'd all been overwhelmed with, until they got to the stage where they didn't want to hear the word AIDS again? What if Bodie had got the bit between his teeth and ignored it all? For that matter, what if 'it'll never happen to me and if it does, all that happens is you die' Bodie hadn't cared enough to give up so much of what made gay sex fun? If it was nothing more than specious sodomy to him, then he wasn't likely to have let concern for the other bloke stand in his way, and Bodie would never believe himself to be at risk. What was it he had said to Bodie, one of the many accusations that had festered, undenied? Oh, yeh, that's right. it's not as if you kissed them or any of that queer stuff, is it? And in that case... That's what our neatly packaged Durex is for, isn't it? It'd be all right, he'd be careful. There were a lot of things they could do that were safe or at least, not overly risky. Lots of things. Except...he £3£3£3 wanted to bury himself in Bodie, up to the hilt, 124 fucking him hard, able to feel him, not the la-£3£3£3 tex that could save his life. Bodie's life. He was clean, he knew, Cowley's insistence on regular checks attested to that. He was clean, as far as he knew, until the scientists changed their minds on that and he discovered that even testing negative wasn't enough.

> Christ, but he needed a drink. The horror gnawed at his belly, this fear that loving someone could kill them. He pushed it back, forcing it down the way he had as a child when the bus had made him travel sick. This was the kind of thing his doctors—Cowley's doctors, to be accurate—had been nagging at him for. Worrying himself into an early grave over things he could do nothing about. He was trying to live by the old adage, the one that taught a person to change what he could and live with what he couldn't, but he had no faith left to put in God and precious little to put into anyone else. Even Cowley was no longer some mildly deified boss, but merely his superior, a man he admired, a man with whom he had built a friendship of honeycomb complexity and order. There was no-one, really, to believe in but himself. And often, when he looked closely, very

closely, at himself, there was nothing for him to believe in at all.

By the time Bodie came aboard, Doyle was lean-ING OVER THE RAILING, lost in thought, all the joy of future seduction drained away. Wind was barely disturbing his short hair, the curls cut severely short so as not to offend the stuffiness of Whitehall. Usually, he even blow-dried his hair into some facsimile of conformity, but the sea air and the damp breezes waylaid that, taking him close to what he'd been before, the first time he'd met Bodie, hair still policeman short. He was thinking about that first day, of the way they had simply fitted together as if they had always been each other's better half. Thinking about the way he had wanted Bodie from the first, but Bodie had always seemed too skittish to take him up on anything more than flirting. Thinking about the roots that had been growing, tangled, between them, making life together more deeply lodged, more a certainty. Thinking about the pain that must have been in Bodie to have driven him off so thoroughly...

"Ray?"

"I was a right bastard to you, wasn't I, Bodie? Not much of a mate in the end."

"Same could be said of me, couldn't it?"

Bodie was coming up beside him now, propping dark-sleeved arms on the balustrade, a pose of ease, tension pouring out of him, the faintly heard footsteps silenced. Behind them, there was the glittering glow of deck-top party, music blaring, and even that was part of the gay statement of this cruise, all the artists bellowing their lungs out known to be as gay as the men dancing to them. The festooning lights were swaying as the wind carolled through them, tossing shadows to and fro all around the two men standing, in their own pocket of silence, staring over the side of the ship, all the long way down to the sea. Doyle didn't look at Bodie, knew that Bodie wasn't looking at him. It seemed so much simpler that way, to speak and not look. Seeing him would make the needing start, and seeing him would expose his own eyes to Bodie's perception. That was something he didn't need, not until after what needed saying was finally said.

"I couldn't forgive you for leaving me, you know that, don't you?

"D'you think I could forgive you for forcing me out? But don't let's get started on all that old crap, Ray. You always were one for blaming yourself for everything under the sun, but not this one. We were both of us as bad as the other with this one. I had good reasons, Ray, and you must've, too. Let's just leave it at that and get on from there."

"You haven't changed, have you? Sweep it under the carpet and if we pretend it doesn't exist, perhaps it'll go away?" His voice sharpened with all the painfilled implications of life, if Bodie really hadn't changed. "Is that how you still work, Bodie? Christ, after this length of time, I'd've thought you'd be past that by now."

"Get your claws back in, Ray. I didn't come all this way to get into an argument with you."

He had actually forgotten that tone of voice, the mildness soft as butter to hide the whetting stone beneath. A glance over his shoulder, to the merry mayhem, revellers twisting and gyrating in movements that really hadn't changed much since their ancestors had danced round the fire. "Okay, I'll be reasonable. So if you didn't come here for the aggro, what did you come here for?"

Tenterhooks pause, then Bodie answered him. "You always said I was all balls and no brain. This is sort of...it's a kind of..."

He was intrigued by this, Bodie stumbling visibly over words. To think this was the man who could casually quote Blake or Donne whilst ducking bullets astonished Doyle. "Come on, Bodie," he said, donning the remembered camaraderie with the comfort of old slippers, "it can't be that bad. Any road, anything you've done, I've done worse." No response, save a small smile glimmering in the coloured lights of the party and the audible swallow of nervousness. Another effort, from Doyle, consumed with the need to know. "Now, I remember, when I was with the Drug Squad..."

On cue, Bodie lowered his head, a resounding snore ensuing. Then laughter, as quick and bright as the moon on the sea. "We had some high old times back then, didn't we, Ray? Some of the things we got up to, make your hair curl. Not that you needed any help."

Doyle saw the aborted gesture of hand, the secret, then stifled, movement to reach up and touch his hair. Bodie always had loved doing

that. "Need to look the part, else Cowley won't be seen dead with me. Hated getting it cut, mind you."

"It suits you." Diffident, unsure, the compliment hesitating before Bodie could say it without buffooning it into meaninglessness. "Listen, Ray, I feel a right wally just saying it like this, but it's probably the only way you're going to hear it. This cruise..." He seemed to change tack, the promised directness obfuscated. "I've never been one for facing things head on, you know that. Well, after a while of sweeping things under the carpet, you can't do that any more. Just isn't enough room. And I used to do that so I could tell myself how well I was coping, when I wasn't even looking at things, let alone sorting them about." It was Bodie's turn to look behind him, raucous life roaring away, while he whispered truths into the dark. "It got so bad, Ray, I needed to get help. Yeah, superman Bodie, needing a trick cyclist."

"No shame in that, Bodie."

"Yeh, some of your best friends are psychiatrists. It's taken me a long time to even admit I go to a doctor. Anyway, one of the things I fi- £3£3£3 nally realised I had to do was start meeting 125 things head on. Stop running away. Had to."

Doyle had to strain to hear the next words.

"I had no where else to run." A straightening of the spine, a suspiciously emotional sniff, then Bodie went on, voice large and casual. "And that's what brought me here. Decided that I might as well do it in style, so here I am."

Doyle stared at this vision of pride, then burst the proverbial bubble. "Decided to do what, Bodie?"

A long, long pause. "Hadn't I said that bit? Decided to finally stop pretending to myself and everyone else and come out."

"Come out? As in admit you're gay?"

"Nah. Come out and admit I admire Kylie Minogue's musical abilities. What other coming out is there? I'm a bit old to be a deb-not to mention a bit on the butch side, chuck."

"So this is the big event? Trust you, Bodie, oh, trust you. The rest of us do a person at a time, a little bit here, a little bit there. You—you go on a fucking cruise!"

"I did do it a bit at a time. Most of the people I work with know."

"What about your wife?"

A drawing away, big signs reading 'don't touch' erupting like boils. "Divorced four years ago. Don't even know where she is."

He shouldn't ask, he knew; should respect the tangible cloak of discomfort. But he had to know, had to... "Children?"

"Two. Boys, right pair of tearaways from what I hear."

"You don't see them, then?"

He thought he wasn't going to get an answer this time and when it came, it wasn't what he expected. "Look, I don't know about you, but my feet are killing me. Spent the whole day traipsing over that bloody island looking for you. And it's getting a bit cool for me. D'you mind if we go in for dinner?" He must have seen Doyle's slight withdrawal, and read it for the reaction it was. "I'm not going to clam up on you, Ray. Just... It's a bit much, all at once, and with us standing here where people might overhear. Why don't we go to my cabin, have the steward bring us something?"

A case of condoms? Doyle wondered, as he acquiesced, leading the way to his own cabin, £3£3£3 not Bodie's. Home ground had its advantages, 126 even if it were only a rented cabin. Uneasiness £3£3£3 was stirring sluggishly, memories intruding of the time before, when they'd torn their partnership apart. He wanted to trust Bodie, in fact, were he to be honest, he did trust Bodie, but his head was screaming caution at him, throwing so many bitterly lonely nights in his face that he was in danger of being blinded to the prospects in front of him.

They were in the cabin, small table set up, meal-but no condoms-delivered, the two of them perched on the small folding chairs that matched the table for their ability to engender a serious attack of insecurity. The steward had been dismissed with dispatch and a hefty tip, leaving them to set the table and serve themselves. The domesticity of it all was soothing, harking back to once well-established habits, Doyle dealing with the food, Bodie dealing with the cutlery and wine. As he dished up his own plate, Doyle noted the hair-trigger tremble of Bodie's hand on the wine, then it was gone, the burgundy poured with panache and unexpectedly flawless French.

"It's bloody good, this, mate. Aren't you going to have some?" This, after Bodie had quietly

put his wine glass back on the serving cart, taking a tumbler instead.

"Gave it up."

"For Lent? They put you on those little pink pills again? Or," with sudden comprehension and genuine concern, "are you off it permanently?"

"Only for today, Ray, only for today. Course," wry humour, the once-loved quirk of the eyebrow, "I'll be saying that first thing tomorrow as well, won't I?"

Doyle watched him, eyes clear and unblinking, knowing that he had to make Bodie say it. He wanted everything laid out on the table before them, no more playing poker the way they had when they were younger and more foolish.

Bodie said it. "I'm an alcoholic."

"Does it bother you if I have a drink?"

"Doesn't make it any easier."

That admission seemed to cost Bodie a lot, an admitting of weakness that was obviously, painfully obviously, difficult. It occurred to Doyle, watching the tense man across the table, that he wasn't exactly making it easy on Bodie. Here he was, expecting Bodie to have completely changed everything about himself to make it better for Raymond Doyle, and he himself was repeating the badgering mistakes of the past. "Well," he eventually said, "in that case, your sparkling water looks just the thing, doesn't it?" He went and poured the wine down the bathroom sink, running the water after it, remembering how much Bodie had loved the bouquet of wine. Reseating himself, he was startled by the expression that was, fleetingly, in Bodie's eyes. Before he could be sure, before he could pin it to anything other than wishful thinking, it was gone.

"But fair's fair," he warned, setting them back on an even keel. "I won't drink, and don't you go eating the stuff I can't have."

"Have you got religion or something?"

"Dodgy heart. And you can wipe that look off your face and all. I was on a case, got careless, they got into my flat and almost took me off the job permanently. The bullet nicked the heart, invalided me out of active duty and got me kicked upstairs as Cowley's right hand."

"And all you have to do is watch your cholesterol and all that?"

Doyle shrugged, minimising something he lived with every day until it had become noth-

ing much to him. "And take the pills—little blue ones, foul tasting things. Don't look so worried, Bodie. I'm in better nick than blokes half my age."

"Apart from a bad heart."

"It's not a bad heart," he repeated in the same voice of barely surviving patience he used on his superiors and doctors, "it's a minor condition that requires preventative medicine. That's it. Like your drinking."

He was surprised by the sudden flood of red rising to cover Bodie's face.

"My drinking wasn't something minor, Ray. D'you think I'd give up booze just for a minor problem?"

"Is that why your wife left you?"

"Oh, still the copper, eh? It's obvious which one of us left CI5, isn't it though? You'll be pleased to hear your interrogation techniques are better than ever."

"Now who's starting?"

Silence, ostensibly while they ate, in actuality, while they buried the hatchet. Picking at dessert, Doyle conceded that it was wonderful to be this close to Bodie again, to be this sure that they were going to be lovers, if only for the duration of the cruise. Not even the glare of the overhead light could diminish Bodie's attractiveness for him, the signs of age adding interest to the handsome face. Every time he looked up from his plate, Bodie would be watching him, a shuttered expression that revealed almost nothing. He pushed the culinary remains aside and poured them both coffee from the elegant white carafe. "Are you going to tell me about your children then?" The question felt strange on his lips, a surreal topic to be discussing with Bodie of all people.

Bodie drank half his coffee in slow sips before he began to answer, hands flat on the table in front of him. "Two boys, one's almost nine and one's almost eight. Both of them call someone else 'dad' and there's a restraining order against me seeing them."

Such bald facts to cover such bitter self-hate. "Want to tell me the rest of it?"

A surge of energy and Bodie was on his feet, piling crockery and cutlery on the dinner trolley, pouring un-drunk drink down the sink, folding the table out of the way all the while he spoke. "Same story as my own dad. Drink.

Couldn't handle my life, so I started drinking. Got worse and worse, started lifting my hand to Claire and she did the clever thing—she walked out on me. Came home one morning and the house was empty. No make-up in the bathroom, no toys on the stairs. No baby crying in the back bedroom. Next thing I heard from her was her solicitor sending me the papers. Went to court, denied drinking, of course, even though the judge could smell it on me. She got custody. She also had a boyfriend by that point, and the boys were already calling him dad instead of me."

No emotion in the words, but the voice was hoarse, the movements jerky, a cup cracking on impact. "I wouldn't admit I had a problem with drink, blamed everything on her. And the boyfriend. Went berserk. Went over to her house one night, kicked the door down—at least that's what the police say—and ended up in the local cop shop with a hangover and an emergency order against me seeing my kids again."

"Is that when you went on the wagon?"

"The first time, yeah. But it only lasted a couple of weeks—I can stop any time I want to, £3£3£3 is what I always said. And I could, you know. 127 Could stop any time I wanted to. Only problem £3£3£3 was, I couldn't stay stopped, could I?"

Doyle sat on the bed, letting Bodie fold the chairs, watching while he tidied up with compulsive concentration. "If losing your family didn't stop you, what did, Bodie?"

"Went to France," Bodie was saying, as if he hadn't heard Doyle. "Had an old mate there from the Service. He had one of those security consulting firms and I went in on it with him. Course, France is the last place you should go if you don't want to drink. Mind you, I didn't want to stop, not really. If I stopped, I'd have to start thinking and I'd have to start living and feeling and I didn't want to do that. Couldn't do that, I don't think, not then. Anyway, showed up for a job with a drink in me—not drunk, but I'd got to the point where I didn't get drunk much any more. Just never got sober, that's all. Almost got myself killed."

He sat down then, on the foot of the bunk, hands dangling between his thighs. Ray's hands were itching to touch, to hold him close and tell he didn't need to say any more, but he didn't, stuffing his rebellious hands in his pockets out

of harm's way. It would only be being kind to be cruel, in the long run, if he stopped Bodie talking. He knew himself, from one or two never discussed nights with George Cowley, just how healing it could be to let it all cascade out. There was something else he had perfected in his association with Cowley, and that was the fine art of starting someone off talking and then just sitting back and listening. He pummelled a couple of pillows into a comfortable contortion and propped himself up on them, never once taking his eyes from Bodie, both fascinated and entranced by the man. He had never seen this side of Bodie, not fully, and he was falling farther and farther inside the man.

Bodie was frowning as he spoke, the words tumbling from him and into Doyle. "After that, I did what any exile does when he's failed—I ran away from my new life and came running home to England. Except England wasn't home any more. I was miserable, absolutely bloody miserable, but I blamed that on the rotten weather we were having and the rotten luck I was having, anything but on me and my drinking. I £3£3£3 couldn't get work, my money was beginning to 128 run low, and the worse it got, the more I drank, £3£3£3 and the more I drank, the worse it got. Then—" a huge breath, and Doyle watched as sturdy fingers laced themselves together as if to hold some horror within their grasp, the knuckles turned white. "Then, I woke up one morning, face down in a back room of some old warehouse. I had no idea where I was or how I'd got there. Didn't know what I'd been doing. But there was blood on me, my knuckles were all skinned and I'd a broken bone in my foot. I'd been fighting, I knew that much. Just didn't know who, or why. And I was sitting there, Ray, covered in someone else's blood and I didn't know if I'd killed him or not. I could've, of course, my training with the SAS would've seen to that even if Cowley hadn't. I just didn't know. Then I realised that some of the wet on me wasn't blood, it was piss. Imagine, me-me-so drunk I'd peed myself! And my head felt like it was going to explode, I was sick as a dog and my kidneys were giving me gyp. And that was the morning that finally did it. Not knowing if I'd killed someone and not even really caring. I was more worried about peeing myself than twepping someone."

"So then what?"

"A.A. of course. Couldn't face a clinic or a hospital."

"Too much like admitting defeat and letting someone else dry you out?"

"Dead right. First night there, it got through my thick skull that this was going to be a hell of a lot harder than I thought it was going to be. And that I was going to have to mend what was bothering me so badly that I started drinking in the first place."

"Which is where the trick cyclist came in?"

"Yeh. And this cruise, eventually. I decided that I really needed an event, something that I could look back at and say," he took on the voice of Black Rod rapping on the door of Parliament, "on this day, I, William Andrew Philip Bodie, did stop hiding and lying and let the world see just what they'd been missing'." He drooped suddenly and Doyle was reminded of Pinocchio after his strings had been cut. "That covers me. What about you, Ray?"

Doyle shrugged. "Not much to tell. Stayed on. Ran the gauntlet, stuck out the publicity and the laughing behind my back, gave as good as I got when the nasties started, the whole bit. Got shot, George stuck me behind a desk, started getting me ready to take over for him when he retires. That's it, really."

"What about..." the delicacy of the question seemed to be giving Bodie difficulties, the bedspread being pleated and unpleated before he actually asked it. "What about... relationships? You settled down with someone?"

"Was, for a while." To the look of interrogation and hungry curiosity. "Mark Ferguson. Nice bloke, was with him for a couple of years."

"What went wrong with him?"

"What always went wrong, Bodie? The bloody job, that's what. The hours, the security, having people more or less in your bedroom making sure you're not sleeping with the enemy, you remember the routine." Bodie simply looked at him and Doyle remembered to whom he was speaking: this wasn't one of the new recruits or one of the friends he'd made in recent years. This was a man who had known him better than anyone else had, in some ways, in the ways that Doyle had known himself. Sometimes, the lies that fooled himself hadn't fooled Bodie, who had never been slow to stick in his tuppenceworth. "Okay, okay, so it was more than that. He got

tired of always coming second to the job, he got sick of the way I was closer to my mates in CI5 than I ever pretended to be to the people we knew outside our mob."

It wasn't until he saw the odd expression on Bodie's face that he replayed what he had said and heard it properly: our mob. Not my mob, not Cowley's mob, but our mob. Revelation can be done with such simplicity sometimes that it ambushes the most triple-thinking of plotters. He snorted with laughter, picturing Cowley's reaction to him claiming triple-think for this cruise. And speaking of Cowley... "Hang on a minute. You said you'd got a bit close to the wire when it came to money, and then you got an inheritance from some relative you didn't even know?"

"Yeah, my Aunt Fiona. I thought she'd kicked the bucket years ago, but the solicitor got in touch with me a couple of months ago with this bequest and instructions that I was to spend some of it on a holiday. So when the brochure dropped through my letter-box-what's so funny, you?"

It took him a minute, but he was finally able to control his rampant hysteria. "Us, that's what's so funny. Cowley, I'll bloody kill the old bastard. D'you want to hear something really funny, Bodie?"

"Oh, do tell. Did he set us up? *Cowley?*"

"The doctors've been after me to watch the stress, cos they claim it plays havoc with my heart. And lo and behold, a month ago, George walks into my office, tosses this packet of travel stuff on my desk and informs me that the cruise starts on the 14th and it 'had better not be leaving without you, laddie, or it'll be me you'll be answering to, not they bloody doctors'. He even paid for it, Bodie!"

He sobered quickly enough when he realised that Bodie didn't seem to be sharing his amusement.

"Pull the other one, it's got bells on. George Cowley's a Bible thumper, there's no way on God's green earth that he'd pay to get two fairies together. Don't come it with me, Doyle. If you've been up to something, then just tell me, don't lie. Cowley playing Cupid—what is he, our fairy godmother?"

"I'll tell you what he is, Bodie, he's a man with a guilty conscience. I got him drunk one night—cost me a pretty penny, he's got hollow legs—and it all came out. You remember how he feels about getting one of his 'boys' killed or hurt? Well, he knew every move you made and he could see every move I made. He knew perfectly bloody well what we went through, and all because he didn't want the Minister screwing up his department. Oh, some of it was George and his crusades, him and his bloody tolerance, but a lot of it was for the department. Wasn't just us he'd've lost, you know, Bodie. You'd be surprised how many queers we had back then. Then there's his brother, and that's probably most of it."

"His brother died in the War, didn't he? What's he got to do with us?"

Doyle stretched out, his foot brushing Bodie's thigh: neither one of them withdrew, but neither one of them acknowledged the contact. It simply lay between them, silent as a mouse hoping not to be noticed. "His big brother died after the war. Alastair Cowley had a bit of a secret and someone found out. They went after him to get him to pass on some of the codes and stuff he had access to in his job £3£3£3 in one of the intelligence departments—George 129 never said which one, but I got the impression 636363it was Army. Anyway, the senior Cowley wouldn't be a traitor, but he couldn't face being found out and he couldn't face his family finding out about him. Their dad was dead by now and the family honour was all on Alastair's shoulders, poor sod. You know how the Scots are about their bloody family name and all that shite, so you can imagine how he felt about being threatened with a letter to his church minister. One night, he went out to one of the bridges and jumped off it. The blackmailers didn't know he had done it until after they'd sent off their latest billet doux and it was our George that opened it. The rest is history. He went off his rocker and swore up and down that he'd never let anyone he knew go through that again, not if he could help it."

"And I came bloody close to topping myself, so he..."

"Stepped in and mended it as best he could. You know what he's done, don't you? Seen that you'd got yourself sorted out and put us right back to where we were before he fucked things up royally by forcing us out."

He forgot to breathe, for a second, when Bodie looked at him then. "And where does that leave us, Ray? Where were we ten years ago?"

"On the verge of something big."

"You should be so lucky, darling." A sudden quirk of humour, taking the solemnity, leaving the seriousness.

"I would, you know. Be lucky, if we got together."

"You reckon?"

"Yeh." He made a great show of checking Bodie out from the roots of his longish—by Bodie standards-hair to the toes of his summer shoes, pointedly lingering at the important little places. "I've seen worse."

"What are you looking for, Ray?" Such seriousness, intensity as hard as agate, the need a vortex in his eyes.

"Happiness." Unequivocal, he merely said it flat out, neither yielding nor attacking. "And failing that, then... Don't the women's mags call them holiday romances? Spend the rest of the cruise together, have sex as often as your decrepit bones can manage?" It felt so right to go £3£3£3 back to the old way of slagging each other off, 130 using black humour and friendly insult to pa-£3£3£3 per over the cracks in their façade of invulnerability. He nodded at the bell-push that was to summon the stewards. "It's not just food they deliver, did you know that?"

> "What—do they have a nice line in marital aids or something?"

> "They've got a nice line in another kind of AIDS. Bodie..." Always the awkward moment, the shuffling around to find a way to ask.

"I'm negative. You?"

And he wondered what Bodie's reply would be if he said positive. It would tell him everything he needed to know about what Bodie wanted, about how Bodie felt for him. Everything, revealed by that one small answer. But the temptation passed as soon as the philistine thought crossed his mind. It was, after all, not the kind of thing to lie about: be careful what you wish for. "Negative, as of three weeks ago. Funnily enough, it was one of the things George got on at me to do for this cruise of his."

"A week ago for me. Haven't had many since it started, been too busy running away from being gay to have the balls to do anything about having blokes, bar buggering a few will-

ing bodies. No exchange of body fluids, not into me, any way."

Doyle fiddled with his watch, taking it off and stuffing it under the pillow, his bracelet coming off to be played with by restless hands. "Bodie, you never actually got round to saying it, but all your problems, I mean your marriage and drinking and all, that all came from you trying to pretend to yourself that you weren't gay, didn't it?"

"Who, me? Nah, nothing like that. It was just too, too much for me, being so modest and yet having to cope with being so absolutely, divinely perfect."

Doyle erupted in laughter, his filthy chuckle warming the room. To be sitting here, with Bodie camping it up great guns, made him ridiculously happy. Bodie wasn't the only one who had spent too many years trying to deny to himself a fact that was irrefutable. For Doyle, that fact was not the question of his sexuality, but rather the question of his emotional ties. He was bound to Bodie, had seemed to be even before he laid eyes on him, that first meeting of theirs having an audible 'click'. "Something I'm curious about, though, Bodie and be serious, you great prat. Are you gay or bisexual?"

"According to my shrink I'm functionally bisexual. But I'm a disaster with women when it comes to emotions and they say you repeat the patterns you learned as a kid, so if that's the case, it's best if I don't ruin any poor cow's life the way my dad did for my mum. Anyway, I finally stopped running away from it and admitted I like blokes better. And you know what people are like: you're either one or the other, you can't be both. But that's not the real reason. My body works both ways, but my feelings are hooked on a man. So in my books, that makes me gay."

"Aren't you going to ask me?"

"You? You'd fuck anything moving. And you get infatuated with women, but when push comes to shove, you'd rather have a man."

They sat and looked at each other in the unexpected silence, abruptly awkward with each other. "Now what are we supposed to say? I mean, actually putting it in black and white like that, I half expect my dad to come in and ask your intentions. It's like one of these encounter group things, isn't it?"

"Except they don't expect to go to bed together, do they, Ray?"

The fumbling words that had been falling over his foot to get out of his mouth stopped. "We are going to, aren't we? Tonight?"

"Yeah."

The silence was not awkward this time, but it was long and filled with looks and questions unsaid. Neither one of them seemed able to take the final step, to take the final risk, until Doyle moved the foot that had been resting, dormant, against Bodie's thigh.

Then Bodie was upon him, inarticulate noises coming from both of them, Doyle holding him tight while Bodie kissed the world away. He flattened himself on the bunk, pulling Bodie in on top of himself, cocooning himself in the heat of the other man's overwhelming presence. There was nothing for him to be aware of, apart from Bodie: all his eyes could see, all his ears could hear, all his mouth could taste, was Bodie. It was better than it had ever been, even in the furtive dreams that lurked in his bed waiting for his guard to fade, far better even than the guilty nights when it had been Bodie with whom he had made love, although the person there had had another name outside the bed. He'd never before been comfortable with letting someone else cover him like this, not even with Mark for whom he'd made such protestations of trust and equality. It was terribly hard for a man who lived by the gun and the vitriol of politics to hand power over to someone who ruled his life with the mundanities of intellect. He spread his legs, looking for Bodie's weight to settle on him, so that their cocks could be pressed together. Under the circumstances, even their summer clothes seemed oppressively bulky, tyrants keeping them apart. He reached down between them, fumbling to shove fabric aside, his hands colliding with Bodie's. His fingers were taken, held tight and brought upwards and he was filled with a shivering tenderness when he watched Bodie turn him palm upward and kiss the soft skin. He felt that kiss and what it betokened, through all his body, waking those few cells that still lay fallow, pleasure rushing into him. He wanted to return the gesture, to reciprocate the meaning, but there was nothing he could do that would speak with such

simple honesty. Instead, he wrapped his arms around Bodie's broad shoulders, and kissed him with all the passion he owned. The shirt was too rough, when compared to what he imagined the skin to be, so he removed it, his mind barely aware of what his hands were doing until the exquisite moment when he touched the warm expanse of Bodie's back. He arched up, and his cock surged into volcanic contact with Bodie, making him writhe with desire.

He opened his eyes to see what Bodie was doing, pulling away from him like that, then relaxed into an embrace he trusted above all else. He lay as Bodie arranged him, as spreadeagled as the bunk would allow, and watched through half-closed eyes as Bodie began the serious task of making love to him. His shirt was lifted, minutely, aside, the skin of collarbone revealed and kissed, small, damp kisses. Inch by inch, his body was uncovered and with each revelation, there were tiny kisses, bedecking him like stars, tangling themselves in the hair of his chest, climbing the peaks of his nipples. He was loved, and thoroughly; there £3£3£3 was no room for doubt when it came to that, so 131 he cast aside that burden from the past, that £3£3£3 empty space filled by the tightly-controlled cherishing that Bodie was lavishing upon him. His feet were laid bare, the arches and the insteps laved, the toes sucked, the tingle shooting all the way to his scalp.

In the brightness of the cabin he lay, sprawled and naked, cock rampant and hard over his belly, as Bodie stripped for him. He devoured the sight, for watching Bodie had long been one of his most favoured pastimes. The long cock, rose-dark, tip glistening, made his mouth ache to be filled. He wanted to taste him, suck him in, feel the cum explode on the back of his throat and slide down into his belly. He wanted lick and nibble and suck until his jaw hurt, or until Bodie was slick enough to put it inside him, to fill his arse with pleasure. As he ate him up with his eyes, Bodie swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing, eyes fixed on the handsome cock that tapped against Doyle's belly.

"I want you to fuck me, Ray."

That brought his fantasies to an abrupt end. "You want me to what?"

"Fuck me."

"I thought you didn't do that, Bodie."

The unease and the fear were blatant, vying for dominion over the passion and the need. "I don't, not usually. I've never wanted to before. Christ, Ray, I was scared I wouldn't want it with you."

"Bodie," he whispered, gentle as he knew how to be, "are you telling me you're a virgin?"

"Yeah. And no."

"What d'you mean, yes and no? Hate to be the one to break it to you, but you have to be one or the other."

"I've never let anyone do it to me before, but I've been...playing with myself, you know, there, and I sort of liked it. A lot. But I've never let anyone inside my body before."

"And that's fucking terrifying, isn't it? Come here, Bodie, come on, relax. No-one's said we have to fuck. It's not as if there're any rules for this kind of thing. Come on, we can fuck another time, when you're ready."

"No we won't, we'll do it tonight. It's important, Ray, it means something to me." Doyle shivered at Bodie's words and in the wake of £3£3£3 the finger that lifted his cock, stroking it once, 132 then letting it go to stand at attention again. £3£3£3 "I've never really wanted anyone to do me like this before, but I want you-when I'm not scared shitless about it. And it means something about us, doesn't it? If we don't do it, then this'll never amount to anything over a good shag, a convenient bonk between mates. It has to be everything, Ray."

> Doyle caressed the satin mound of rounded buttock, twisting himself round a little until he could butterfly his finger against the hole that opened Bodie's body. Canopied over him, he saw Bodie arch and close in on himself as the pleasure ricocheted through his body. He pressed again, more firmly, the very tip of him going inside Bodie. "Yeh, that's it, that's what you really want, isn't it?" he whispered, with something close to awe. In all his ponderings, it had never occurred to him that fucking Bodie would ever be more than a fabulous fantasy, for he had believed Bodie to be one of those men who simply could not let another man violate the sanctity of his body. But this sighing pleasure seeping from Bodie promised something else. He moved round, quickly, easily man-handling the pliant Bodie into position, until it was no longer

Doyle who was flat on the bed, but Bodie. He spanned him like a bridge, knees between Bodie's thighs, mouth lowered to kiss the mouth that devoured him. Without hurry, exerting all his control to make this first time last, to make his body listen to him and not explode in three seconds flat, he traced with lingering tonguetip, the inner contours of Bodie's mouth, relishing every texture and every taste, every caressing joust of Bodie's tongue. Hands were cradling his head, holding him still, while Bodie drank his fill from him, until Doyle's cup of pleasure overflowed.

Under him, Bodie was pushing up, trying to rub them together, the very tip of his cock grazing Doyle's belly, dappling pre-cum in the hair there, sending little nuzzling jolts of arousal through him. He lowered himself, suddenly, heavily, a puff of air from Bodie filling his mouth, then the indrawn breath when their cocks touched, rubbing hard one on the other, Doyle rotating his hips to better feel the delicacy and the hardness under him. He tweaked at nipples that were already mountainous, stroked skin that already shivered, kissed a man who was already hungry for him. The tide of pleasure was rising in them and he was in danger of being swept away: he couldn't allow that. Tonight meant something, tonight was important: he'd not throw it away just because simply being this close to Bodie felt too good.

"Let me up," he said into Bodie's mouth and felt himself kissed all the harder, a rain of hunger over his face and neck, with the thunder of his own pulse ringing in his ears. "I'm serious, Bodie, let go a minute."

Blue eyes came into gradual focus, startling him with the unbridled warmth. "Only for a minute, mind. I'm enjoying this..."

Standing beside the bunk, memorising the sight of utter hedonism, Doyle thought that was probably the understatement of the century. Bodie was flushed rosy at his neck and rosier still at his cock, pre-cum glittering in the light, languid limbs sprawled in a beautiful clutter of flesh. As he watched, Bodie's hands couldn't keep still, reiterating the pleasure that Doyle had been giving him, pressing on cock, pinking at nipples, rubbing the sensitive skin of his belly. Stuff retrieved from the drawer, Doyle climbed up beside him again, gracelessly twisting to grab

one of the pillows from where it had fallen to the floor, stuffing it under Bodie's hips. The angle was better then, setting him higher on Bodie, making sure that he'd be able to kiss him while the fucking was going on. That distraction, that display of affection would be important, if Bodie had any fear left in him about this. He settled himself between Bodie's legs, lying down as if Bodie were the most comfortable of feather beds. He kissed him again, sucking on his neck like an edentate vampire, licking the reddening mark with gentle benediction. He suckled on a nipple, and while Bodie was arching and gasping at that, slipped a finger down to the small hole that hid, coy, between the richness of buttocks. There was no shrivelling of fear at that, so he took some of the spermicidal cream and smoothed that inside, his finger going deeper now. Bodie seemed to pause, listening with rapt attention to the sound of what Doyle was doing inside his body, then there was a spasm, a shiver, and Doyle felt him relax with determination.

"It's all right, Ray. Like it..."

He withdrew that finger, sent it back in again with a friend, ladened with more cream, the passage becoming slick and inviting. Great heaving breaths helped calm him, giving him pause enough to regain the control he needed to have, so he left off sucking on Bodie's nipples and licked down his torso to suck on his cock. The taste exploded through him and he thought he might die if he didn't take this man into him, have his cum erupt, sliding down his throat. With large regret, he pulled his mouth away, unable to resist the temptation of a farewell kiss to the crown. Later, perhaps, they could chance it, but not at this stage. Boide was a quivering mass splattered on the bed and Doyle wondered just how long it had been since Bodie had done this with a man, for it looked as if it had been even longer than Doyle himself had. And for Bodie, too, this would be a rare pleasure, something only newly indulged in since he had dredged up enough courage to face himself. Oh, yes, despite what his body was screaming at him, this was not a time to be hurried. He took care, then, to caress Bodie to the point of whimpering, helpless ecstasy, until the eyes were closed and the head tossing side to side on the pillow, the cock jerking with minute spasms of enormous pleasure. Then, and only then, did

he reach for the condom, the ripping of the package quiet amidst the panting of Bodie's breath. But Bodie had obviously heard him and Doyle's fingers stilled in their business while Bodie gathered himself.

"Here, give that to me. I want to do it, Ray, haven't really had the chance to touch you."

The condom was taken from him, Bodie getting up on his knees to crouch before him, tongue flickering at the base of his cock, mouth sucking on his inner thigh, adding to his catalogue of pleasure. The condom was smoothed onto him, tugged firmly into place, Bodie's mouth dropping on him unexpectedly.

"Sealed with a kiss," Bodie grinned up at him, his open mouth trailing its way back up Doyle's abdomen, only to come to an abrupt halt.

"Should've warned you about that, shouldn't I? Not a pretty sight."

His scars were traced by the tip of Bodie's tongue, again and again, Bodie's face as closed as his eyes. "It's all right, Bodie," Doyle said, his hands kneading the muscles of Bodie's shoulders. "It's not your fault you weren't there to stop me being stupid. Anyway, guilt's my department. Now get up here and let me kiss 133 vou..."

He tumbled them back to the bed, his control suddenly exhausted and fled. That last kiss, the love that had been in it, had gone to his head, making him dizzily intoxicated with the sheer joy of making love with Bodie. There was a part of himself standing off in the corner, propped against the wall, arms folded, staring on in utter incredulity: this was not something he had ever expected, not in a million years. He feasted on it, his common sense in the corner there fearing a famine that could follow, but for the moment, all he was interested in doing was forging them together with the heat of their passion, fusing them into one möbius strip of endless delight.

His cock was nudging at Bodie, reminding them both of how lonely it was. Manœuvring them closer, he felt his cock press against the bud of flesh that guarded Bodie, felt the body yield, himself press home—and the sudden rigidity of once supple flesh, the clawing tightness of muscle hurting him, Bodie suddenly, frighteningly distant although their skin still touched.

"Don't!"

He stopped, waited, giving command of this over to Bodie, letting Bodie call all the shots, forcing himself into passivity when all he wanted to do was spread Bodie's legs and shove himself into him as deep as he could go. Instead, he dabbled a single finger tip against the anal bud, reminding Bodie of the pleasure, helping him over the moment of fear. He knew what was going through Bodie: fear, certainly, to allow one's body to no longer be inviolate. Fear, also, of losing one's manhood, of suddenly becoming less, becoming eunuch. Fear, probably, echoing from some of the things he'd seen as a merc and a soldier and from too many wickedly gleeful tales. Most of all, though, for Bodie, the final confession to himself, the final moment from which there could be no return. He had never counted himself queer, because all he had ever done was bugger other blokes. It was the other men who had been queer, to his way of thinking, it was the other men to whom all the vicious invective learned over a lifetime applied. And here he was, lying flat on £3£3£3 his back, legs splayed like a woman, letting **134** himself be buggered. Sodomised. And even as £3£3£3 those words sent a thrill of arousal through Doyle himself, he recognised that the thrill they sent through Bodie would be coloured with fear and doubts. Give him time, he told himself, hands caressing, give him time...

"Okay. Go ahead. Slowly..."

Very carefully, making sure that everything he did was in response to the minuscule cues from Bodie, he took his time rimming flesh that was so pink and tender, it made him want to kiss it. He did, plunging his tongue inside Bodie's darkness, hearing a shout of pleasure as he did. The spermicide was bitter on his tongue, but the flesh was pliant and luxuriant and most importantly of all, it was Bodie. His own cock was as desperate as Bodie's, nagging him, threatening him with coming too soon. Bodie was ready, a faint frown marring his forehead, but that was less than he had expected. He positioned himself, hooking Bodie's knees over his shoulders, angling himself so that he would slide in nice and easy. Right hand to guide himself, he pressed the head of his cock to Bodie's arse, feeling the flesh part, feeling the final, convulsive tightening of fear, and then that was gone

and his cock was going inside. Muscle clung to him, stopping him and he waited. Bodie may have been playing with himself, but that was a world away from the impact of the real thing. Doyle was caught in flesh, virgin-tight, holding him hard, squeezing him, squeezing him...

He couldn't wait a single second longer, Hips pushing forward, inch by slow inch he penetrated Bodie, taking his body for his own, joining them, locking them together. Bodie's face was transfused with pleasure, broken phrases tumbling from him, his body undulating under Doyle, pulling his cock in closer. Strong arms reached up to grab Doyle, to pull him down until their mouths could cling together, while their bodies clung as one. Bodie's cock was digging into his belly, snub head rubbing, in perfect harmony with the snub rub, rub, rubbing of his own cock deep inside flesh that was so perfectly hot.

Drawing back a little to catch his breath, he caught instead the sight of Bodie, his Bodie, transfixed upon his cock, penetrated, no longer a completely separate human being, but conjoined until there was no marking where one began and the other ended, save for the physical line where his cock stretched Bodie to his limit. He couldn't resist the beauty of it, plunging in, pulling out, watching his body be absorbed and consumed and renewed by Bodie, watching as they were in such complete unison. Bodie was wild under him now, muttering at him, cursing him, saying words of what sounded like love. Doyle opened his mouth to Bodie's, taking the words inside the way Bodie was taking his cock inside, sucking him in, feeding on him. There was a plash of heat against his belly then a profound stillness in Bodie as the explosion of pleasure took him, muscles contracting once, twice, thrice around Doyle, holding him as still as Bodie, making him stop to watch.

Then he was held tightly, Bodie surging under him, Bodie's words hot breath in his ear, Bodie's mouth devouring wet on his, Bodie's tongue claiming his, Bodie's hands pressing down on his arse, moving him to the rhythm Bodie wanted, the control taken from him and pure pleasure refunded in its place. He let Bodie move him, pistoning him in and out, Bodie's hands large and hot on him, damp with their

sweat combined. He was soaring, high as a kite on feelings, then Bodie's finger found him, entering him, and Bodie's mouth was on his, Bodie's tongue in him and the cycle and circle was complete. He came, a cry wrenched from his throat to be absorbed by Bodie, cum wrenched from his cock, to be absorbed by Bodie.

Exhausted, he could do nothing more than lie there and feel fingers stroking through his hair, eliminating the waviness that had been such hard work but the closest he could come to Whitehall respectability.

"Prefer it curly," the voice murmured, all cotton wool and dreams. "Like it best when it's all long and just begging to be touched. Used to day-dream about running my hands through your hair and holding it to keep you still when I kissed you. Scared me shitless, feeling like that about another bloke, 'specially my partner. Suicide to need someone that much, that's what I used to tell myself. Not good to owe someone that much either. Look at me and my mate Keller... Like kissing you, Ray. Like all of it with you..."

Doyle stirred himself enough to move, reluctant though he was to break Bodie's dreamy confessions. The condom was dropped into the lined wastepaper basket so wisely provided, then he got on with the rest of it. The towel was within reach and he mopped their bellies, lulling Bodie so that he could examine him without there being so much as a blink of anxiety. No trace of damage, just a blushing pinkness that spoke volumes. He dabbed the towel there, wiping off the residual seepage of spermicide, dumping the towel in favour of the tactile pleasure of touching Bodie.

"Should have a tattoo put on down there," Bodie was mumbling into the pillow, eyes at halfmast. "Ray Doyle was here. D'you know," a huge yawn, "I c'n still feel you inside?" A wiggle that dislodged Doyle's hand from the cushion of buttock. "'S nice. Could get addicted to that, you know."

Doyle settled down beside him, draping himself half over the recumbent form, coorying in close, not bothering with blankets even though he knew the cold later would wake them up. It was, after all, as good an excuse as any for making love again.

"'M glad Cowley's an interferin' old bastard. Missed you, sunshine..."

Then Bodie was gone, sound asleep, all shagged out, as Doyle thought to himself with giddy humour. He could hardly believe it: to come this far, only to go back to the beginning again. He stroked a fingertip along the lush eyelashes, watching the eye twitch in sleep. To think they'd finally made love, and to think that he could concede it was love and not just sex without so much as a second's pause. His finger found and explored the quirk of Bodie's left eyebrow, something he had wanted to do from the moment he had seen him. It had been a long time coming, the road there convoluted and £3£3£3 without signposts, a road that was far from fin- 135 ished. But they could traverse it, he hoped. They £3£3£3 would get there in the end, come hell or high water. Oh, there would be problems, bushels of them, there always were in a relationship where feelings ran deep. But they could sort them out better than they could have ten years ago. There were, however, still so many questions to be asked, so many answers to be given, so many truths to be laid bare. But they could do it, he knew they could. They wouldn't repeat the mistakes of the past, he wouldn't let them. Going by what Bodie had had to say, Bodie wouldn't let them either. If Cowley's devices had split them up, then their own desires would hold them together.