C I V I L SERVANTS

NANNY'S TEDDY TALES AND OTHER BEDTIME STORIES: BEDTIME STORY EDI N. BURGH

Two Professionals tales and both with upbeat endings. Well 'Bedtime Story' is #4 in the Nanny's Teddy Tales collection, so there's certain to be just a 'wee' twist, but 'Wrong End of the Stick' is sweet and humorous, everything that a romantic could want.

THERE WERE TIMES when the cost of this job was higher than the wages of sin. Today, for starters. God, what a day. Getting there too late and finding the Ambassador's kid bound and gagged, suffocated in the airless heat of the stair cupboard... And Ray's face. You could see the guilt on him the second he opened that door, could see it get worse as he brought out the small body and tried mouth-to-mouth. Standing in the corridor, at the bottom of the stairs, all Bodie had been able to do was stand there, helpless, and watch while Doyle knelt in a patch of light, trying to breathe his life into a child who obviously, so painfully obviously, was far beyond any help. To make matters worse, they hadn't been even close, off searching all the bastards' known haunts in London, taking an eternity to even find out about this place, thinking that the kid would be all right, kept alive as a bargaining chip. But to look at those tiny wrists, and the way the ropes had cut in, and to look at the sodden and soiled trousers, it was overwhelmingly clear that the child had been tied up and left in there from the beginning, near enough.

Bodie couldn't get it out of his mind, all of it brought into ever sharpening focus with every line of the report he'd typed out and with every line of stress that had appeared round Ray's eyes and framed his mouth. Oh, his mate was hurting, more than even Bodie was, and it was tearing them apart. Doyle on a guilt trip was all pugnacious fury to stave off tears, all sharp words and sharper digs to leech off some of his own pain.

"But who is it who gets to be on the receiving end, eh? You're a mug, Bodie," he said to himself, even as he got the teabags out of the caddy and lifted the tea pot down from the shelf, listening with half an ear for signs of Doyle finally being finished with his bath. He was still, ruefully, with a wry twist of self-deprecation, calling himself for every kind of fool, and all the time knowing, as if it had been bred in his bones, that he'd be whipping boy again, for Doyle. That he'd be whipping boy for Doyle at his own funeral, if it would ease his friend's pain. The last of the custard creams were lying at the bottom of the biscuit barrel, the sunshine-yellow packet crumpled on top of crumbs and broken bits an inch deep and a month old. Domesticity wasn't exactly high on his list of priorities, so he didn't even bother dumping the débris out, just grabbed the packet and dumped a new packet of chocolate digestives on the tray, busying the cups and biscuits and

teapot all together.

The living room next, newspapers shoved aside on the coffee table to leave room for the tea, a quick backtrack to the kitchen for the new bottle of milk and the sugar, cubes this time, the box torn open, some of the white lumps spilling out like childhood's memories. Poor brat hadn't even been missed at first, not with all the running around to give the kids their routine polio drops, the bitter taste disguised in sugar cubes...

He shook himself then, trying to make it all water off a duck's back. Switch the telly on, get laughing at "Some Mother's do 'ave 'em", shove it all to the back of his mind, let today bury itself under years of dust until he wouldn't even remember it. Get rid of the sting of seeing that kid, push it all aside. Ignore the pain, because pain made him angry, and he couldn't be angry. Ray would need to let it out, would need to shout and yell and rail against the unfairness of the world. And if Bodie allowed himself his own anger, then it'd be another fight, more bruises and another agony of separation, no quick spat the way they were both feeling today, no chance of that. Not worth it, not worth it all, to let the job rip them apart the way it had over that bomb cock-up at Christmas. He began, methodically and with concentration, to cram biscuits into his mouth, chewing energetically, arrowing on that simple luxury. If it weren't for Doyle needing to go through his usual catharsis, he'd crawl into a bottle tonight and stay there until morning, but Bodie knew how stroppy he got when he'd been drinking like that, and he'd already decided that this would be another of those nights when he'd be there like the Berlin Wall, big, solid and dumb, something for Doyle to scream his outrage at, something for Doyle to mark with his protests for freedom and decency.

The bathroom door clicked, the faintest shuss of bare feet on carpet, then Doyle was there, and if it had been any other day, if they'd found anything but that poor kid today, Bodie would have made a cheerfully cheeky comment about copper's instincts never failing—always there the second the pot had brewed. But it wasn't one of their better days, where the worst they'd had to do

was rough someone up or shoot someone. It had been the kind of day that not even all Bodie's good intentions were letting slip from him. He was too tense, and he knew it, not turning to look at Doyle, but gesturing instead, dark head nodding, to the tea things on the table, the ritual objects of British life. No matter what, the kettle went on, Bodie thought to himself, didn't make any difference whether or not it was a christening or a funeral, the end of a day at the seaside or the end of a day where Doyle had to bring a small body out of that dark cupboard...

Doyle didn't speak either, not berating Bodie for his choice of television viewing, not uttering a single word that was outwardly to prick Bodie's conscience but was never meant as anything more than a way for Doyle to beat himself with his own stick. He just sat down, there on the settee beside Bodie, poured them both tea, adding milk and sugar as required, passing the mug over as if this were nothing out of the usual, as if they did this every day. And they did, which was what made the hairs on the back of Bodie's neck rise: this was what they did after a day spent going through files, or giving evidence in Court, or working on the bikes. This was not what they did on the days when Doyle's guilt would be working overtime. He wondered, looking at the closed profile with its frown of concentration, when the explosion was going to come, when the vitriol was going to start. Nothing. Not a word, nothing but the slurp of Doyle drinking tea, the crunch of biscuits being chewed, the chattering fun on the television. He could, he fancied, even hear the beating of his own heart, picking up speed, brump, barrump, getting faster, waiting for the axe to fall, for the anger to spill over.

And that was when he noticed: no anger. No caged fury, no coiled temper waiting to strike with all the venom of the cobra. Just... He stared at that profile again, at the bruise under the eye, nestling there like a pillow between the spike of lashes and the bump of cheek implant. But Doyle hadn't been hit. They hadn't come close enough to any of the bastards, the sods slipping through the net and slinking off to Spain when Customs weren't looking. It was darkling in the living

room, dusk outside, the television screen dark with nothing but the BBC spinning globe giving off light. Without taking his stare off Doyle, Bodie reached out and flicked the switch on the lamp.

A huge sigh, then, and Doyle turned towards him, the slow humour in his eyes ironic contrast to the bruised look of his eyes. "Yeh," he said, "big, tough CI5 man, exDetective Constable Doyle, blubbering in the bath. Funny, innit?"

But Bodie couldn't face that honesty, couldn't face that vulnerability. Not from Ray. Doyle was tough, had to be hard as nails just to survive his own idealism, it just wasn't...right...for Doyle to be like this, not when Bodie had been expecting the usual temper and the usual fury to cover the vulnerability up until it went away. He fiddled with his mug, reached out and argued with the chocolate digestives until the packet was ripped open, lying gutted on the table, spilling its contents for Bodie to pick over. Doyle was restless beside him, and he could feel that too, too honest gaze on him, could feel it grazing his own profile, could feel it stumble when it came to the tightly disapproving shutness of his mouth.

"Christ, Bodie, I don't need this!" Voice shaky, watery, as if there were tears just waiting to be spilled, waiting to burn Bodie like acid. Couldn't handle it when people cried, not when it was people he loved. He still remembered that day when they'd been after the Greek assassin, chasing round looking for the high-power rifle, finally twigging what was going on. Doyle's voice had broken that day, when Bodie had lambasted him for not shooting from the doorway, and Doyle had said, helplessly, hopelessly, 'yeh, and who was standing in the window if I'd missed?'. He hadn't known how to handle it then, knew even less now. Beside him, into Bodie's silence, Doyle exploded into movement, erupting from the couch, almost flying across the room, a flash of white shirt as muscular arm reached for jacket, grabbing keys, running...

Running out of his own home, Bodie realised. And all because of him. All because he was terrified that Doyle might cry.

"Ray..." Small, tentative, half-warning, but

it was enough. Doyle stopped, jacket shrugged half on, head bowed, chest heaving as Bodie got to his feet and turned to look. All the sinews of Doyle's neck were standing out in stark relief, the muscles on his forearm rippling strong, the fabric of his jeans strained by the tensed clenching of thigh. No, Bodie thought, watching Doyle, cataloguing his strengths, it had bugger-all to do with Doyle crying. It was all about Doyle being weak. It was all about Doyle needing him. Cos when someone needed you, if you gave them what they needed, then you were tied to them. You were attached, they belonged to you, in an odd kind of way. At least, that was how he had always felt. Let someone need you, let yourself fill the empty spaces in their life, let your strength be pollyfilla for all their weak spots, and where were you?

Committed. Attached. Tied down, belonging, settled, shackled, freedom flown out the window and responsibility steamrollered in through the front door. He should be running by now, he knew that. Only, this was Doyle. The old panic was struggling to lift wings left dormant too long to give him flight. He *should* be running. But this was Ray, and he didn't.

"Should've run a long time ago, mate," he said, making Doyle whip round to look at him, the green eyes narrowing, temper flushing the pallid cheeks, hiding some of the redness of the eyes.

"An' what the fuck's that supposed to mean, Bodie?" Doyle asked in that so quiet voice that even Cowley listened to. "I should've run out on you before? You been tryin' to get rid of me, is that it, an' me just too fuckin' stupid to notice?" The jacket was hauled on all the way, while Doyle glared at Bodie, impaling him, all the weakness blessedly hidden behind the tempest. "What is it, *mate*, don't you like bringin' your work home with you any more, eh? Or don't you like it when I want somethin' a bit more special than a great dumb ox to shout at?"

Now this was something Bodie could deal with, nice familiar ground, good and steady, as well-known as the back of his hand. "Is that how you see me, Ray?" he asked, his voice mild at this point, as it always was in these cathartic spats.

Another pause, another moment when it would either be the pattern of ages—an explosive, nasty comment from Doyle, the perfect comeback uttered by Bodie to feed the release of anger—or it would be those stumbling first steps that come to all relationships. If they are to survive...

"Is that how I see you?" Doyle asked himself, right hand running through his hair, his bracelet glinting in the light. Bodie had wished that it had been he who'd bought Doyle that, but standing there in the jeweller's, standing there beside Doyle who was all sharp tongue and aggro, he hadn't had the balls—and hadn't wanted to, when all was said and done, not when he stopped and really considered the end results from a gift like that. A bangle? As close to a wedding ring as two blokes could get. And for Bodie, that made it first cousin to a handcuff to chain them together. But Doyle was separate from him, his mind and his words still on the birthing argument. "Is that how I see you?"

The question was repeated in a voice that was vague, and weary, so weary that it made Bodie uneasy. He was used to seeing Doyle tired—had to be, given their line of work—he was even used to seeing Doyle depressed—had to be, given Doyle's nature—but he wasn't used to this...defeated world-weariness.

"Ray?"

"Nah, Bodie, that's not how I see you—that's how you want me to see you, innit? Play the big stupid lummox, do the ex-Army hard man, and that way, I'll never expect much from you, will I? Never expect anything other than all mates together, never expect much past a bit of a tumble, never expect you to give up your birds, or your disappearing off on me, or your keeping your great trap shut about anything that really matters. Nah, it's not me that sees you like that, Bodie. Not me at all."

"Oh, so now you think I go out of my way to be an insensitive bastard. Oh, that's great, that is. What's the matter, diddums? Is Uncle Bodie not being Father Christmas to you?"

He was shocked when he heard the anger in his own voice, shocked even more when he heard Doyle laugh. "This is a right turn up for the books, Bodie, a right turn up. Here we are, going through the motions, the same fucking routine we go through every time the job turns sour, 'cept this time, this time, it's not me doing the ranting and raving and spoiling for a fight. What's the matter, Bodie? I'm good enough to guard your back, I'm good enough to fuck, but only if I keep it nice and butch? What is it? Scared I'm going to turn into a fucking nancy boy, cos I got upset about that kid?"

Too, too close to the truth, and too, too soon for him to adapt, to come to terms with the changes that had been happening inside him while he had been looking in the opposite direction. Panic flexed those wings, and more of the buried anger and the banked fear seeped from him, hissing, words his mind was trying to catch even as they spilled between them. "Don't be so soddin' stupid. You're the butchest little bitch I've ever met."

"And you've met quite a few, haven't you, Bodie-boy?"

It was, after all, despite Doyle's words and Bodie's intentions, turning into one of the usual fights, although nastier than normal, vicious enough to make Bodie's palms sweat and his throat dry. "Was wondering when you were going to throw that back at me."

"What, that you're a flaming queer? That you've had more men than I've had hot dinners? Well, I wouldn't let it worry you, mate. You've had more women than I've had hot dinners as well. Proper little slag, you are."

"Tut-tut, Doyle, your jealousy is showing, and all because you lack my sex drive," he sneered, defending himself with the best offense he could muster. "Pull the claws in, petal, they don't suit you."

"Oh, I wasn't being bitchy, Bodie, just honest." Bodie eyed him warily, involuntarily backing off a step, then two, as Doyle stalked closer, the whole situation transmuting itself again, leaving him dizzily off balance. "Want to know what I was getting at, Bodie?" Doyle asked, silken voice, steely eyed.

Bodie didn't answer, glaring at him instead with the sullen insolence that drove Cowley right round the twist and did nothing but egg Doyle on, voice chill with the heat of temper.

"Do you, Bodie? I'm sayin' that you're not oversexed, I'm sayin' that you're not God's gift

to woman, and man and anything else that's still warm." A measured pace forward, all the more threatening for the ostentation of its calm. "I'm sayin' that you're a coward. I'm sayin' that you run through people the way Cowley goes through whisky." Green eyes agleam with cutting knowledge, slicing Bodie's defences to pieces. "I'm sayin' you fuck your way through the phone book because that's safer than havin' to stay with someone." And now he was close, so terribly, terrifyingly close, his mouth overflowing with Bodie's most fiercely guarded secrets, his words bringing all of Bodie's most intimate shames out to lie, bleeding, on the floor between them. "It's easier than havin' to work at a relationship. It's easier, Bodie," and Bodie gulped, feeling the heat from Doyle's body all down his front, "than tryin' lovin' someone and fucking the whole thing up. Isn't it petal?"

He simply stood there for a moment, gathering his wits, guddling around in his mind for the smart alec come-back that would get him off the hook, that would get Doyle off his back and let him scoop all those dark little secrets back up and stuff them into the back of his mind where they belonged, not all out in the open like this, as shoddy and as tawdry as used condoms littering the back close. "Bit of the pot calling the kettle black there, Doyle?" The narrowed eyes simply stared at him, giving him time to speak his peace—giving him time, Bodie understood, to gather up enough rope to hang himself with. Even so, he blundered on, attacking in selfprotection, going for the jugular because if Doyle were to bleed, then Bodie would be so busy patching him up that neither of them would even notice that the whole issue of Bodie's cowardice had been shelved. And the knowledge of that cowardice was what was shaking Bodie so hard his brain was rattling round in his head, common sense tumbled into dizzy uselessness. "I mean, look who's talking! You're gettin' at me for fuckin' anythin' that moves—least that's better than being fucked by anythin' that moves."

"Oh, Bodie, Bodie, Bodie. You 'aven't got a fuckin' clue, 'ave you?" And there was, to Bodie's horror, genuine pity in that voice, and

in those perceptive eyes. Eyes that had always been a mirror, of sorts for him. As long as he looked okay to Doyle, then he knew he was doing all right in this life. But Doyle was looking at him with such pity now, such condescending comprehension, that it set Bodie's teeth on edge. "D'you honestly think I give a monkey's who ends up on top, as long as I get what I'm after? An' I s'pose this means you've you been countin'?" He grinned up at Bodie then, and Bodie felt the sting of that sharp-toothed smile. "So who's winnin' so far, eh?" And as Bodie opened his mouth to deliver a facetiously vicious retort, Doyle slid the stiletto home with deft ease, skewering him right through the heart, doing more damage than Mai Li had ever done Doyle. "Me, Bodie. I'm the one who's winnin', cos I know what I want an' I'm not afraid of gettin' it. I'm not the one fuckin' up the only good thing in his soddin' life just cos I'm too scared to face 'ow I feel 'bout someone."

And it blurted out, racing down the path that years with this man had been leading up to, just blurted out and was said, baldly. "Not afraid of lovin' you, Ray. Scared of losin' you. Scared of drivin' you away."

The eyes staring at him were wide and bright, piercing him with their knowingness. "An' scared of needin' me, an' me needin' you. That's the bottom line, innit, Bodie? Terrified shitless of being tied down to someone."

Bodie didn't need to speak, saw his own answer in that unblinking gaze, felt the momentary relief as the eyes blinked, slowly, stayed closed, Doyle letting out a puff of breath, too forceful to be called a sigh, too miserable to be called anything else. "What the fuck am I goin' to do with you, mate? Christ, Bodie, we've been together over five years now, livin' together as near as spit for four years, an' you're still scared you won't come up to snuff? You are a fool, aren't you?"

He could have taken anger, could even have taken contempt, but this patient understanding could well be his undoing. There were no defences against this, nothing he could hurl at Doyle. Not without causing serious hurt, and even as his mouth opened to spear Doyle with the cutting edge of his defence, he discovered that the words had

fled, crowded out by the ridiculous lump in his throat.

"Cat got your tongue," Ray was saying to him, in something akin to the old manner between them. Bodie watched in fascination the way the curls tumbled back into place in the wake of Doyle's hand, watched as Ray watched him, watched himself in Ray's eyes. "Oh, sit down," and he did as he was told, arms stretching out along the back of the sofa, making a point of displaying his easefilled confidence, even if he felt nothing of the sort.

"Got nothing to say? Since when 'ave you done the silent sufferin' bit?"

"Since when 'aven't I?" There. He'd said it. or part of it, part of what was between them, holding them together, keeping them apart. "Never get a chance to do anything else, do I?" And it was easier, now that he'd started, now that he'd dared to go beyond the usual carping that was second nature and first mask to them both. "Never get a word in edgewise, do I? It's always how you're feeling, it's always all about how we can get you over whatever the fuck's gone wrong.'

And those eyes were staring at him again, Doyle's mouth soft and half-smiling as he spoke. "An' when 'ave you ever tried to make it any different? D'you realise this is the first time you've ever talked to me like this? Honest, no holds barred, lettin' me in to how you're feelin'? You'd make the Pope feel guilty for Easter, you would."

A begrudging smile for that, the truth stinging not half as badly as he had thought it would. "Always thought you'd be all over me if I started complaining."

"Started complainin? When did you ever stop? 'Bout the stupid little things, anyroad."

"No time like the present." He looked away, watching something on the television that didn't even register with him, just that there was noise and colour and movement. Hadn't been enough of that today when Doyle'd gone into that cupboard under the stairs. "Don't mind when you take it out on me, Ray, when the job gets to you, but I hate it when you get the fight you want an' then go and bear a grudge on me for what I said."

"Like Christmas, you mean? Told you I

was sorry about that."

"When? When did you even *mention* it, tell me that?" He was shouting again, he recognised, saw it in the way Ray's face tightened. "Told me you were sorry? Oh, and how did you do that? Roll over and let me fuck you, did you?" Too late, too, too late, he saw the wounding truth. Oh, fuck it, he thought to himself, it was after Christmas Ray'd started doing all those little things, all the small touches that made the difference between friends fucking each other and two people... He closed his eyes, groaning in dismay at his own blinkered blindness. It was after Christmas, at the beginning of January, when Doyle had started speaking to him again, that was when Ray'd started letting on to a very few, select mates what was going on between them. It was after Christmas that Ray'd relaxed again about letting Bodie touch him in public, it was after Christmas that Ray'd stopped bristling and denying everything when someone made the usual comments about 'better halfs' and 'share everything, do you?'. After Christmas...

"Penny finally drop, did it?"

"Fuck, Ray, I'm sorry, didn't realise..."

"Yeh, well, can't really say anything, can I?" Bodie's look of disbelief and the incipient words were forestalled with: "Thought you'd twigged, didn't I? Thought that was why you didn't throw a fit when I organised the holiday and bought you that new duvet..."

They sat, looking at each other, all the years coming together at last, and Bodie started to laugh. "We're a pair, aren't we? Here I am, expecting it to be red roses when the time comes—"

"Red roses? Why would I—"

"It's what you did with Ann."

"Yeh, and Ann was a woman, an' in case you 'aven't looked between your legs recently, you're not. Get off it, Bodie, you'd've knocked me into next week if I'd come at you with roses."

"Look who's talkin'. You expectin' me to settle down with someone just cos he's bought me a new cover for my bed—specially since you were the one always complaining about the old bedspread."

"So do you want roses instead then?"

Panic slammed into him, knocking the breath from him. He hadn't, honestly hadn't seen this coming, and he should know better by now. Conversations with Doyle never seemed to follow any of the usual scripts people went by, never seemed to follow on a single discernable path of logic, but jumped hither and yon, seesawing intent with the same speed as Doyle could switch emotions on him. He jumped to his feet, felt a hand on his arm, lost his balance as he was tugged, hard, back down onto the sofa.

He looked, then, at Doyle, at this man who always reflected him back so clearly. "I'm not lettin' you run away, Bodie, not now. We're goin' to see this through, sort this out between us for once and for all. D'you want roses from me?"

And Bodie knew the real question: do you want commitment, do you want it just to be the two of us forever, do you want to admit that this is love, real love, and nothing else will ever come close. Do you want to try, for the first time ever, at actually having a real relationship?

He said the first thing that came to mind, anything to give him a second's cover, a moment to regroup his routed thoughts. "Roses make me sneeze."

The green eyes shuttered over, shutting him out, and it was then that he realised what else had been said, and actually in so many words. We're going to sort this out between us, once and for all. He wanted to shout at Ray, when did it turn into an all-or-nothing situation? When did it get to be the turn of the screw, when did it get to be give in and get tied down or get out?

When did it get to be hand yourself to me on a silver platter, heart and soul and mind, or watch me walk out of your life?

When had it ever been anything else? When?

They'd been partners first, forced to trust each other to survive, thrown together, sometimes day and night, usually at least twelve hours a day, a minimum of five days a week. They'd had no choice in that, but they'd both had a choice when it came to the partnership outside of work. And he'd chosen that, going into it with his eyes wide open.

Even though he'd known before he'd ever slept with Ray that this one could hook him, that this one could nail his hide to the wall and all he'd do would be hand him the hammer. He'd known, from the start, the very start. Had known, and still gone in there. Fighting and kicking and screaming all the way, covering it up with mateyness and girlfriends, bringing home the occasional boyfriend for a really mind-boggling session of three-way sex. But it had always been Ray, hadn't it? Everything he'd done, every woman or man he'd had, he'd always had to see how Ray reacted, what Ray thought of them. How Ray always came after him with more wiles and ever-more beguiling ways: a flexing of his spine, a twitch of that delectable arse, an arch to show off the heavy bulge in his jeans...

Pity, Bodie thought, watching his life turn itself inside out, that he didn't believe in God. He could have used someone to pray to at that particular moment of revelation. But there was nothing for him, nothing but himself, and the people he believed in. One of whom, the most important of whom, was sitting not ten inches away from him, showing no weakness now, no, not one iota. Funny, it occurred to him, that it was Ray showing how vulnerable he is that got me crucified like this. Small wonder he always wanted either fight or flight when Ray got all worked up and broken inside like today. Better that than this, surely.

Oh yeh? reality sneered at him cataloguing all the things he'd done, all the things he'd accepted. So he was afraid of losing his freedom: and just how much freedom did he actually, honestly and truly and no selfdeception, just how much freedom did he still have? When was the last time he'd gone off and done something wild, without doing it to get at Doyle? When was the last time he'd done anything, without Doyle crossing his mind at least once?

Probably not since before he ever knew that Raymond Doyle existed.

And Ray, never the soul of patience, was rising again, preparing to leave as he had started to earlier, but slower this time, so much more slowly. It occurred to Bodie to think how Ray must be feeling, after a day like today, laying all his cards—and his heart, don't forget his heart, he whispered in the privacy of his own thoughts, a small warmth growing in him at the thought, the soft-blooming knowledge beginning its slow permeation of his being—to do all that, and to have it rejected by silence, by a man Doyle had begun to think of as his, as the one person who would finally stick with him.

A memory, mingling with the soft sounds of Doyle gathering up chequebook, keys, wallet, the leaving more measured this time, more permanent. A memory, of a bitterly cold night, breath frosting the air as they sat in the car, waiting for their mark to venture the January night. Doyle, eyes glued to the binocs, voice so steady, so without pity.

Never had someone want to stay with me without changing me into someone else. Never been good enough for anyone before, not really.

But what was he, Bodie, doing right now? Telling him without saying a single word, that Ray wasn't good enough. That Ray would have to change, again, if he wanted to keep a lover.

Then the rest of the memory.

Was always lonely before I met you.

And what did Bodie know, if not being alone?

Belonging.

He knew belonging. He knew what it was to have a place, a spot carved out to fit him and no-one else. A perfect match, for him to this one part of the world.

Doyle. He fitted Doyle, the two of them a pair, a matching set.

Belonging.

And a freedom long since gone, just not yet lamented, not yet officially bidden farewell.

Doyle—going through the living room door, heading down the corridor. Many things, was his Doyle, but a fool wasn't one of them. Let him leave now, and there'd be no path back to trust, no path back to belonging. Probably no sex either, nor kisses, nor jokes chuckled over in the giddy darkness after an oppo was finally over. No exchanged knowing glances, no wordless conversations, no neatly portioned pleasure to keep them both going when the days were long and miserable. Like

today. If it were such a day tomorrow, he'd have to go through it on his own, even if Doyle were standing right beside him. Working partners. That's all they'd be, working partners, guarding each other's back because that's what the job needed.

Working partners.

The thought made his skin crawl. Go back to that—just so he could refuse to admit to something that was already true?

He bolted from the couch, suddenly realising that time waits for no man and Doyle wasn't waiting for him to finish his ruminating. Through the doorway, pelting down the hall, front door open—and Doyle standing there, waiting, after all. Slowing his pace, he strolled the last few feet, leaning himself, all Maurice Chevalier nonchalance, on the open door jamb. He smiled, quite sweetly, one eyebrow lifting, inviting Doyle to join in a joke that hadn't been told yet. Lazily, the smile heating to a grin, he reached out, shutting the door, turning the mortise lock, snibbing the snib, putting the chain on, enjoying as the waiting silence on Doyle's face warily changed to dawning cheer.

One finger drawing a line along the broken cheekbone down to the parting lips, he whispered in his best cockney, "It's a fair cop, guv."

"You what?"

"You got me, Detective Constable. Got me fair han' square."

He was pleased to the soles of his feet at the way that lit up Doyle's face, the meaning sinking in to fill up the eroded hollows. "Come along now, sir," Doyle said, doing a credible Dixon of Dock Green. "If you'll just come quietly..."

"If I just come quietly," Bodie said, still whispering, bedroom warmth dripping from his voice, "you'll wonder who the strange man in your bed is, won't you?"

"Wonder that anyway, don't I? You daft bugger, Bodie," but it was said with indulgence, the way Doyle always spoke to him when fondness overcame whatever thoughtless thing Bodie had done—or not done. "I take it this means yes?"

"Not much point in saying no, is there?" And at the sudden festering of suspicion in green eyes, "No, I'm not saying that you've trapped me into this. Too good a cop for entrapment," he said, playing the game again for a second, discovering that open commitment didn't spoil what they had, that the sweetness of humour was still there to make it possible to say things that would embarrass them no end if they used the words scrolled on Valentine cards. "I'm saying yes because it's finally dawned on me that I said yes a long time ago, didn't I? First time I laid eyes on you, I warrant. Been a long time coming, pet."

And it was nice to come home, to feel Doyle's familiar caress, hard hand snaking down to cup his balls, a breath of sheer pleasure hissing through Bodie. "Can make you come fast, Bodie," he heard, as he gathered Doyle in close to himself, hugging him, trapping that wonderful hand tight against the plush of his cords.

"Make it last tonight, Ray. Make it special. Make you," and a kiss, open mouthed and lush, tongue tasting tongue, "feel better after today. Get rid of all the shadows for you..."

"Standing up against the front door? C'mon, bedroom, mate. Want you in my bed, where you belong."

He felt the pause, felt the tension flare briefly in Doyle's body, as the forbidden word hung in the air, like the second shoe waiting to be dropped. Bodie buried his face in luxuriant hair and his hands in luscious arse. "Sounds wonderful, Ray," he murmured, finding out that he meant it, finding out that he didn't even care enough to wave goodbye as his spurious freedom danced off into the distance. "Do it all, eh? All the things you like to do and I always pretended I hated."

"All the stuff you put up with just to keep my face straight?"

"Yeh. Candles, music, cuddling up under the covers, reading that bloody story of yours..."

Doyle said nothing, and Bodie's grin matched his as he was led, by a slender hand slid down his belt, along the hall to the bedroom. Neither one of them spoke again, no words needed, as curtains were drawn, as the bedside lamp was switched on, candles lit, portable cassette whispering Prokofiev. Opposite sides of the bed, they faced each

other across the familiar expanse, Bodie smiling a little ruefully as he took part in the romantic ritual he had so earnestly eschewed, remembering his own loud protests that he was only doing it to keep Doyle happy. Well, he could admit to himself tonight that it was to keep them both happy, that it was to make up for the day and to celebrate tomorrow. That it was to allow him to savour this belonging, and to give Doyle all the metred pattern of romance that he needed. He opened his arms, and Doyle walked towards him until they melted together in a long kiss, hands languorously sliding clothing from firm flesh, fingers moulding and shaping, palms cupping and caressing. Doyle was hard, rampant, tamed only by the press of Bodie's hand, and that pleased him, that Ray was so willing to let all the angst evaporate. It was wonderful, to have this easeful acceptance, to have all this love after so many friezes when it had seemed inevitable that this would have to come to an end. His arms were filled to overflowing with Doyle, his heart spilling over with the joy of being, finally, free enough to admit that he was forever joined to another human being. They were on the bed now, both of them pulling back, neither one wanting to let all this pass too quickly.

"Make it last, Bodie," Ray said to him, clear eyes watching him, asking and promising at the same time.

"Oh, I will," he answered, meaning both the sex of this night and the relationship of tomorrow. "Come here, pet."

Together under the blankets, slow slide of skin on skin, lingering kisses of fingers on flesh, then a moment, a pause, as Bodie cradled Doyle's face in his hands. Unyielding, unashamed, Doyle stared back at him, and Bodie saw the misery that still lay underneath the happiness.

The child. Jesus Christ, he'd forgotten all about the child. He looked at Doyle's mouth, at the Michaelangelo perfection of the lips, remembering how pale they'd been after Doyle had pressed them to a child who would never breathe again, no matter what Doyle willed, no matter what Doyle was willing to give to make it different. A flicker of a glance, and he caught sight of the haunted, hungry need in

Doyle's gaze, caught sight of the aching hurting needs that needed to be sated tonight. Oh, yes, they'd read one of Doyle's stories, as they always did, but it would take something very special to take away the chill sting of pain in those eyes. Something deep, something that would stir Doyle to the profoundest core. Something very personal, something secret that only the one man closest to Ray was ever trusted to know. And that was Bodie himself. There was a bittersweet thrill in knowing that, in knowing that he was so desperately needed, so deeply tied to this man. Then the bitterness passed, as unmourned as the freedom he no longer wanted, leaving only the sweetness behind.

"It's all right, Ray," he whispered against Doyle's parted mouth, his words taking the place of the words Doyle had almost spoken. "You don't even need to ask. Know what you want, know what you need. And you've got it, mate. Got me now, and that's everything you'll ever need in your life, isn't it?"

So Doyle didn't speak, didn't ask, which made Bodie wallow in self-satisfaction that it was all going to be so easy now that he had stopped running and caught up to Doyle at long last. He settled Ray in closer, propping him just so, until the curly hair nestled under his chin and the whisper of chest hair caressed his own smooth chest. One handed, he reached into the bedside unit, taking out the unassuming grey book, holding it whilst Doyle flipped through to the well-worn pages,

to the story that he knew Ray usually read alone, on afternoons or nights when Bodie was unwilling to be so open, when Bodie was unwilling to share so intimate a fantasy. The page found, Bodie smiled as Ray settled against him again, pressing a kiss on tumbled curls as Doyle's strong fingers found his right nipple and pressed it, flickering nail surging delight through him. He knew, at that moment, that neither all the good intentions nor all the skillful control in the world was going to be enough to make it last long enough tonight. Skipping through the tale, he found the part Doyle would love most. The hot sweetness of arousal rekindled, he turned to the muchloved lines and began to read. And as he spoke, he felt the jolting heat of Doyle's cock against his thigh, heard the sudden, fierce intake of breath, felt his own heat rise to match Ray's, his heart full of love, his body full of passion, both ready to seal them together forever. A fiery kiss, a fist tight on his balls, pulling them tight, promising, promising both himself and Doyle what they loved most and so rarely had had the open trust and love to share. He gulped in a deep breath, spread his legs all the farther for Doyle to delve and explore and take possession as he willed. Voice trembling with passion, he continued their bedtime story...

"And he drew the whip between his legs obscenely, like a lover, a deviant caress rich with subtle eroticism...