

# ROUGH TRADE

*Like Pinocchio's nose, this one grew...and grew...and grew! In the beginning M. Fae had an idea for a scene, nothing much just an interesting situation. But then she found it needed an end, and a beginning, and, well, most of its middle. The result: Rough Trade, where the title reflects both the concept and the action in the story.*

*It's a voyage of discovery. Bodie thinks he is on a voyage of discovery about Doyle, only to discover that the voyager is himself. Here is a man who thinks he's on to a sure thing, only to find that there's nothing sure about anything, including himself.*

*Warning to the reader: M. Fae says she will not do a sequel. Please feel free to pick up the string and see where it leads.*

**EYES** dancing, Bodie grabbed a handful of tight jeans and Doyle's bum, barely able to suppress a burst of laughter at the way his partner jumped.

"Gotcha!" he muttered as they went through the swing doors into the pub, Doyle's face a picture of fury now, the passing women's giggling reaction fuel to Doyle's fire and absolute joy for Bodie.

"Pack it in, you stupid sod," Doyle hissed, shouldering past Bodie to get to the bar first. "You can buy your own bloody drinks if you keep that up."

"Oh, yeh, moneybags? And when was the last time you got a round in, eh?" Bodie carped with equal measures of good humour and barefaced lying. "On Noah's Ark, was it? Can just see it now," he went on, pantomiming the way his old Granda would talk about the War, "the black clouds gathering overhead, the rain pissing down, the water rising—"

Doyle nodded to the barman when he came over, giving their order as if sublimely unaware of the amateur dramatics emoting all over the place.

"—and there's our little Ray of sunshine in the middle of it all, taking an age to find his wallet, sifting through his pockets to see if there's a copper in there under the lint and the mothballs—"

Doyle handed over a crumpled fiver, waited for the change, a solid slurp of bitter carrying him over until the barman came back with his money and the crisps.

"—Noah's standing there, his sons're standing there, all the neighbours, moaning an' groaning about how come if the Flood's coming, then how come Noah's still stood standing there waiting for little Ray to buy them a drink—"

Doyle stuffed the crisps in his jacket pockets, filled his hands with their pints, started off for the empty table there in the corner. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Bodie's expression, and managed to keep the grin from his own face: little Ray indeed!—wasn't often he was able to keep his own temper in check long enough to outlast Bodie, but by Christ, he thought, he was going to get a rise out of his bloody partner this time. He'd turn the tables for once, and then we'd see which side of his face Bodie was smiling out of. Just to rub a bit more salt in the wound of Bodie's failed fat-arsing around, Doyle began to whistle.

So Bodie grabbed at him again, Doyle turning to come round the table at just the wrong moment, Bodie's cupped hand grabbing him full in the crotch instead of the rump.

"Oi!" Doyle yelled, beer slopping over the rims of their mugs, froth landing wetly on Bodie's hands and Doyle's jeans. "You better watch it, mate, or I'll have you singing soprano."

"Ooh, petal," Bodie cooed, all gooey eyes and batting eyelashes, playing this to the hilt now that he'd finally broken through Doyle's unnatural reserve and won this round too, "and I thought you didn't want me that way."

The OAPs at the next table cackled at the floor show, Bodie completely over the top. "He's funnier than that Benny Hill bloke, in't he?" one of the women choked round her port and lemon.

"No, it's not Benny Hill, it's Danny la Rue what does all that fairy stuff, Peggy," her friend of forty years informed her, relishing a good argument that would see them through the dead part of the day between tea and *Coronation Street* on the telly that night. "Or that Larry Grayson, he's just as funny."

Doyle didn't think Bodie was funny at all, his glower gaining strength as he turned away from the old women to the bastard at his side. "I've already warned you once," he said, none too quietly, "pack it in, you stupid git."

"Why?" Bodie asked, having a good drink of Doyle's pint, switching them back before Doyle had finished fishing the crisps out of his pockets. "It's only a lark—an' you've got to admit," he nodded towards the lively coterie of old women nursing the luxury of their small sherries and ports, "it's good for a bit of a laugh."

"For some it is, but you better watch yourself, mate."

"Tut, tut, Doyle," Bodie stuffed a handful of mangled cheese and onion crisps into his mouth, tongue tip catching a few stray morsels, "such lack of imagination in one so well-read. You're repeating yourself, old son. Anyway, what're you going to do?" His eyes were gleeful again, even as he automatically surveyed the pub for any possible risk or anyone who was too interested in them. "Hit me with your handbag?"

"It's not what I'll do, it's what Cowley'll do, if people start talking about you."

"You what? Oh, come off it. Queers're the last ones to mess about in public, everybody knows that." He leaned in a little bit closer, winking outrageously, pleased as punch to have really wound Doyle up this time. "Course, it's the best camouflage for the likes of us, isn't it, ducky? Hiding in plain sight and all that—" Bodie broke off, his attention caught and the joke deflated by the two women just entering the pub. "Would you take a look at that pair!" he exclaimed, nudging Doyle in the ribs, moved as always by a large pair of breasts. "And her friend's not half bad either, is she? Christ, must be a D at least. Tits like melons—"

"The way you've been going on, I didn't think that was the fruit you fancied." Seriously peeved, a caustic edge to his voice that was entirely lost on

the happily lustful Bodie staring at his idea of heaven on legs. "But I could fancy some of that myself," Doyle went on, entering into the usual banter, dropping the backbiting joking that had become part of their routine, finishing his pint and getting to his feet before Bodie could make a move of his own, (comma) Bodie close enough behind him that it was nigh near a race to see who could reach the women first. A couple of feet still away from the women, Doyle glanced over his shoulder at his partner as he neatly stepped in front of Bodie and claimed the one Bodie had wanted for himself. "Anyway, you always did prefer grapes, didn't you?" He turned his very best smile on the woman Bodie had fancied so much. "Hello there," he said over Bodie's bluster, his arm fitting neatly round the very buxom woman's waist, her hip swelling just so against his groin, "my friend doesn't half fancy your friend," he went on, positively oozing charm as Bodie was left to smile at her flat-chested friend. "So why don't you and me go and have a drink together while those two get to know each other better?"

Days later, that evening nothing more than a vague memory of long hair and longer legs, they neither one of them was in a good mood as they came into the same pub, Doyle snagging the one empty table, Bodie shoving his way up to the bar, rejoining Doyle in silence, the matching set of double whiskies disappearing rapidly.

"Hungry?"

Doyle looked at him, nodded, leaned back against the wall again, his ribs still aching, either from the kick he'd taken or from the thudding of his heart.

Bodie knew better than to fuss, but even so, he didn't much like the colour of Doyle's skin right now. Fish-belly white he was used to, but only when he looked in the mirror or Cowley was using the office shower. Doyle was usually sallower, even showing a bit of a tan if the weather'd been nice, but this off-grey tinge bespoke either pain or the sick fear that sets in when the mind actually has time to think after too close a call and to remember just how mortal we all are. Uncomplaining, unjoking for once, he fetched them some food, his frown deepening when he returned to the table and found Doyle still slumped the way he'd left him. "Get yourself outside this," he said, shoving the

mounding plate in front of his partner, the steam curling amidst the cigarette smoke lurking in the atmosphere.

Doyle didn't even complain about how much he hated steak and kidney pudding and sludgy baked beans, just shovelled it in mechanically, one forkful after the other, too unnerved to bother about the social niceties of table manners.

"That's better," Bodie said eventually, shoving his empty plate aside, meaning the way the colour had returned to Doyle's cheeks now that his partner had some food and booze in him. "Least now you don't look like something the cat threw up."

"Anyone ever told you what a charming dinner companion you are?"

"Nope," cheerfully, but with eyes shadowed still with concern.

"Not surprised. Christ," the word exploded from him, the edge of panic sharpening his voice, "but that was a real balls up. Cowley'll have Murph's guts for garters."

"And I wouldn't be in McCabe's shoes for love nor money." Bodie paused, leaning back until his shoulders brushed reassuringly against his partner's. "Well, maybe if it was for enough money..."

A bare bleat of laughter, Doyle's eyes closed in memory or simple tiredness. "You'd need it for the athlete's foot powder if you'd been in McCabe's shoes. Here," and Doyle squirmed, fishing around in a too-tight pocket, crumpled money finally appearing. "Get us both another, will you?"

"And is there anything else sir will require?"

"Hot bath, warm bed—"

"Willing bird?" Bodie asked, knowing how it could be when the adrenalin high wore off and the chill of mortality set in.

Doyle opened his eyes, looked from Bodie down to his own jeans. "Couldn't get it up with a bloody crane. The only full body I'll be interested in tonight'll come out of a bottle."

"Fair enough." Bodie took the money, started dredging his way through the crowd. After today, if Doyle wanted to drown himself in drink, Bodie wasn't going to gainsay him—what's more, he'd even foot the bill, especially given what he owed Doyle beyond the realm of hard currency. He shifted uncomfortably while he waited for their drinks to be poured, his trousers catching him the

wrong way, his own reaction to the rush of fear and the near brush with disaster having its usual self-preservationist effect on his body. Later, he told himself, absently reaching down to rearrange himself in his trousers, when Doyle's safely blotto and tucked up for the night. You'll have your turn then. Still, his poor cock couldn't help but nudge hopefully whenever an attractive woman caught Bodie's eye.

"Things I give up for you," he murmured, only half intending Doyle to hear him as he fetched their drinks back to the table.

Doyle roused himself with visible effort, his usual lithe vitality not even hinted at by the leaden movements of his body tonight. "Yeh," he said, going through the motions for Bodie's sake, "poor old Bodie, stuck in the boozers when he was all set for a night at the opera."

"Uh, yeh," Bodie answered, all crossed-eyes and single digit IQ, "Lord of the Rings, that was it."

The fact that Doyle let that pass without a single dig about liking fairies warned Bodie that Doyle was a lot worse off than he was letting on.

"Here," Bodie said with a hell of a lot more enthusiasm than he actually felt, Doyle's taste in clubs running to the loud and expensive, "we could go down that club you were going on about the other day?" A suitably lecherous grin, a suggestive nudge. "Never know your luck, eh?"

Doyle gave him one of his patented looks, irritated beyond cause at Bodie's reminding him of something he didn't even want to think about. "Already told you, I'm not up for anything like that tonight, all right? That registered in your thick skull yet?"

Knowing better than to answer when Doyle took one of his nasty turns, Bodie made a placatory gesture with his hand then applied himself to working his way through the river of alcohol Doyle had prescribed for them both. Well, at least he had the consolation of knowing that his rather intimate little problem would soon yield to brewer's droop, which wasn't much help right now, when every lean forward to pick up his drink pressed his cock into his thigh, and every lean backwards stretched his cock, kissingly, down the tender skin of his inner thigh.

"I'll get one in," Doyle said, mind on the next few drops of alcoholic anaesthesia, Bodie's mind still on the way his cock was nudging forlornly at him.

“You what?” he asked, but Doyle was already on his feet, wending his way through the press of people. The place was absolutely mobbed now, the after-work crowd jamming in to erase the stresses of their tidy little nine-to-five jobs, completely oblivious to the fact that there were two men in their midst who had killed today, and might well kill again before this sad lot saw their next pay-packets. The familiar glow of superiority warmed Bodie, took away some of the unpleasant, unexaminable unease of killing, his own pride in himself and his well-honed skills and highly trained body making his gun feel comfortable where it was snuggled in under his arm.

A movement in the corner caught his attention, and he watched, without being obvious, as the well-dressed young man in his three piece suit—someone, Bodie told himself with an upwelling of pride, who’d pee himself if he so much as heard about the sort of blokes Bodie had to defeat—chatted up a bottled-blonde with long legs and pert bust. Cynically amused, Bodie watched as what he’d thought of as a chat-up turned itself into a reconciliation scene, the man proffering apologies and G&Ts in equal profusion. A kiss, then another, even a quick brush of hand against breast, and Bodie’s mouth twisted as he looked away. There was one bloke who was going to be in with a chance tonight, sowing his wild oats, forgetting everything about himself in the pleasures of sex.

And him? He was sitting here waiting for his mate to fight his way back through the crowd and give him another pint that he didn’t even want. For what? he asked himself for the millionth time, this one done as Doyle came back into sight, his ferocious scowl and tacit threat of violence cleaving the horde like magic. I’m sitting here because he’s my mate and he needs to get through tonight without doing himself a mischief, he answered himself, hating the lacklustre patina that dimmed Doyle’s usual vitality, wary of the coiled tension that warred with the too-familiar threat of Doyle’s depressions. I’m here because I owe him this much at least—for fuck’s sake, I’m here because he needs me.

The last thought was stomped on, battered into oblivion, sentimental weakness having no place in Bodie’s scheme of life. Loyalty, the left-over discipline from his Service years, that was one thing: safe, secure, an added survival skill. Anything beyond was blind stupidity, especially in his line of

work. But Doyle, oh, no, Doyle didn’t see it that way, did he? Liked being ‘friends’, liked spending time together, going out with birds together, or having a drink with each other when there wasn’t a bit of crumpet on offer.

Silently, he took his drink from Doyle, gulped from it, set it down, refused to look at his partner. Looked, instead, at the clusters of women, friends come hunting in twos and threes, dolled up to the nines, as ready for a bit of sex as he was. There was plenty on offer tonight, judging by how many mascaraed eyes were gazing his way—staring in Doyle’s direction too. Bodie had a good look around at what was available, paying no heed to the storm sitting beside him just waiting to douse everything in its path. Finally, he cast a reluctant glance at Doyle, noted, unenthusiastically, the set of Doyle’s shoulders and the cast of his mouth, read the emotions behind the fixed mask. He knew Doyle in this mood: it would end up either in misery or violence, and either way, Bodie knew he’d be the one to be on the receiving end.

“Bugger this for a game,” Bodie announced, dunting Doyle in the ribs, his decision made. “You can wait till I’ve snuffed it for a wake.”

Doyle drew him a dirty look, took a pointed slurp of his beer.

“No, I mean it, Ray. All right, so the Cow’s after everyone’s guts for garters, but he’s not here right now, is he?” He was hurrying now, throwing the words like stones, annoyed when they simply bounced off his partner. “We’re here, and we’re fucking alive, made it through another day, right? Not that anyone could tell from looking at you,” he added, his empathy burned off by his own need for sex, his sympathy too impatient to wait out Doyle’s unhealthy moodiness. “And I’m not going to sit here as if we’re at our own fucking funeral. You don’t need any more booze, my lad,” he went on, finishing Doyle’s drink for him, too caught up in his solution of all their problems to notice Doyle’s uncommon passivity, too determined to jolly Doyle out of this latest problem to care whether Doyle wanted to have a good sulk or not, “what you need is a good fuck.”

“I’ve told you—”

“Yeh, yeh, you’ve told me,” Bodie mocked, the same way he had since he’d been five. “And I know you better than that. Look at you, wound up tighter’n a spinster’s cunt, and for what? Because we survived and some right bastard didn’t?”

"It was a bit more complicated than that—"

"D'you think I don't know—"

"I know," Doyle said with quiet contempt, "that you don't want to think about it. Deep as a fucking saucer, that's you, Bodie and—"

With some determination, Bodie held on to his temper: they'd been through this before, and Doyle's ugly mood would turn rapidly into a far uglier situation if Bodie rose to the bait of Doyle's carping. "And you've had enough booze for one night."

"Well, thank you, Lord Longford," Doyle retorted, one long finger tapping the rim of his emptied glass.

"Come on, Ray," Bodie said in his best wheedle, "you're ready to explode, and Cowley'll murder me if I let you get into a fight."

"Since I'm not fit for human company then," Doyle said steadily as he stood on slightly unsteady legs, "that leaves me the choice of goin' 'ome alone, or staying with you." He raked Bodie with a particularly vitriolic stare. "And given the choice, 'ome sounds like fucking heaven. I've 'ad ever such a lovely evenin', mate."

Bodie's voice was very tight with a resentment he didn't usually permit himself. "Don't mention it."

"You're the one who's mentionin' it—" Doyle broke off, turning to look, awkwardly, at Bodie, at the man who'd stepped between Doyle's jammed gun and a very nasty sawn-off shotgun: looked, carefully, at the man he hadn't even bothered to thank for saving his life—hadn't felt he needed to. "No wake," he said, sitting back down, his action as close to an apology or thanks that either one of them would want, "but no birds either, all right?"

"Wasn't thinking about anything so fowl," Bodie replied, rubbing his hands with an entirely mendacious glee, and he was, under the humour, grimly determined that he was going to get Doyle out of this fit of the moodies without anyone being hurt this time, either by Doyle's lethal hands or the sharp edge of his tongue. "Tell you what, why don't we have something to eat to mop up all this booze—wouldn't do to be caught drunk and unable, would it?—and then we'll make a night of it?"

Doyle leaned back against the wall, the tension still there under the posed relaxation, the currency of partnership demanding that he give Bodie what Bodie obviously needed. "Why not?" he said

unenthusiastically. "The booze 'asn't made a blind bit of difference."

"Going blind, my child?" Bodie intoned, piously, then grinning, positively willing Doyle to at least try to defuse the situation, unwilling to confront his own need to have Doyle around to share the rest of the night. "There's a cure for that, you know."

"What? Never!" Doyle squeaked, doing his part, playing Bodie's game because he at least owed him that. "Whatever will they think of next?"

"I can tell you what I'll think of next," Bodie muttered, nodding over at a singularly attractive, and attractively single, woman standing amidst the clutter of people, her dark eyes searching for a table. Bodie waved her over, all the happier when her friend joined her and the two of them started making their slow way over.

"Which one d'you fancy then?" Bodie whispered as *sotto voce* as was possible in a crammed pub with a juke-box blaring the Undertones full blast.

"I already told you—"

"Yeh, I know, but it's like riding a horse, innit?"

"Don't know about you, mate," Doyle said dryly, "but I've never fallen off one yet."

"Didn't mean *that*. Just meant if, you know, you get a bit nervous about bein' able to perform, right, then you've got to just do it, get it over and done with before you get your knickers in a twist over it."

Doyle gave him a very straight look, then shook his head in apparent wonder. "You really take the biscuit. I almost got killed today, two men who didn't have to, died. And the entire thing was such a royal fuck-up, it's a miracle any of us are still hanging around, and you think I don't fancy a quick fuck because I'm worried the old plumbing won't work?"

"Well, what else is it, eh? You said yourself you couldn't get it up with a crane—"

"And I meant it. Bodie, I'm fucking knackered, I ache all over and I don't fucking feel like it!"

"All right, all right, keep your hair on," Bodie muttered, looking anew at Doyle and realising that his partner might just mean it. But still, there was that darkness lurking in Doyle's eyes, and the tightness of his body, a dozen minute signs that Bodie recognised after a year of working with this man under more circumstances than the people in this pub could ever imagine. He knew he wasn't

wrong about the impulse to destroy: that was clear enough in the tone of voice Doyle used to lash him. But he'd've bet a month's pay that Doyle was sexually wound up as well—and there wasn't a snowball's chance, he reminded himself, of him not being able to read Ray Doyle like the proverbial bloody book. All right, he decided, so Ray's convinced he's going have a bit of trouble with his equipment tonight: that didn't alter the fact that what the stupid prat needed was a good fuck.

The two women had finally managed to get through the crowd, were sitting down, smiling at Bodie's charm, making allowances for Doyle's creaking politeness.

"What'll it be for you two lovely ladies?" Bodie asked, making sure he had to lean in very, very close to be heard.

"Aren't you even going to ask them their names first?" Doyle asked, voice dark with contempt and danger. "Planning on—"

"Pardon my bad manners," Bodie said quickly before Doyle could land them right in it. "It's not often we get a chance to meet two such gorgeous women and I..." he paused, smiled the way that always made the birds melt, shrugged with all the ingenuous charm of a schoolboy, every move one he knew would get him exactly what he wanted, "I'm sorry, I just forgot myself. My friend's Ray, and I'm Bodie."

It only took half a breath, long enough for the two women to turn to each other and tacitly agree who was going to do the intros this time. "I'm Heather and this is Christine," the one with the long hair said and Bodie waited, with a sudden stab of unexplained annoyance, for the usual comments on him being 'just Bodie'.

"Pretty names for two very pretty women," Bodie broke in, forestalling a usual part of the chat up that he had no patience for tonight. "G&Ts, is it?"

"Oh, no, thanks all the same, but I'll have a Carlsberg," the blonde—Doyle's, Bodie decided abruptly, his own enthusiasm waning unexpectedly—said, her polished nails such a pale peach against Bodie's navy blue jacket.

"And I'll have a Bacardi and Coke," the one with the long hair said, and Bodie realised he had forgotten their names already. Not that it mattered: as long as they served their purpose, that was all that counted.

"Coming right up," he told them, one hand

grabbing Doyle's upper arm too tightly for comfort. "Come and give me a hand," Bodie said very sweetly, fingers digging into tense muscle.

"Wouldn't dream of doing anything else," Doyle replied just as sweetly, his eyes narrowed unpleasantly as he followed on behind Bodie, shaking himself free as soon as he could.

"What the fuck's the matter with you?" Bodie hissed at him as they squeezed into the bar and waited for one of the harried barmaids to pour their drinks.

"Oh, that's bloody typical. You don't listen, just plough on like a bulldozer, and then you ask me what's the matter? I don't want either one of them, I don't want sex and I don't appreciate you trying to set me up with this week's tart!"

"Come on, Ray, since when've you not been up for it? Those bloody jeans of yours want censoring half the time."

"I told you, Bodie, I'm not interested. But you can buy them their drinks, and I'll be polite, but then I'm for the off. I'm sure," he smiled, very nasty indeed, making his words cuttingly sarcastic, "a big lad like you has enough for the both of them."

A barmaid picked that opportune moment to come up to them, taking their orders, coming back incredibly quickly, neither man speaking, neither of them finding words that wouldn't make the whole situation worse. Bodie fumed quietly, simmering with a volcanic quiet that could unnerve even Cowley. His temper wasn't improved by the nagging knowledge that at least half of this was his fault, and that the other half just might be from a miasma of emotions left over from today, a corrupt, corrosive pile Bodie didn't want to touch with a bargepole.

"Fair enough," he finally said, and actually meant it. "Even though it's beyond me, you're not in the mood. Have your drink then," not commenting that he'd ordered only a half pint for Doyle, wary of the other man's too chancy temper tonight, "and I'll take care of the girls." He plastered on his most infuriatingly smug smile, trying desperately to make this night the same as every other night, trying to pretend that the evening hadn't somehow got away from him. Trying to pretend that Doyle hadn't got somehow away from him too, turned into this uncommunicative, incomprehensible stranger. "Of course, the girls'll be too busy trying to keep up with me to miss you."

"Who wouldn't?" Doyle replied dryly, not

actually quite looking at his partner. He started to turn away from the bar, was shunted, midstep, almost off his feet by a proto-rugby player bellowing for his beer. Stumbled, was caught, but not before he had been pressed, chest to knee, against Bodie. He stood there for a moment, frozen.

Bodie grabbed Doyle, a friendly imprecation on the tip of his tongue, and then he stopped, noticing. Aware, suddenly, that he had been right about Doyle's sexual tension. For a second, he was flooded by the relief that he could still read the man he depended on to watch his back, and then he felt the pulse of arousal surge through Doyle's cock, felt it stir against him like the Serpent in Eden. Unwillingly, he met Doyle's eyes, saw the echo of that passion in the enlarged pupils, saw himself reflected in Doyle's eyes, shock setting in. And on its heels, baying like a pack of hungry dogs, came knowledge.

"Christ, Ray—"

"Don't you dare say a fucking word, d'you hear me, Bodie?" Doyle snarled, teeth bared, words hissed, one finger digging sharply into Bodie's chest. "Not a single fucking word!"

Then he turned, was gone, an eddy of annoyed and complaining punters marking his wake.

Bodie was left to struggle, regain some semblance of normalcy, paying for drinks, easing his way through the crowd, three glasses clutched between his hands, the fourth drink left behind for the greed of strangers. By the time he made it back to the table and the sex he no longer really wanted, the polished surface of Bodie's manner was pinned in place, his smile easy and charming as he chatted to the two women and made excuses for his absented friend.

And all the while he chatted, all the while he smiled and laughed and made flatteringly interested noises, Bodie churned with the remembering, Doyle's groin hot against him, Doyle's cock pressing hard, and worst of all, arrow shot in the dark to pierce him through, Doyle telling him he didn't fancy a woman tonight.

Bodie remembered it all. Added a dozen, a hundred small incidents, from tonight, from last week, from a year ago. Went over it again and again and again. Thinking about Ray Doyle, whom he knew now not at all.

Thinking about Ray Doyle, coiled so tight, sexual need exuding from him like sweat.

Thinking about Ray Doyle needing sex and

not needing women.

Thinking about Ray Doyle pressed against him, his cock leaping in response.

And finally, he could pretend no longer.

Now, he knew.

"...so if MacInnes was on the take, then that would be the connection between Jones taking the snapshots of the research papers and Goldbloom beating our mob to the punch with that micro-chip—"

The fiercely businesslike monologue went on, Doyle keeping up an unceasing flow of words, the job become a defensive barrier between Doyle and Bodie, a flimsy shield against the power of Bodie's knowing.

"...which means that CI5—"

Not *us*, Bodie thought, almost idly, one part of him calmly cataloguing all the signs of Doyle's agitation: the darting glances in his direction from behind dark glasses that couldn't completely conceal the whites of Doyle's eyes; the endless stream of words, the absolute refusal to permit even a second's pause lest Bodie say something; the way Doyle was as relaxed as a mannikin, and his posturings just as genuine.

"...be working with the prats over in MI6, which'll be no picnic—"

Even Doyle had to breathe, didn't he? Bodie waited, quite patiently, thinking about nothing in particular, slipping the car through traffic, letting Doyle run on and on, the words registering but meaning nothing. He turned left to miss the worst of the roadworks, driving them to work as if, as Doyle was trying so desperately to make true, today were no different from any other.

"...Spurs couldn't play their way out of a wet paper bag—"

Doyle took a breath, and Bodie slipped smoothly into the tiny pause. "Went to your flat last night," he remarked quite casually, tension crawling slowly up his spine to tangle in the hairs at the back of his neck. He could feel Doyle's reaction as if it were his own: the indrawn breath, the sudden glance, the convulsive flex of hands, the abrupt swallow. Knew that Doyle would be feeling the beginnings of fear, if the stupid bugger hadn't already seen what a precarious position he had put himself in.

"Oh, yeh?" Doyle replied belatedly, voice not

entirely as steady as it ought.

“Where were you?” Bodie asked him, still in that oh-so-casual tone, this display of serenity unnerving to those of a guilty conscience.

Doyle shrugged, sank lower in his seat, pushed his glasses back into place, the perfect delusion of innocence relaxing. “Out and about. Went to the Black Swan for a drink—and you’ll never believe who I met—”

“Where were you, Ray?” Bodie asked again, even more casually, even as he pulled the car in to the side of the road, Doyle’s side too close to the chained gate of a factory long since fallen victim to recession.

“Told you—”

“Not the truth, you didn’t.” He twisted round in his seat, jacket squeaking against the seat, Doyle immediately becoming engrossed in the rusting padlock outside his window. “C’mon, Ray, you can tell me. Where’d you go last night?”

There was no answer, not that Bodie had really been expecting one. “Pick up a fella, did you?” he said into Doyle’s wariness. Bodie couldn’t help but add, an unacknowledged anger sharpening both his words and the keen stare he turned on the partner who had lied to him for so long, “Seeing as how you didn’t fancy a bird, that is.”

“Don’t be so fucking stupid!” Doyle snapped, clinging to illusion that he might yet get out of this with both the partnership and his job intact, if only he could hang on long enough for Bodie to calm down, this preternatural calm fooling him not at all: no-one could get away with deceiving Bodie, albeit by omission, not without paying the piper a pretty price. “What the fuck makes you think I’d pick up a man, for Christ’s sake,” he hurtled on, base instinct making him lie, covering the truth up with bullshit until only the lies would show. “I’ll leave sodomy and buggery to sailors, thanks all the same.”

Deliberately, Bodie let the insult slide from him like water from a duck’s back, his own merchant navy years a long way away. The words may have missed their mark, but the intent hadn’t, and Doyle’s compounding deceit narrowed Bodie’s eyes. “So all that in the pub last night—”

“All what in the pub?” Doyle demanded, attacking before Bodie could drag his secrets out in the light to watch them squirm like vampires. “Just ‘cause I didn’t fancy fucking my eyes out inside some nameless cunt?” Not so much as a quiver

betraying his nerves, he hammered at Bodie, using the sheer force of his will to conveniently rearrange the night before and his body’s betrayal. “So a bloke has to shag every bint in sight, twenty-four hours a day, or you’re suspecting them of being bent?” A heavy sigh, perfectly balanced, perfectly timed. “You ought to try growing up, Bodie. You might like it.”

“More than you like girls?”

For all it was worded as a question, it was a flat statement and lay there between them, as poisonous as nightshade.

Doyle opened his mouth to reply, to give some suitably cutting retort, closed his mouth tightly, looked away, fist coming up to be pressed against those thinned lips.

Bodie started the car again, moving back into traffic, his movements as smooth as the voice that quietly cut Doyle to shreds. “Thing is,” he began, “if Cowley finds out you’re bent, you’ll be out on your arse. And if he doesn’t find it out from me, I’ll be chipped out with you, won’t I?”

Bodie could feel Doyle stare at him, couldn’t ignore the conflicting emotions bombarding him from without and from within. “See, if I don’t tell Cowley my partner’s bent, and he finds out, then they’ll all think I kept stumm because I’m as queer as you are.”

“Then they’d be wrong then, wouldn’t they?”

“No fucking doubt about that!” Bodie snapped, the first frayings of control erupting like boils through his calm. “Christ, even thinking about doing the things you lot do is enough to make me sick.”

“*You lot?*” Doyle demanded, voice rising. “What the fuck’s that supposed to mean? Oh, yeh, course, it’s obvious, innit? I bump into you, you’re the one that cops a feel, but *I’m* the poof? And you think you’re a CI5 agent?”

“All I was doing, Doyle,” nastiness underlying the jagged calm, face set as he found them a parking space at the kerb, a cloud of pigeons rising in protest, “was standing there. *You* were the one to shove yourself against me. So—”

“Oh, that’s rich. The only time you weren’t the one grabbing me—”

“Christ, Doyle,” Bodie shouted, on the defensive, an ugly guilt gilding thoughts he never wanted to think, “it’s only fucking camping it up a bit, messing about the way mates do—*straight* mates.” He sidled a glance at Doyle, watching out

of the corner of his eyes as his words hit home. "Not that you'd know much about that, though, would you?"

"No, I don't," Doyle agreed with an equanimity that set Bodie's teeth on edge. "Which is hardly surprising, is it?" he went on, getting out of the car, waiting until Bodie was facing him over the top of the Capri. "Not given the company I keep."

And it was the second time in less than twenty four hours that Bodie had been left standing there alone.

Doyle couldn't have cared less that George Cowley would have described his expression as 'truculent': Doyle was in a filthy mood, and why shouldn't the world know it? He straight-armed the door open, slamming it hard against the wall, distantly satisfied at the way the handle gouged into the plaster.

"Full of all the joys of spring, I see," Murphy murmured quietly, rising to his feet to leave free Doyle's usual seat, there on the lumpy old sofa beside Bodie. A flourishing bow, his arm sweeping from Doyle to Bodie, he announced to Doyle: "Your throne awaits, sire."

"Fuck off, you stupid prick."

Murphy, naturally, had better things to do with his hide than risk it under Doyle's temper. He looked from Doyle to Bodie and back again. He thumped Bodie lightly on the shoulder. "Makes me want to get down on my knees and thank Cowley for leaving me solo. He's all yours, and I hope you live happily ever after, petal."

Doyle moved so quickly not even Murphy had time to avoid him, Doyle's strong hand tangling viciously in Murphy's collar. "Next time some mad bastard's shooting dum-dums at us, why don't you live up to the name and step right in front of one of 'em?"

"Now, now, Ray," Bodie moved in smoothly, not a thing about him betraying just how unsure he was of his welcome, not even the faintest glimmer in his eyes revealing how unnerved he was by this sudden dissolving of their mainstay rapport. "You forgotten Lecture No. 398 so soon?" The humour camouflage for him neatly disentangling Doyle from Murphy's throat, he put on an outrageously bad Glasgow accent: "Nae bluid oan mah guid cairpets, laddies—"

It was more than simple reaction to Bodie

spoiling his fight: it carried everything from the night before, and all the reasons for Doyle avoiding him since the car this morning. "If you don't get your hand off my arm, I'll fucking cut it off yours."

Not even Bodie dared argue with Doyle when he was this quiet, this controlled. Doyle stood there for a scant second, until Bodie had stepped back, hands raised in silent surrender, and Murphy had started to make good his escape.

"All his?" Doyle sneered, looking at Murphy whilst all three of them knew all this was intended for Bodie alone. "He should be so lucky—and I should be so fucking insane."

And it was the third time Bodie had been left standing.

Cursing under his breath, Bodie shoved his plate onto the coffee table, cast a last, longing glance at the television where Liverpool were about to thrash the eleven hapless idiots in the Everton squad, and conceded that escapism was obviously not to be his tonight.

It was, he assumed, Doyle hammering on his door like that. Cowardice not normally a habit of his, he still half-hoped it was his fairy godmother come to wave her magic wand and erase the night before, not to mention the morning, afternoon and early evening after.

Bodie hauled the door open as Doyle raised his arm to thump it again.

"Christ, the poor man's Thor, complete with his bloody Hammer. The bell does work, you know," he said, stepping aside to let Doyle come in, but his partner just stood there, glaring down at his own feet. Bodie took one look at the gargoyle poised on his threshold and his sense of humour got the better of both of them. "And here's me thinking it was my fairy godmother come to make it all better. But you can come in anyway."

Doyle, contrary to the end, stayed where he was, firmly planted on the front door mat, hands now shoved deep into his jacket pockets, frown even more deeply engraved on his forehead. "I'm not stopping, and I'm not coming in."

Bodie propped himself up against the doorjamb in a pose he'd just stolen from Doyle. "Going to do the dirty washing on the doorstep, are we? That should please the neighbours no end."

"Don't you start, Bodie. I've had enough—" A glimmer of what might be amusement in Bodie's

dark eyes was enough: Doyle snatched a deep breath, hauled in his temper, and refused to give the stupid berk what he so obviously wanted. They were going to sort this out once and for all, and Bodie wasn't going to distract them into leaving all this unsaid. "Last night wasn't what you think it was," he said, continuing right over Bodie's expression of lofty disbelief. "'Ad nothing to do with you, you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, an' if you'd kept yourself to yourself, you'd never 'ave found out in the first place." He stopped in anticipation of Bodie's explosion of contradiction.

"Oh, don't stop, this is amazing stuff. Anyway, you've started, so why don't you finish?" Bodie said in his best Bamber Gascoine.

Doyle was still hanging on, grimly, to his temper. "What needs to be finished is you goin' on as if I'd made a pass at you," he said, tightly controlled, throwing irrefutable facts at Bodie in the hope they'd camouflage the underlying truth. "For God's sake, Bodie, to hear you, anyone'd think I'd tried to fuck you!"

"And you haven't?"

"Of course I haven't!"

"Which just goes to prove," Bodie said terribly mildly, giving Doyle no time to build a defence, "what a fucking coward you are."

Doyle's face flickered, briefly, with an expression that told far more than Doyle could ever risk Bodie knowing, everything plainly visible from his unspoken desire to his own self-damning for his cowardice.

Before Doyle could recover, before the anger could blot everything else out, Bodie attacked again, his sharp eyes devouring every hint gleaned from Doyle's expressions. "I'm surprised at you, really surprised you never chanced your arm with me," he said as if he were mildly amused and his body language was simply mistranslated. "Didn't you wonder about me? Merchant navy, mercs, the Services—all that male company. All those months when I couldn't get my hands on a woman?"

Doyle swallowed, jumped, startled, at the faint snick of a door-chain being undone. Over behind them, old Mrs. Jenkins was peering out to see what they were doing, listening in, her face alight with speculation as to the meaning of all this. Caught between a rock and a hard place, Doyle opted for the one that hadn't told any tales on him to Cowley. He shoved Bodie aside, went straight through to the living room, pouring and devouring

the large whisky that he'd promised himself he wouldn't have, not tonight, when he needed to be clear headed and steady. But his hands were already shaking as he poured the first drink, forcing the admission that he had already lost at least half his battle and so he started in towards oblivion.

"Planning on keeping the distilleries in business all by yourself, are you?"

Doyle didn't react, his overstretched nerves having listened to every move Bodie had made, had identified everything from the dull thud of the mortise-lock bolting home to the faint hiss of clothing as it slid against the naked skin it hid from view. Not, given the circumstances, something he ought to dwell on.

His third drink turning to acid in his stomach while his brain dulled until all his sharp thoughts no longer cut so painfully, Doyle straightened his spine and started what he'd come here for. "Look," he said to the wall in front of him while he listened to Bodie's stillness behind him, "I just didn't fancy fucking some bird I'd never seen before and wouldn't see again. After yesterday..." he shrugged, focussing on the one aspect of yesterday that he dared reveal and turn to his advantage, "well, it'd've been different if I'd had someone I could go home to, someone who actually knew me..."

"Someone whose name you'd be able to remember in the morning?"

"Yeh, basically. We could've been killed yesterday, Bodie, as easy as that—" he tried to snap his fingers, but they slid silently against each other, his co-ordination suffering from his Dutch courage. "And then to have to have a stranger—Christ, talk about *cold*." He shrugged again, took another hefty swallow of whisky. "Would only've made it worse for me."

"Know what you mean," Bodie said quietly, and Doyle's shoulders rounded marginally as the edge of tension bled from him. "Course," Bodie went on, and it was just as well Doyle couldn't see what was passing for a smile on the handsome face, "you'd have a better chance of me believing you if you'd stayed home last night." He lifted his hands, rested them lightly on Doyle's shoulders, not missing the sudden hiss of intaken breath as Doyle stiffened. "Where did you go last night?" he asked again, very, very softly, and very, very dangerously.

"Out," Doyle said, yielding nothing.

"I'd already worked that bit out myself,

funny enough.”

Doyle would give his right arm to make Bodie see all this as funny, a joke gone awry. But Bodie wasn't laughing, and Doyle had heard that purring tone of voice used as threat before. “I needed to think. Too restless to stop at home...”

“Too restless, Ray?” Bodie murmured, far too close for comfort, his breath stirring Doyle's heavy curls. “Suppose that's one word for it. But I think randy would be a better one.”

Like a fist to the stomach, Doyle could remember that moment, pressed against Bodie, all that heat and strength—he wrenched his mind away from that: too dangerous to think of that now, with Bodie so close and everything on the line. “That was just the adrenalin—”

“Why won't you admit it?” Bodie asked, sounding no more than curious.

“Admit what?”

“Not like you to play for time, Ray, not with me.”

That's what you think, mate, Doyle thought to himself, too aware of all the months he'd lusted after his partner and all the things he'd never said, half because he thought Bodie would thump him on his way to Cowley's office.

“And it's not as if you have to admit anything I don't already know.”

Doyle didn't say anything, reached out instead to pour another drink. Bodie's hand stopped him, fingers closing over his own, until his fist was enclosed in Bodie's, and no-one knew better than Ray Doyle just how much damage could be done to his hand if Bodie decided to force the issue.

“What d'you want?” he asked, conceding finally that Bodie wasn't going to let this lie, wasn't going to let them pretend it was something harmless to be swept under the carpet.

“I want you to come right out and say it, that's all.”

“That's *all*?” Doyle was appalled to hear a faint shrillness of fear in his own voice. He wanted to run away and hide: he wanted desperately to have said ‘say what’ with insouciant confidence. But he had given himself away, betrayed by his own surprise, and the confusion of having Bodie surrounding him, and the chaos of Bodie's odd reaction.

“Say it, Ray.”

Doyle remained silent, sluggishly dredging his mind for something, anything, to say but the words

Bodie seemed so intent on.

“Say it, Ray, go on, just say it.” Bodie's hand tightened round Doyle's, pressuring him.

“You threatening me, Bodie?” Doyle said, and this time his voice was calm and steady, the way it always was in the middle of a disaster, before the aftermath tore him to pieces.

“Say it, Ray.”

Doyle raised his hand, and with it, Bodie's, the knuckles even whiter than the rest of Bodie's skin. “Cowley won't like it if you break my hand.”

“Is that what's bothering you? I bet it is,” Bodie said. He let go of Doyle's hand, stepped away from him, until there was cold air between himself and his partner. “Don't worry, I'm not about to tell Cowley about you.”

“No?” Doyle almost laughed, but he couldn't even pretend that much. “Going to let me be a security risk then, are you?”

“You're not a security risk,” Bodie said flatly, that line of conversation one he didn't want to even start on. “But I'm not going to tell the Cow, so go on, prove you've still got balls. Say it.”

“Prove what?” Doyle asked, turning round to face Bodie this time, his face a perfect picture of sarcasm. “Cause you think I've suddenly gone bent, you think that makes me a fucking fairy? You can think whatever you want to, mate, it doesn't make a blind bit of difference to me—”

“Doesn't it? That's not what your body was saying last night, was it?”

Unfair of Bodie to refuse to drop the subject now, of all times. “That was only sex, Bodie, and since when have you thought sex had anything to do with feelings, eh?”

Bodie smiled slowly, the expression of triumph taking its time to display itself, giving Doyle time enough to realise just what Bodie thought had just been said.

“Don't be such a wally,” Doyle snapped. “Just because my prick fancies you doesn't mean *I* want *you*.”

“Doesn't it?” Bodie asked smoothly, stepping in front of Doyle as his partner made to walk away.

“Course it fucking doesn't,” Doyle said nastily, lying as fast as he could. “And I've said what you wanted to hear—” He stopped then, all vulnerable belligerence, staring his partner down. “So now I've said it,” he went on, spitting the words out until the hoarseness of his voice sounded like nothing but anger, “I'm leaving.”

“Ray.”

Doyle hesitated, a half-step into the darkened hallway. Slowly, face wondering, he turned round, looking at Bodie.

“You can’t just leave. Not now you’ve admitted it,” Bodie said quietly, staring at Doyle.

All his safe and sane plans for tonight torn to ribbons, Doyle ran one hand wearily through his hair. “For fuck’s sake, Bodie,” he demanded, giving up the fight, “what is it you want?”

One hand dropped to the front of Bodie’s trousers, and the deft fingers slowly dropped the zip of his fly, the action more than enough answer. “Come on, Ray,” Bodie whispered, “you know you want to.”

Doyle swallowed hard, throat gone dry and palms gone damp. Then reason kicked in, dislodging the unthinking reactions of his body. Disbelief and disappointment bred sourly with the whisky in his stomach. “D’you know, it never even crossed my mind that you’d try this on with me?” It wasn’t a question even of Bodie offering himself as rough trade: he’d seen enough, experienced enough to know how common that was, and the only shock in that idea was the explosion of desire through his body. He shook his head, almost angrier at himself for his blinkered faith than at Bodie’s blackmail. “I never thought even *you* would stoop to putting the screws on.”

“I already told you I wouldn’t tell Cowley.” As smooth as silk, Bodie’s voice slid down Doyle’s spine, and Bodie saw the effect of it. He spread his legs a little farther apart and, millimetre by millimetre, eased his hand into the open zip of his trousers, stroking himself, smiling as Doyle couldn’t keep his eyes to himself, the smile growing as he watched Doyle watching him. “Come on,” he murmured, putting two fingers under his cock, making Doyle lick his lips and look away, harried, as Bodie’s cock was outlined under the cloth. “It’s not like you to be shy, Ray. And it’s not as if it’s the first time either one of us has ever done it, is it?”

Doyle’s head jerked up, his gaze flying to Bodie’s face. “Are you telling me—”

“No, I’m not,” Bodie replied, a thin edge of honed steel in his voice. “You’re the only queer here, mate.” He stroked himself again, Doyle’s involuntary reaction more proof for Bodie, a convenient excuse to forget all the times he’d seen Doyle with women: not to be thought of, the unmanning idea that Doyle might be bisexual, for

that would question everything Bodie was doing here tonight. Worse, it would question Bodie himself. Automatic though the rejection was, the thought lurked at the back of his mind, where he couldn’t, quite, hear it. The intangible doubt was enough to erode the friendliness of Bodie’s voice until it sounded like any other anonymous encounter. “But like I said, didn’t you ever wonder how I managed all those nights without women?”

Doyle jammed his hands in his pockets, tried to look away from what Bodie was offering him. Not equality, no. Not an emotional relationship, not even good, old-fashioned fucking for fucking’s sake. The coldness of cynicism clashing with the spreading heat of arousal in his belly, he asked: “Hang about the cottages, did you?”

“Sometimes,” Bodie agreed readily enough, his hand still moving addictively inside his trousers. “But it was better round the back of the barracks, or in one or two pubs I know.”

The cynicism might yet win. “With looks like yours, you probably made a fortune.”

“Only enough to tide me over till payday once in a while—and stop trying to piss me off, ’cause it’s not going to work.” Shifting his stance slightly, his cock stretching long and hard down the inside seam of his black trousers, the engorging pride of seeing Doyle lusting after him was enough to push aside uncomfortable memories that were never so much as looked at, never dusted off, always shut away with the rest of his dead. Bodie grasped himself, drew himself out, until his cock was pale and shockingly naked against the darkness of his clothes. “Suck me,” he said.

Doyle swallowed hard, eyes impaled by the sight of Bodie’s cock revealed for him to see, his own cock rising to meet it. Under attack by Bodie’s voice and the lure of having this much with Bodie when he’d expected rejection at best, betrayal at worst, cynicism was losing rapidly, Doyle’s cock filling and growing hard, pressing against the softness of his underwear, making his hand itch to touch and his mouth water with the longing to do exactly as Bodie had demanded. “So you think you’ve found a convenient mouth, have you?” he managed, fighting against the impulse to go to his knees and take what he could get, refusing to permit himself the lie that this would just be some casual encounter. “Think you’ve found yourself ready sex on tap any time your bird won’t come across or you can’t be bothered going through all

the social motions just to get your end away?"

"Got it in one," Bodie replied, right hand slowly moving the length of his cock, every tiny gesture drawing Doyle's attention. "And I'm right, aren't I, Ray?"

Christ, there was no way he could win this battle, no way he would be able to keep his hands off Bodie, not with the bastard standing there looking like that and talking like that. Doyle turned away, hand on the door jamb, intent on leaving.

Behind him, he heard the faint hiss of Bodie's breath, the sound so sexual, so blatantly aroused, it stabbed him, sliding between his ribs to lodge inside him, closer to his heart than he would ever, ever, admit to his partner. It was impossible not to hear what Bodie was doing, impossible to ignore the murmured comment. "Come on, Ray, give me some mouth action."

"And if I do, what do I get?" Doyle heard himself asking when he should be leaving, running as fast as he could.

The only answer Bodie gave was a command so laden with sex and promise it was a seduction in itself. "Look at me."

Doyle turned, and looked, a jolt of purest lust thudding through his groin.

"You get what you want," Bodie said, staring hard at Doyle's mouth. "You get to suck me, and I'll even fuck you—" he grinned suddenly, squeezed his cock the same way a nice tight arse would, "—but only if you play your cards right."

If he played his cards right? Doyle's self-respect wanted to deny it, but it was true enough, if he looked at it from a particular—from Bodie's particular—point of view. The question wasn't whether or not he could engage in a meaningless fuck: the question was whether or not he could convince Bodie that it was meaningless. More: if he could convince himself that none of it mattered at all. Mesmerised by the movement of Bodie's hand on that long cock, Doyle stood there, clenched fist rubbing against his own cock, the pressure tantalising through the multiple layers of fabric, and with every move Bodie's hand made, his own echoed, and with every pulse of Bodie's cock, his own ached for more. But still, he didn't take that irrevocable step forward. Would not set himself up for this, could not convince himself that he'd be able to get out of this with nothing more permanent than a bit of casual sex.

Bodie lifted his hand away from himself, Doyle's

gaze following it as Bodie raised it to his mouth and spat in the palm, Doyle's eyes following once more as Bodie lowered his hand again, covering his cock, stroking it, the light catching on the dampness left behind on the satin skin as if it had been Doyle's mouth on him. "Come on, Ray," Bodie whispered again, the sound as compulsive as the sight of that hand caressing hard flesh. "Suck me."

He wouldn't, absolutely wouldn't do it. It would be disaster, with Bodie after nothing but a convenient hole, and Doyle bitterly aware that he just might have found the one person he could really love. "No," he said, and wished he had sounded more definite. "No." Harder this time, but the determination in his voice was undermined by the hardness of his cock.

"No?" Bodie murmured gently. "Never took you for a shrinking violet, Ray," he added, stopping to wet his cock again, smiling as Ray couldn't quite control a moan of unwilling desire. "Well, you know what they say. If Mohammed won't come to the mountain," he put his fingers on the underside of his cock, making his erection stand up flat against his belly, the length of his cock impressive, "then the mountain can come to Mohammed." With devastating confidence, Bodie slowly crossed the room, his hand never once pausing in its stroking of his cock, the foreskin sliding back and forth, back and forth with every single step Bodie took.

Doyle knew he should leave, but he couldn't take his eyes off Bodie, couldn't free himself from the mesmerising allure of that gorgeous, erect cock. But if he couldn't leave, he would at least not run: he stood his ground, his heart pounding, palms sweating, arousal bludgeoning his common sense. It's only sex, he told himself, almost believing it. Bodie was in front of him now, that half smile on his face, left hand on his own cock, right hand coming up to cup, disturbingly gentle, the nape of Ray's neck. Stronger then, the grip grew, until Doyle could feel the indentation of each individual finger, knew that there would be a reddened imprint left behind. But still, still he resisted the pressure, even as his cock pounded with his arousal and his gaze met Bodie's, transfixed, his mouth dropping open in some silent demand he didn't want to make. His body was eroding his will, defeating him as Bodie never could.

"Come on, Ray," Bodie whispered, that right hand tugging, not roughly, all that strength reined

in so that even now, it didn't really hurt Ray. "You know this is what you want, so why lie about it, eh? Come on," and the pressure was more now, the pain beginning, Bodie exerting more and more power, the least of it the physical. "Why don't you suck me? It's what we both want, isn't it? You love sucking cock, don't you, Ray? Love the feel of a real man in you..." Now Bodie was pushing, pushing, refusing to take no for an answer, but Doyle was still trying to pretend, still trying to deny that he wanted Bodie, even like this. Inexorable, the grip on his neck tightened, and pulled, lowering him, his neck bending, his knees buckling, his mouth gaping wide, wider, opening and there was a groan coming from him as he dropped to his knees, until he finally, finally, got his mouth round Bodie, tasted him, touched him, took him inside where he belonged. Fumbling, clumsy hands hauled his zip down, his hands feverish in their need to touch his own cock, to match the movements of his hands to the movement of his mouth, giving him some pretence of unity in this.

Bodie looked down, and laughed in triumph and in pleasure. Doyle's head was moving back and forth, back and forth, the mouth wide and deep and sure, taking him in ever farther, until he could feel Ray's face pressed into his groin, Ray's chin pressing against his balls, the faint stubble scratching not quite unpleasantly, a distraction enough to make this last as Doyle swallowed him completely, throat muscles milking him. He sighed as Ray pulled back, moaned as a skilled tongue caressed him, teasing the slit, laving him, licking at his balls, swathing back up to flicker inside the slit; then the hot, wet mouth was consuming him again. Losing himself to the sensations and the power of having Ray Doyle on his knees at his feet, Bodie buried his hands in Ray's hair, pulling him in, thrusting himself deeper, until even Ray gagged, the spasm of muscle exquisite against Bodie's cock. He drew Doyle off a little, allowing him to breathe, and then held him still, fucking himself again and again into the skilled mouth that accommodated him with perfect skill and the flair of passion.

Bodie started muttering, dirty words, obscene compliments, an aural feast to accompany the oral one, every verbal stroke inspiring Doyle to greater depths, to stronger suction, to more intense pleasure-giving. One hand wrapped round his own cock, Ray brought the other up to stroke Bodie's balls, fingering and rubbing them, tugging on them

lightly, running his fingers through the soft hair between Bodie's legs, following it to where the flesh parted, to where the small opening beckoned. One finger, that was all, just one finger, barely skimming the muscle, and Bodie's hands were tight round his skull, digging into him, holding him utterly still as the brutality of Bodie's voice lashed him.

"You try anything like that ever again—and I mean *ever*, I'll rip your balls off and feed them to you."

Doyle was let free, and he sat back on his heels, his cock sobbing against his waistband. Doyle wiped one hand across his mouth, smearing where Bodie had been. "Scared?" he asked belligerently, making sure Bodie knew he was neither cowed nor beaten, but strong enough to brace himself for trouble.

"Me? Don't be so fucking stupid. I just don't—" and he grabbed Doyle again, holding him hard, thumb pressing on the hinge of Ray's jaw, opening him up to be invaded by Bodie's cock, "bend over for anyone, you hear me? Not," he thrust forward, deep, deep into Ray's throat, "even," and now he was standing astride Doyle's bent knees, giving Doyle no room to pull back, keeping his cock deep in Ray's mouth, "for *you*."

The traitor that was Doyle's heart leapt, hope surging through him, inciting him even as the cock in his mouth inflamed him. Ray's hand blurred on himself, balls drawn up tight now, even as Bodie thrust again and again and again, going suddenly still, the viscid wetness erupting in him, filling him, dripping from the corners of his mouth as he tried to consume Bodie, his own seed rising to meet Bodie's, his hand hard on himself as he fucked his own fist, thinking of Bodie, thinking of Bodie bending, for him, even for him—

And then Bodie was letting him go, withdrawing, stepping back, and Doyle couldn't stop himself, orgasm too close, thundering in on him. He knelt there, fully clothed, only his cock bare, Bodie's cum round his mouth, his eyes full of the sight of Bodie standing in front of him. Unexpectedly, Bodie leant forward, only his hand touching Doyle, as he wiped the cum from Doyle's chin and then pushed his wetted hand into Doyle's mouth, the fingers filling the emptiness left by his cock. Doyle sucked on the fingers, tasting Bodie all over again. A wordless moan escaped him, and he came, cum spurting over his fingers and onto his shirt as

Bodie watched, then stood, and turned, and walked away.

His breathing was embarrassingly loud in the aftermath, drowning out the small sound of Bodie, back turned impassively to Doyle, tidying his clothes, only the rasp of the zip covering the rasp of Doyle's breathing.

"Fancy a drink?" Bodie tossed casually over his shoulder, not looking at Doyle.

Sitting there still, Doyle steadied himself, ignoring the expected hurt as if that would make it go away. "I could do with—"

"A stiff one?" Bodie said, grinning the grin of the satiated male. "Tut, tut, and after you just having one. Ought to be ashamed of yourself, Ray."

And Ray was, ashamed of himself. Not for giving in to the urge to suck Bodie, but for sitting here like a violated virgin, hurt because his lover hadn't showered him with affectionate words, hadn't even looked at him once the sex was over. Ashamed of himself, because he had known perfectly well it wasn't going to be any different, and he had done it anyway. It was a bit late to cry over Bodie's spilled cream, and stupid of him to wish for something that hadn't even been on offer "Just give me a drink," he said, and didn't even hear the melancholy in his own voice.

Bodie looked at him sharply. "Don't you start getting maudlin on me," he said coldly.

"Yeh, I know, I know," Doyle muttered, taking his drink from Bodie, "you're just trade, not Lochinvar come to sweep me off my feet."

"Glad you've got at least one thing straight, mate." Bodie made a sound that might have been disgust, might have been any number of different emotions. "And for fuck's sake, will you put that away?"

Doyle looked down at himself, poor pale thing languishing against the roughness of his jeans, his own semen already drying, stiff patches forming on his shirt, tell-tale signs for all the world to see.

"Who needs a scarlet letter, eh?" he muttered more or less to himself.

The comment was one Bodie preferred to not hear. A moment, and then he had found something to do, busying himself with clearing away the congealing mess that had been his supper, giving himself an excuse to leave while Doyle tucked himself away and sorted himself out. In the kitchen, mind safely blanked, he hacked the cheese into manageable lumps, piled them on top of bread

and tomatoes, bunged the whole miniature mountain range under the grill. He stood there watching the cheese melt, bubble, begin to brown, the crusts blackening before the cheese was ready. There was beer in the fridge, and he grabbed two, sticking one in each pocket before he filled his hands with the two plates of toasted cheese. Not once did he think about Doyle, not once did he think about what he'd done, ignoring the insidious weakness that always clung round his knees after he'd had sex. Didn't think about what Ray was doing through in the other room, didn't think about anything at all, just the supper, and the beer, and the pretense that all was normal, that nothing could possibly have changed.

"If you stick the telly on," he said as he used his back to push the door into the living room open, "we'll be in time for the second half. Liverpool're going to—"

The room was peopled by nothing more lively than the failing plant at the window. Jaw tightening, mouth thinning, Bodie clattered the plates onto the table, the bottles following loudly behind. Stern faced, he snapped the television on, turning the volume up enough that the couple downstairs would be complaining again. To the roaring of the crowd and the babblings of the commentator, he methodically chewed his way through toasted cheese for two, and refused to think about Raymond Doyle, who had walked out on him. Again.

"Ah, there you are, Bodie," Cowley called down the corridor as Bodie made his appearance the next morning, one crooked finger beckoning the agent imperiously. "You'll be checking the security for the Home Secretary's meeting in Birmingham."

"That's Harrison's baby," Bodie complained as he caught up to his boss. "Sir."

A whip couldn't have cracked with more discipline. "It's whoever's baby I decide is daddy, and that's you, Bodie!"

"But Birmingham?" Bodie could just imagine it: him and Doyle, stuck together like two whelks on a rock, and God alone knew how Doyle was going to react for the next little while. "And it'll take days!"

"Days? Aye, it will, if you do your job properly, and mind that you do. Get on with it, Bodie," Cowley said, already growing abstracted as this problem was solved and the next one sat up and

begged for his attention. He slapped a thick manilla folder into Bodie's unwelcoming hand. "All the information you'll need and what had better be enough cash to see you through." Cowley spared a glance for the agent even he admitted was one of his two favourites. "Well, don't stand there guddling around looking for your brains. Your train leaves in forty-five minutes."

Bodie stifled a groan of complaint. "What about Doyle?"

Cowley was skimming through the report he was carrying, which was probably just as well, given the odd expression on Bodie's face. "What about him?"

"Isn't he coming with me?"

Cowley looked up for that, whipping his glasses off to stare at Bodie. Needless to say, he positively dripped sarcasm. "I didn't know you needed someone to hold your hand, Bodie. Perhaps I should send you to Brian for a refresher—or to Doctor Ross for an assessment."

Bodie managed a sickly smile after hearing those two names in the one threat. "But sir—"

"Ach, don't you 'but' me. On your bike, Bodie."

Even Bodie wasn't going to argue with that tone of command. "Yes, sir," he said obediently, making a rude gesture as soon as Cowley was safely behind a closed door. "Birmingham," he muttered under his breath, heading for his locker where at least he had a change of clothes and a razor to take with him. A quick glance at his watch, and he made a swift detour for the restroom, the home of eternal tea and therefore, Doyle. Unwilling to examine the feeling too closely, Bodie simply wanted to at least see his partner before he headed for points north, say goodbye to him. Check to make sure that Doyle wasn't going to be stupid about last night. Make sure that Doyle was still going to talk to him, after last night, that there wasn't going to be a chill of Arctic dimensions. Be just like the moody bastard to turn difficult on him...

"Oh, hello, Stuart," he said to the only person currently in the room amid a cluster of used tea mugs and discarded sandwich wrappings. "You seen Doyle?"

Stuart stretched his long legs even longer on the battered old sofa, had himself a good swill of tea before he bowed to the impatience in his fellow agent. "I'm happy to say I haven't had that misery this morning. Why—have you lost him?"

"Nah," Bodie said dismissively, Stuart not being

someone it was wise to reveal any reaction to. "Just wanted to let him know the Cow's exiling me up to Brum for a few days, maybe as much as a week."

"Well, why don't you write him a note," Stuart said as if he were speaking to a brain-damaged chihuahua. "Then you could pin it to the board and he could have someone read it to him."

"And fuck you too," Bodie retorted, slamming the door shut on his way out. Ten minutes later he had his kit together, a pen waved in the general direction of the necessary paperwork, and just about enough time to get to the station for his train and still manage to buy a ticket.

Still, he wasted another few minutes detouring to the gym and then to the armoury, just on the off-chance that he might bump into Doyle. After the way Doyle had disappeared off sharpish last night, it was small wonder that the seeds of doubt were flourishing madly in Bodie.

Another glance at his watch: if he didn't leave for the station now, he'd never make it in time, and then Cowley would make his life truly miserable. He'd just have to phone Doyle once he got up to Birmingham, talk to him then, make sure Doyle wasn't going to let last night get blown out of all proportions. That phrasing pulled him up short, suffusing him with memory best not explored outside the privacy of his own bed. God, but Doyle was good—the best Bodie'd ever had, if truth be told. It'd be a damn shame if Doyle let any poofterish notions spoil that.

Bodie shoved the small-paned front door open, almost smashing it into the object of both his desire and his thoughts. "Look what the cat dragged in," he said cheerfully, scrutinising his partner intently. "Another minute and you'd've missed your last chance to see my smiling face."

In a characteristic gesture, Doyle shoved his dark glasses more firmly into position, obliterating those too expressive eyes from Bodie's gaze. "I thought you'd already be on your way to the station by now."

Now there was food for thought: not only had Doyle come in early enough this morning to know that Bodie was being sent up north, he had then gone off somewhere until he thought the coast was clear. Bodie chewed on that for a second, then shoved it aside with all the other unwelcome thoughts stemming from the night before. Deep in his belly, there was a curl of reaction to the picture Doyle made, standing there like that, the faintest

hint of his sweat reaching Bodie across the early-morning acidity of traffic fumes. "Yeh," he started belatedly, realising that he'd been guilty of staring, not at all happy with the way Doyle was shutting him out, "I'd best be on my way before Cowley hangs me by my heels."

"You do that," Doyle told him, cooler than cucumber. He stepped aside, unnervingly polite, allowing Bodie to pass unimpeded.

Bodie had been prepared for almost anything, but not, apparently, this sudden feeling that they were strangers. "Aren't you going to say goodbye?"

Doyle shrugged, making it all very casual. "Goodbye, then," he said, turning on his heel and heading back in to familiar confines of CI5.

Bodie hefted his sportsbag a bit more comfortably over his shoulder, giving himself an excuse to look at Doyle again. "Oi!" he shouted.

"What?"

Unsure of why he was trying to provoke the very reaction he had previously been hoping to avoid, Bodie asked: "Going to miss me, are you?"

Doyle looked at him squarely, absolutely confident in the masking abilities of his sunglasses. "A crack shot like me? Fat bloody chance."

The words were perfect, exactly in keeping with the way they always slagged each other off. And if the tone were wrong? If there were added depths there, unvoiced meanings? Bodie always had prided himself on not dwelling on things. "Right," he said. "Well, I'll be off then."

Doyle waved, laconically, over his shoulder, the way he might if it were Lucas going off on a minor half-hour job.

Unaccountably, or at least to someone who didn't want to tally up life's little scores, a pang of loneliness skewered Bodie as he hurried off to catch his train.

The pang of loneliness that suffused Doyle was far from unaccounted for: Doyle knew every last atom of it, and knew it well. Discreetly behind the front door, he watched Bodie until he couldn't see his partner any more and only then did he go upstairs, back to the job and away from what was probably the stupidest mistake of his life.

Just because he'd let Doyle suck him off that once was no reason for Bodie to change the habit of their partnership, was it? Reports, in triplicate, dutifully and grammatically filled in, used ammu-

munition accounted for and replaced, expense vouchers and other lies slipped into Betty's tray, a quick stop at their favourite Chinese take-away and then Bodie headed straight for Doyle's flat.

Up the stairs two at a time, bell pressed in the fanfare that served as code to announce him and Bodie was waiting, not patiently. "Come on, come on," he muttered to himself, "what's keeping you?" Another tattoo on the bell, and the door was flung open, Doyle standing right there in front of him. Bodie took a breath, suddenly thrown off-balance, something not quite right in his partner and in himself. "Aren't you going to invite me in?" he said breezily, shouldering past his uncommonly quiet partner. "Especially as I've brought enough grub to feed an army." He paused for the usual comments; received none, went on hastily, gabbling on to fill a silence that shouldn't be there and which didn't bear explaining. "Chicken chow mein, sweet and sour pork, spring rolls, fried rice, chicken curry, prawn balls—" Another pause for the standard come-back, another non-standard silence, another hurried spate of words. "Pineapple fritters, egg fu yong, even got you those bloody onions you like, you know, the ones swimming in that soy sauce concoction."

"In that case," Doyle said in a perfectly normal tone of voice, "I'll get the plates and the drinks. Lager do you?"

"Yeh, lager's fine. Bring us a couple, will you—I had them do a nice job on the curry."

Bodie shoved the cluttered newspapers, books, ballpoints and the odd crisp packet off Doyle's coffee table, recluttering it immediately with foil cartons and discarded lids. He knew the instant Doyle came in through from the kitchen, could tell by the way the hairs on the back of his neck prickled, as if he were in danger. Which was ridiculous, he reminded himself. It wasn't as if he'd got Ray to do anything he hadn't wanted to, was it? And Ray, for all it had turned out he was a shirt-lifter, he wasn't a poof, one of those pansies who'd turn simpering-eyed on him. He was still a good bloke, just one who...well, one who did favours for his best mate, that was all. Convinced, Bodie grabbed his can of lager, popping the ring and slugging half the drink down. "Christ," he said, wiping his lips, "I needed that."

"You drink the breweries dry up there?" Doyle asked him, and it should have been exactly like any other post-job comment.

“Nah, the locals beat me to it. Actually, didn’t have much time, and anyway, all they had at the Home Sec’s digs and the conference rooms were these bloody wines. So sweet you could sell them as liquid lollies. Course, that suited Smith from MI5 to a T—”

Bodie rambled on, his usual tall tales delivered between the demolition of the Chinese food and the lager, Doyle making few comments, sitting cross-legged on the floor and not, as had always been their wont, parked beside Bodie on the settee.

Bodie’s mouth ballooned by the last of the prawn balls, Doyle cut in to the somewhat mangled account of Bodie’s Adventures In Birmingham. “I’ve been thinking,” was all he had to say.

Bodie almost swallowed the prawn ball whole. “You ought to watch that,” he spluttered, hoping against hope that he could keep all this light, horribly suspicious about what Doyle had been thinking about, and no-one did a better line in guilt than his partner. “You’ll do yourself a mischief.”

Doyle ignored that completely. “I’ve been thinking about what we did the night before Cowley sent you up north.”

Bodie did not like the sound of this at all: he knew Doyle, knew what happened when his partner settled down to what he called a good think and what the rest of the world, i.e. Bodie, called a Force Ten Brood. Mopping his mouth with a bit of kitchen roll, Bodie had a quick glance at Doyle, and liked what he saw even less: that set expression always heralded trouble, always meant Doyle was on one of his ‘change’ kicks. “Don’t suppose there’s much chance of you not sharing all this deep thinking with me, is there?”

His natural grace made inelegant by tension, Doyle clambered to his feet, started pacing around, another sign that made Bodie want to head for the hills.

“You had a chance when you saw him before you left, and you could’ve phoned in any time you felt like it,” Doyle said, confusing Bodie at first, who had been expecting some messy, emotional scene. “But you never said a word to him about me, did you?”

Not really a question, and it answered what the hell Doyle was going on about. “Told you,” Bodie said, all smugness to hide the wariness, “I’m not going to tell Cowley.”

“Why not?” Doyle paced back towards Bodie,

stopped the other side of the coffee table. “Why the hell not?”

Bodie shrugged, his loyalty to rules and regulations always questionable, and absolutely non-existent when those rules stood in the way of his loyalty to a few, a very few, people. “Some rules are made to be broken, and anyway, if I hadn’t found out till then, there’s not much chance of someone else sussing you, is there?”

“That’s not good enough, Bodie, and you know it.” Fierce, more demanding in this than Bodie had been that night a week ago. “Why haven’t you turned me in?”

“Because,” Bodie said slowly, having to come up with a genuine reason for the first time, forced into thinking about it by Doyle, “if Cowley knew—officially, like, if I’d made a report to him—then he’d have to transfer you, even if he didn’t fire you outright.”

“And you’d miss me?” Said quietly, the words dropping soft as rain.

Acid rain, burning into Bodie’s protective hide. “A crack shot like me?” he sneered, hitting Doyle back the way Doyle had hit him. There was an odd expression in Doyle’s eyes at that, but Bodie was in too much of a hurry to see, rushing headlong to remind Doyle just who had knelt for whom. “We all know how long it takes to get used to a new partner, and how fucking dangerous it is. I’ve no intention of having some wet-behind-the-ears git watching my back just because you’ve turned queer in your old age.”

“But I haven’t.”

Bodie just looked at him, his disbelief blatant. “Oh,” he finally said, “of course. You haven’t turned queer in your old age. You’ve always been,” he flung his arm out, bent his wrist and simpered for all he was worth: “a ginger beer.”

“Well, I have always been the way I am,” Doyle admitted, his somberness in complete contrast with Bodie’s rather desperate jocularly. “But I’m not queer, I’m bi.”

Bodie did not want to hear this.

“I’ve always liked both, even when I was trying to convince myself I was one way or the other.”

Did not want to hear this, did not, did not, did not...

“Finally realised I wasn’t copping out about anything, just happened to go both ways.”

“You’re a fucking queer!” Bodie shouted, needing it to be true.

"Why?" Doyle asked quietly. "So I can be your hole whenever you want one? So you can play the straight bloke to my poor little pansy?"

"I'm not *playing* straight," Bodie said, teeth clenching like his fists, heart pounding with something akin to raw fear.

"Course you're not," Doyle said, smiling with all the condescension of the Renaissance Man for the Neanderthal. "You're just the same as all the other straight blokes who lie back and think of England. Or," he paused, making it seem as if he'd just thought of this, "is it that all cats are grey in the dark?"

"What the fuck else d'you think it is?" Bodie demanded, machismo bursting out all over. "You're the one doing the whole Hephaiston bit, aren't you?"

"No arguing with that," Doyle agreed reasonably, smiling to himself as he saw both relief and self-doubt on Bodie's face. "And I'm not. Just want to set the record straight—" he grinned openly, "or half-straight anyway." And Bodie could deal with that as best he ought, Doyle told himself with more sympathy than one might expect. "And don't worry, I'm not going to start piping my eye if you don't send me roses for my birthday and I'm not going to start wearing high-heels and mascara—"

"Oh, I don't know," Bodie drawled, scrambling desperately to recoup his sangfroid, "I think you'd look rather fetching all dolled up like that. Like *whatsisname*, Tim Curry in that film."

Eyes agleam with speculation, Doyle came round to perch on the arm of the sofa, his new position leaving Bodie with the choice of having Doyle more or less sitting in his lap, or Bodie having to move, lounging back on one arm, sprawling himself in what just might be called invitation. "Fancy me done up like that, do you?" Doyle asked with softly dangerous insight.

"Can't you take a flipping joke?" Bodie blustered. "I wouldn't fancy you unless you'd been born with a cunt between your legs instead of a prick. If anyone fancies anyone round here, it's you fancying me, mate."

"Yeh, course it is," Doyle said reassuringly and the only reason Bodie didn't hear the sarcasm was because he didn't dare. "Straight blokes only fuck men like me because there's nothing else available."

"Right," Bodie told him, relieved now that Doyle was beginning to see sense about all this.

"So how come..." Doyle began, then stopped himself, reminding himself of how this had to be, of how he *knew* this had to be. "Sorry," he said instead, "lost my train of thought. Oh, yeh, that was it. Told you I'd been thinking..."

"Not that again, Ray!" Bodie moaned. "It's only a quick fuck, no need to turn it into a great debate."

"It wasn't a fuck, but that's neither here nor there for the minute. We need to set a few ground rules, here, Bodie," Doyle told him, refusing to be baited.

"Yeh," Bodie said quickly, harshly, "you suck me, I fuck you, we both keep our mouths shut and you don't go getting all weepy and clingy on me, and we'll do just fine."

"And you think that covers it, do you?" He half-laughed, shook his head in genuine amazement. "You really take the biscuit, you know that?" His voice became shaded with aggression, every statement becoming more and more adamant, finger poking Bodie in the chest. "How about adding a bit about you not turning possessive on me, eh? And you can just wipe that look off your face, I know what you're like, I've seen you in action with your birds before. I can fuck anyone I please, whether you like it or not, and whether it's convenient for you or not. Don't you dare ever fuck things up for me because your balls are doing your thinking for you and you want sex whether I'm with someone else or just not in the mood. And that's another thing: if I tell you to take a flying leap, you do that, all right?"

That was taking it too far, more than the fit of fairy pride the rest of the diatribe had been. "I'm not exactly in the habit of raping people you know."

Doyle gave him one of his more familiar smiles, the first indication Bodie'd had that Ray might be willing to let them get back on their old footing. "Sorry, mate, didn't mean it the way it sounded." He sighed, deeply, looked briefly away, and then pinned his partner with the seriousness of his eyes. "I had a speech all prepared, you know, but I've bloody forgotten it."

A fortnight ago, Bodie would have thumped him affectionately or ruffled his curls for that one, but the memory of the last time he'd had his hands in that hair stopped him. "Thank god for small mercies!" The would-be joke felt flatly between them, and Bodie bit his lip, still feeling out of kilter with Doyle, everything unbalanced by the sex

between them, Doyle's need for him and his own position of always, always being the one on top. "There's not much more needing to be said, is there?" he said finally, fervently hoping that Doyle would agree with him on this one. "No need to keep rehashing it is there? Dragging it out, going on and on about it like a pair of bloody Agony Aunts..."

"Oh, that's right," Doyle retorted, tone as sharp as the sting of Bodie's words. "Straight blokes don't talk about it, they just do it, don't they? Well?" he demanded, getting quickly to his feet, pulling his T-shirt off over his head, voice muffled and face well hidden. "Aren't you going to fuck me then?"

Dumbfounded, Bodie stayed put, collapsed against the couch, grateful that he'd already been lying down. "Ray?" he asked, very differently from the night when this had all started.

"What?" Doyle asked right back, something cold and bitter about him, something that Doyle understood and prayed Bodie never would.

"I...em..."

"What's the matter, petal?" Doyle simpered viciously. "Afraid your little mannikins will let you down? Scared you can't get it up? Not to worry," he added, still as nasty, the ugliness in his voice not quite covering up the well of conflicting emotions churning underneath. "It's just us boys, all men together, and other blokes always understand, don't we?"

"It's nothing like that, you bastard—"

"Then what is it?" Doyle shot back, heeling his trainers off, one hand gripping the back of the sofa as he pulled his socks off, the fingers too close for Bodie's peace of mind. "Got a girl tucked up your sleeve for later? Or are you scared you're not man enough to fuck me?"

With that, he turned neatly, walking quickly away, stopping in the doorway to pull his jeans off, the white of his underwear shadowed where it clung to the cleft of his behind. Deliberately, Doyle reached backwards and slipped his fingers inside, pulling the fabric free before he started to skim his pants down, the very top of the darkness between his buttocks revealed before he went into the hallway and on towards the bedroom.

"I'll never understand you, Ray Doyle," Bodie muttered to himself, lying there for another minute, refusing to acknowledge the way his heart was pounding in his chest or the way his cock was worrying at the stitches in his Y-fronts.

"You coming?" Doyle's voice, raised, dimmed

by the walls between the living room and the bedroom.

The *double entendre* of the simple verb sidled its way down the front of Bodie's underwear, tingling through his balls and lifting his cock. "Of course I'm coming," he shouted back. Give the poor bugger what he wanted, Bodie told himself, getting to his feet and following Doyle's untidy example, his clothes punctuating his path to the bedroom. Poor bastard obviously really needed a good fuck from a real man, and it couldn't be easy, stuck in the security services the way Doyle was—couldn't exactly go to the local gay club and find himself a nice boyfriend, could he? Yeah, Bodie told himself, grinning, give him what he needs—and get his own rocks off at the same time. Be stupid to turn down free sex, and not even Macklin thought he was *that* stupid. And it was a measure of his own self-delusion that he didn't even question the unresolvable conflict between the two views of Doyle he was taking, a proverbial bendy-toy, the passive queer, the fairy, and at the same time, unchanged, the same man who had guarded his back from the beginning.

In the bedroom, the ridiculous fur bedspread puddled on the floor, the blankets and top sheet shoved down to the bottom of the bed, one of his old bath towels spread out carefully to stop any grease stains, Doyle waited, listening intently to the encroaching footsteps. Moving quickly, he switched the big light off, putting on only the small angle poise on top of the tallboy. One last thing: he dug round in the bedside drawer until he found what he needed, taking one out to leave within easy reach. Didn't want to have to argue the point, and certainly didn't want to have to fumble around if Bodie tried to push the issue. A muffled swear word: Bodie must have stubbed his toe on the telephone table in the hall. It would be less than a minute now, a lot less, and Doyle took several deep breaths, schooling himself to impassivity. The muscles in his face were too stiff, and he had a horrible suspicion of the expression there. He used rearranging the pillows as an excuse to not look when Bodie stepped into the room, although he would swear he could feel Bodie staring at his bum. Another deep breath, and Doyle covered his face with a far more familiar expression, challenge mixed with defiance, not entirely safe in this situation with this man, but safer by far than anything honest. One look at the wariness hinted at

behind Bodie's eyes proved that Bodie didn't understand Doyle's sudden insistence on being fucked when a week ago he had been equally insistent that he was profoundly heterosexual. That was just fine, as far as Doyle was concerned. He'd had a week to think about this, and there were no two ways about it: he was better off by far having Bodie as trade than having Bodie find out the way he felt about his overly macho partner.

Utterly flummoxing Bodie, Doyle, who was supposed to be the 'bottom' in this, who was supposed to be the queer honoured by a straight man's generosity, Doyle walked over to Bodie, his warm hand snugly enclosing Bodie's cock. "I've already had a taste of doing you with me on the floor and you standing up, and I for one am used to a hell of lot better than that. Into bed with you," he said, hand still on Bodie's cock, his touch all the encouragement Bodie needed to follow him onto the bed, "and let's do it properly this time."

That was too close to wounding Bodie's pride, too much a part and parcel of this unnerving way Doyle was taking the lead, acting, for all the world, as if it were Doyle who was the top dog around here, instead of Doyle being the one who was going to be fucked to within an inch of his life.

Made rough by insecurity, he grabbed Doyle, shoving him down onto the bed, his hands bruisingly tough as he twisted and turned Doyle over onto his belly. "That's it, Ray," he muttered, hands going between Doyle's legs, "spread 'em. Spread 'em for me so I can fuck you—" His hands were clenched on Doyle's buttocks, Doyle's anus stretched wide and visibly opened. Bodie spat, once, the saliva shining wetly on Doyle's arse, Bodie's fingers stabbing the moisture into him. "Oh, yeh," he groaned, two fingers going in, rotating, stretching Doyle all the better to accommodate his cock, "that's it, pet, you open up for me." He pulled his fingers out and grabbed his cock with his wet hand, balancing himself on his knees to lean forward and fuck Doyle.

To find himself, so quickly he was literally dizzy from it, flat on his back, a naked, dangerously furious Doyle pressing one knee into his belly and the lethal fingers of Doyle's right hand digging into his neck. "I thought you said," breathless, and ruthless with it, "that you didn't go in for rape, eh, Bodie?"

"It's not rape—"

"Really? Well I never," Doyle hissed, everything

about him contrasting with the lightness of his words. "And here's me thinking that forced sex is rape—"

"Scared?" Bodie echoed another occasion when that word had been a sword between them. "Did diddums lose his bottle? A minute ago you were fucking desperate for it. What happened, eh? Did you get a look at my cock and faint clean away?"

"Got a look," and the knee slid lower, threatening Bodie's cock, still hard despite—or perhaps because of—what was going on., "at your idea of fucking, and I'm not having it, Bodie, not a bit of it. You want me, mate—"

There was something about it that was a question, something that made Bodie answer, made him honest within his own mind, heard the ricocheting desire reverberate madly.

"And you can have me, but you do it right, d'you hear me? You treat me right, you make me feel good and you don't—" an unmaning shove from his knee, "fucking come at me like a bull in a china shop and hurt me, right?"

"Right," Bodie agreed silkily, moving a little, Doyle's knee sliding out of harm's way, Bodie's arms coming up to grip him just right, and then it was Doyle flat on his back again, Doyle where he belonged, under Bodie. "Abso-fucking-lutely right, Ray. I'm not going to hurt you, I'm just going to make you scream because you want it so fucking much." He leaned down, not looking into the furiously glittering eyes, not wanting to read the expression behind the surface anger, and fastened his mouth and teeth to Doyle's flesh, the tender spot where neck flowed into shoulder. He held on tight, loving the way Ray was wild under him, the erection rubbing against him evidence that Ray wasn't struggling to be free. A sudden hissing intake of breath, a bit of genuine struggle, and he backed off, soothing the hurt with his tongue, still preferring not to look at Doyle. In the back of his mind, shame burned, that he had been so rough to start with, that he had been so consumed by his own lust that he hadn't stopped to think about what he was doing—Christ, he'd seen blokes end up in serious trouble from being fucked too hard and too dry, and god knows how long it'd been since Ray last had anyone up him.

No. That was uncomfortable, that made what they were doing mean something, made it dance alongside specialness. Better to think of Ray on his knees, Bodie's cum smeared across his face, or Ray,

on his knees, fucked by an endless stream of men, Ray, down the cottages, letting anyone have him.

“Over,” he groaned, more upset and aroused than he cared to admit by the images of Ray with strangers. “Let me at your arse, let me in you—”

The fear of seeing too much didn’t work both ways, and Doyle took a good, long look at Bodie, his hands busy on Bodie’s soft skin, strong hands massaging sensitive muscles, caressing erogenous circles of desire.

“You got a fetish about having me on my knees or something? Eh, Bodie?” he asked, open mouth tasting Bodie, open hands running over Bodie’s skin.

Bodie didn’t waste a breath on words, stroking himself back to readiness, his eyes feasting on the lithe sinuousness of Doyle’s strong body, his left hand seemingly addicted to the feel of chest hair covering nipples.

Doyle went willingly enough, but not all the way over on to his knees, stopping, rather, half-way, lying on his side, a quick movement bringing the small packet out from under the pillow. “Here,” he said, “this’ll do the trick.”

Bodie took it, an expression of blank incomprehension on his face. “What the fuck is this?”

“A condom, what the fuck did you expect?” from Doyle, equally as confused, Bodie’s reaction surprising him, and the delay frustrating him. “Are you going to use it or are you going to sit there staring at it?”

“What,” Bodie demanded, a slow anger beginning to simmer, the reaction no less real for its unreasonableness, “do you need a condom for? It’s not as if I’m going to get you pregnant, is it?”

“We,” Doyle replied tartly, “need a condom because I for one know where you’ve been shoving that prick of yours, and if you think I’m going to run the risk of having to see Doc Martin for a dose of clap up the arse, then you, sunshine, are going to have to make do with a wank.”

“Are you implying—” Face hardening, disappointment making him vicious, because it wasn’t supposed to be like this. There was an aching hole somewhere in his chest, in the small, silent part of him that knew what it was supposed to be like, but the rest of him knew only that it wasn’t supposed to be like this, it wasn’t supposed to be going all wrong. Ray wasn’t supposed to be like this, the whole thing was supposed to be something good, a

celebration of coming home, not this, this... He took a deep breath, shoving the emotions down deep where they couldn’t bother him, couldn’t cause any more chaos, all the suppositions relegated to the void. It wasn’t easy, but he kept his hands to himself, didn’t—physically—attack Doyle. “You didn’t seem much worried when you went down on your knees for me last time. Isn’t it a bit late—”

“‘Cept a man can get oral clap from a woman, can’t he, but how’s he going to get clap up his arse if he didn’t have some bloke in there, eh?”

It was reasonable, put like that, but Bodie rebelled against it, hated the idea of having to wear a french letter. He wanted to feel it, feel it all when he was inside Ray, for god’s sake, if he was wearing a condom he might as well be wanking with rubber gloves on. Anyway, the bare-faced cheek of Doyle implying that he, Bodie, had a dose—who was it who fucked anything, male or female, eh? “I’m not putting on a fucking condom—”

“Then you, my old china,” Doyle said tightly, entire body poised for fight or flight, depending on how much damage he was willing to do to Bodie, “are not putting anything in me.”

Bodie looked at Doyle then, staring at him sullenly, cataloguing what it would take to persuade Doyle round to his point of view. Took a good look at the truculence on Doyle’s face, measured the mutinous set to his mouth, weighed whether the battle would be worth the sex—and spending the next day explaining to Cowley how come Doyle had ended up battered to a pulp.

“I want you,” he said, sounding more lost than he realised.

“Then put the Durex on.” Said calmly, very quietly, but Doyle was still coiled tensely, and he had shifted so that both arms were free.

Voice rising, unspoken confusions knocking the feet out from under him. “I’m not wearing a fucking condom!”

“Then I’ve told you, you’re not fucking me.”

“Christ,” Bodie said in disgust, shoving Doyle backwards, throwing the packet down on to him, where it lay, rising and falling with his breathing, “it’s as bad as being with a fucking prostitute. Thanks all the same,” he was sarcastic now, bitterly so, clambering off the bed, still not sure why the whole thing was such bile instead of the sweet dissolution of sex, “but I’ve gone right off the idea.”

Then Bodie was on his feet, hastening out of the

room, gathering his clothes as he scrambled along the corridor, the living room door slamming shut behind him, and he was dressing himself any which way, shoving his feet into shoes, socks stuffed into his pocket for the sake of speed, anything that would get him out of there that bit quicker.

For the first time, it wasn't Bodie who was left alone, but Doyle, lying there in his big bed, the light burning the night through, while he stared at the ceiling and thought.

"Morning," Bodie said coolly as he met Doyle on the way in to Mr. Cowley's office.

Doyle only nodded a greeting, keeping his distance, physically and metaphorically, making it clear that he wasn't best pleased by what had happened the night before.

"Trouble in Lavender Cottage?" Stuart murmured nastily, his implication less than subtle and even less welcome. "The honeymoon finally over?"

They may have come perilously close to outright mayhem only last night, but they still watched each other's backs, and it was Doyle's strong hand that stopped Bodie's fist before it hit Stuart and got him fired for attacking a fellow agent. "Now, now, Bodie," he said in that peculiarly nannyish voice he reserved for those occasions when he himself wanted to rip someone's face off, "Stuart's just jealous," he turned to a suddenly wary Stuart, his smile singularly nasty, "aren't you, dear? Anyway," he put Bodie's fist into that worthy's jacket pocket, patted it through the fabric, "didn't your mother ever teach you not to hit the girls?"

"True," Bodie replied, drawing himself up to his full height and dropping his voice to its lowest register. "And I won't say anything to this pathetic little prick either because—"

"Good old Mam told you never to mock the afflicted—"

"—and I—"

"Bodie! Doyle! The pair of you, get in here and stop causing a draught. Stuart, if you can't think of a place to start looking for that information, I can always send you to Records. For a month!"

Stuart took off like a bat out of hell, and Bodie regarded his boss with what might have been genuine respect. "Wish you'd teach me how to do that—I've been trying to get rid of him for months."

"Yeh, not very fond of clinging vines, are you?" Doyle said, and it was there again, all the mire from last night dulling that one bright moment of rapport.

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that," Bodie muttered under his breath as the phone rang and Cowley dealt with what, judging by the weary edge to the Scotsman's tarnished patience, was the latest in a very long line of telephone calls. "Clinging vines are a real pain, yeh, but at least they're not as bad as pansies."

If George Cowley himself hadn't been sitting there, Bodie would have ended up splattered across the nearest bit of floor. As it was, it was a close-run thing, Doyle's hands not balling into fists for he knew far more effective methods than mere punching. "So that's what last night was all about, eh? You just don't like what's growing in my garden."

Stiffly, with a surfeit of dignity. "You could say that."

"Yeh, but then I'd be as big a fucking—"

"I'll thank you to watch that mouth of yours, Doyle, and if you can't, then I'll have you on Royal garden parties and church fêtes for a month."

"Sorry, sir," Doyle said as he glared at Bodie. "I don't know what *came* over me."

With Cowley's ever-suspicious glare bent on them, there was nothing Bodie could say to that, but he gathered the comment in and hoarded it away with all the other little digs, concentrating on that because then he could forget the real pain of Doyle—Ray Doyle, his partner, of all people—having deliberately deceived him.

Having been given no reason for real suspicion, Cowley had already dismissed the momentary disharmony between his most experienced team, turning his concentration to the more important matter of a conference between sworn enemies: factions in both camps were incensed by such selling-out, which left Cowley worrying not only about the dangers from enemies, but the lethal possibilities of certain allies showing up.

Twenty minutes later, in the car, Doyle driving, Bodie read the files aloud, temporary, tacit truce in force, the struggle for equanimity on the job a serious, up-hill struggle.

"...nothing I hate more, I mean, *nothing* I hate more than baby-sitting terrorists done up as diplomats, sipping tea with their fucking pinkies sticking out as if the most shocking thing they'd ever done was fart in public. I hate this," Doyle

fumed, tyres protesting his driving skills, “nothing I hate more—”

“Change the bloody record, will you? We neither one of us wants to do this, but our Führer has spoken, and it’s right there in the small print: his word is law and don’t bother arguing. All right, so he’s set us off on a wild goose chase—least he hasn’t got us stuck up in that bloody manor house waiting for a mouse to squeak.”

“You’ve changed your tune. A minute ago—”

“A minute ago,” Bodie interrupted, opening yet another supposedly relevant file, “I didn’t have you doing the complaining for me, did I?”

“Yeh, well,” Doyle muttered, “told you, it gets right up my nose.”

It was as close to an apology as Bodie was ever likely to get and closer to civility than anything he had expected after last night’s complete balls up. Thank god, he thought, for the job. “Anyway,” he said, signing on the dotted line of the truce, “it could be worse.”

Doyle careened them round the corner, a trip made all the more unnerving by the fact that he’d turned to look at Bodie.

“Oi, watch where you’re going, mate—you nearly bowled that OAP into the Belisha beacon there.”

“Nah—missed her by miles,” Doyle replied airily, easily dismissing the haranguing pensioner. “So go on, what is it that could be worse?” Doyle demanded brightly, perfectly aware that he was just that shade too enthusiastic, that the normality was that bit too forced to be convincing, but what else was he to do? Play the star-crossed lover or do his outraged saint? “Come on, Bodie,” he said, keeping most of the tension from his voice, “don’t keep me in suspense—what could be worse?”

Good question, Bodie thought, his mind long since having drifted off track. “Oh, ye of little imagination,” he said loftily, trying to remember what he’d been thinking about before, “can’t you think of anything that could make it worse?”

Doyle, in between shifting gears and shunting them round overloaded lorries and carfuls of sleeping children and arguing parents, gave that all the due thought it deserved. “Could always be stuck with Stuart on the job with us. Or we could have Cowley in the back seat.”

Given recent events, this really didn’t seem like the best time to make any dirty jokes about ‘having’ Cowley—or anyone, for that matter. Despite all the

best intentions in the world, despite the fact that neither one of them gave the slightest of reactions, that one, simple comment had brought last night crashing back in on them. Even without closing his eyes to shutter the outside world, Bodie could see Doyle again, naked and hard, erection stoic against the rippled muscles of his stomach, and the flexing clench of his buttocks. It was, he decided, something close to a miracle that when he finally remembered to say something so that they could both pretend that nothing had changed, his voice was perfectly normal. “See? Now you’ve got the idea. Could be worse, we could have—Macklin handling the extra training.”

“Could be worse,” Doyle mused as they left the motorway and started weaving their way through a town the tourists swore was quaint and which was, as far as Doyle was concerned, nothing but a bolognese of too-narrow streets, one-way systems and lolligagging tourists, “yeh—” he announced suddenly, grinning, “it could be worse—we could be liaising with Willis!”

“It could be worse—” Bodie put in his tuppenceworth, quite embarrassingly grateful for the normalising of the situation between them, absolutely thrown to realise that Doyle’s jeans were growing snugger with each passing kilometre, “we could be undercover as waiters.”

“Yeh—or chambermaids. Or it could be worse for the conference blokes—,” Doyle moved as best he could, pinned behind the steering wheel as he was. Christ, but he half-wished Bodie would stop looking at him like that! He’d need a bucket of ice down his front in a minute if Bodie didn’t stop drooling all over him like that. “—we could be undercover in the kitchen with you doing the cooking, frying the lettuce and burning the boiled eggs.”

Not the most fun they’d ever had running a job into the ground, and not the funniest they’d ever been, either, but the stale joke had done the trick, giving them footing that was at least familiar and off the beaten track of churning sexual awareness, the surface chit-chat neatly covering the turmoil below.

“So was there anything else in those files I need to know about?” Doyle asked, all business, eyes firmly fixed on the winding road that was far too long for his tastes, his shoulders aching from the length of the drive and the tension of being with Bodie, of pretending that everything was just so,

life just one big ripping yarn. His jeans were uncomfortable, the back seam caught between his buttocks, the front digging into his testicles, worsening the discomfort of unrequited lust. "Oi!" he said again, glancing briefly at the wool-gathering Bodie, somewhat cheered by the perception that his stone-age partner just might be seeing sense. "I asked you if there was anything else in those bloody files."

"This and that," Bodie replied quietly, turning pages and reading pertinent details out loud and without his usual scurrilous remarks. Necessary information droned out, each aspect of the operation doled its due, a perfectly routine situation. At his side, Doyle shifted gear and avoided pot-holes with more than customary care, the car jarring less. He should have been more, not less comfortable, but his body didn't feel quite right, something out of kilter, some vague disjointedness in his bones, some leitmotif of unease making him need to shift and change more often than Doyle did the car. A few glances at Doyle's sunglassed profile didn't help at all, of course, rather, added to the odd feeling, as if the world were new and Bodie old, some relic brought to life in a time where the old magics were now simply old-hat, parlour tricks to amuse the children while the rest of the world got on with the serious business of making sense of the universe.

Bodie couldn't get comfortable, which could have been explained away by the innate discomfort of a tall man in a Capri, but there was a job on: there might, if things went wrong, be shooting and killing, and if he had lost his edge to distraction, then it might be he who would be shot, or injured, or every soldier's nightmare, maimed.

Or, Bodie thought, and it was as if he were a child again, it might be Ray who gets hurt. Might be Ray who never comes home.

"Hey," he said, bursting into *bonhomie* as Doyle crunched the car along the gravel drive of a house that put *Brideshead Revisited* to shame, "tell you what: after we've finished with this lot, why don't you and me paint the town red? My treat—we can have dinner, might even persuade me to go dancing."

"Yeh?" Doyle said quietly, the car sliding to a stop to the jeers of a couple of dubiously suited security-types on the front portico. There was a tint of hope dawning in his voice, and he looked at Bodie over the tops of his dark glasses, his eyes brightened by possibilities.

"Yeh," Bodie said, punching him familiarly on the arm before grabbing the first of the duffel bags from the back seat. "Go for a slap-up meal, a bit of dancing, then," he leaned in close, a small seed of panic blossoming as he smelled the mixed scents of Ray Doyle's after-shave and arousal, "if we're really lucky, the girls'll come across—"

"Girls?" As chilling as a bucket of water on two dogs.

"Yeh," Bodie replied as Murphy neared them. "What else did you think I had in mind?"

"This," Doyle said through thinned lips, one long finger pushing his protective glasses more firmly into place, "or that."

"Come on, Ray, don't be such a fucking prima donna," Bodie murmured quietly, supposedly to stop Murphy from hearing, but perhaps, just perhaps, because guilt lowered his voice. "I mean, it wasn't a million years ago you were trying to convince me you weren't a complete fairy, was it?"

"You know," Doyle replied distantly, cutting himself off cold turkey, "you are a complete bastard. An absolute fucking arsehole."

"Now what?" Bodie hissed, grabbing Doyle as his partner made to get out the car. Letting go of him after a single, lethal glare before those viciously bright eyes were hidden behind blackness again. "What the fuck's got into you?"

"Not you, I'm glad to say, Bodie," Doyle said very quietly and very, very coldly, "not you."

Then Murphy was there, making comments about the amount of stuff they had brought with them, asking questions, wanting the files, pushing away everything but the job.

And although neither word nor deed commented upon it, Murphy noticed, and watched, and worried, as Bodie and Doyle, the department's Siamese twins, didn't look, or speak, or notice each other, except in the line of duty.

Warring factions neatly disarmed—some by treaty, others by C15—the huge house was slowly emptying, voices becoming hollow as they drifted down corridors and through doorways. Footsteps, now, sounded merely lonely as they neared, or departed, all threats now waved off to their respective shores. George Cowley was already back in London, no doubt on the phone, turning this most recent triumph into increased funding. Willis' lot had been the first to leave, and now it was the

cleaning crews turn to take over the magnificent house. The ink on the treaty was dry and miracle of miracles, the truce was holding. Which, with the passing of hours, had been more than could be said for another, unofficial truce.

Walking past gaping doorways revealing rooms within bedecked by vases of slowly dying flowers, Bodie was definitely and emphatically, not looking for Doyle.

Doyle, in the far wing of the house, wasn't looking for Bodie either.

And it bothered both of them.

What bothered them, partners still in this at least, was that no-one thought to offer the whereabouts of the other. Here they were, at opposite ends of the house, and not one of their fellow CI5 agents mentioned where the other half of the team was, nor did a single solitary soul ask one where the other was.

It was unnatural, and should have been unreal, but already the feeling of being solo was beginning to settle around Doyle's shoulders, influencing how he thought, how he moved, reacted. Changing how he saw himself, and his future in CI5. The empty space at his side where Bodie had always been left his flank unprotected from the endless souging doubts that questioned what he was doing in CI5, that wondered if the ends could ever justify the means. That couldn't forget that he'd held his gun to a man's head, and with every clear, calm, calculated intention of using it.

God, but he could use a drink. Would have one, as soon as he got back to Town. Would have a few.

But not, he thought, automatically deflecting the pain, with Bodie and his bloody birds.

He had a few friends, impressively discreet friends, and he'd visit one of them. Defiance was a wonderfully warm feeling after the chill unravelling of what had always been simply *there*: him and Bodie, always thought of, always spoken of as a pair, always thinking of themselves as a team. Yet here he was, wandering the house doing the last turn of his mop-up check, doing his damndest not to think about Bodie and hoping that he wouldn't even see Bodie.

The drive back didn't bear thinking about.

It didn't, as it turned out, bear talking about either. On the portico, other colleagues yammering with the relief of an unbloody job done and the excitement of time-off. Doyle, standing silently to one side, sunglasses on, staring at the huge expanse

of manicured, deNatured garden. The others all left him to it: after all, he was probably contemplating the role of Man and Nature, the yoking of one to the other, another of Man's sins. But perhaps he was doing nothing so loftily esoteric. Perhaps Ray Doyle was simply trying not to hear as his partner, his best friend, laughed and joked and made plans with the others and did nothing to notice Doyle's turned back or his silence.

Behind him, he heard the dirty jokes, Bodie's voice loudest among them, heard the dispersing to cars, the decisions of who was going with whom. Heard the pronounced lack of comment when Bodie asked Murphy for a lift back up to Town. A slight pause in the chattering mayhem, and then he could feel it, digging into the back of his head, between his shoulder blades: the quick looks, the questioning glances that were, of course, done behind his back. He wondered, for a moment, what the expression on Bodie's face must be—might be. He thought he knew, thought he could be sure. Had believed himself omniscient when it came to his partner. Had believed himself right, as he watched his partner's slow coming-to-terms.

Now, with car doors slamming, with all the uncertain goodbyes hanging unacknowledged like dust behind a car, Ray Doyle was wondering if he even knew himself.

Tyres scrunching gravel, engines purring or raging, one after another after another they left, the smell of their pollution heavier than the flower perfumes hanging in the air. A final car, his ears identifying the voices: Murphy, Stuart, Bodie. Heard the latest rupture of laughter, heard the beginning of another joke. Bodie, of course, which meant that it would be another 'fairy' joke, another brick to rebuild Bodie's self-image and belief in himself.

Or it could simply be another nail in the coffin, the last few blows before the end.

He should never have sucked Bodie.

Should never have let himself get involved with a colleague.

Should never have given himself away to Bodie.

Definitely should never have fallen in love with the insensate bastard.

The last sounds of so-called civilisation disappearing off into the distance, the first sounds of the next infesting horde coming from the house, Doyle left the garden to its own devices and the artifices of the gardeners, took himself off towards his own

car, his step brisk and lively, his whistling cheerful and happy. His own devices, and his own artifices, and it was, perhaps, as well that there was no-one there but himself to be fooled.

A wild night, drunken abandon, riotous living, raunchy humour. Spiralling through him, Bodie felt the unfocussed need, the blind seeking, recognised it for lust, the need to bury himself—not in Ray, no, not him—in some lovely woman, an acquaintance for the evening if not a lady of the night. Someone lovely, and adventurous, someone like him, on the look-out for sex and lust and a quick goodbye.

Murphy had disappeared a good half-an-hour ago, dragged off unprotesting by his girlfriend of the past several months. Bodie couldn't remember her name, but could remember the other things about her: a pretty woman, too clever for Bodie's taste, that sharp tongue too honest by half. Still, Murphy had the right idea, running off home for sex—unlike Stuart over there, haunting the darts board, betting the unwary out of a few quid as he downed enough beer to sink the Bismark and float the Titanic.

Yeh, Bodie decided, Murphy had the right idea, definitely. Unfortunately, Murphy also had the right girlfriend, an aspect of Bodie's life that had been sorely neglected of late. Back at his flat, he had an address book full of names, but it seemed a bit off to phone someone up to invite himself over for sex. That left the local talent, and a slow survey of the room showed most of that to be already taken, the few still unattached either unwilling or unappealing. A quick run-through of his resources: yeh, he had more than enough to cover the cost of a pro. The last of his pint disappeared in one long swallow, his Adam's apple bobbing. He stopped, the tumbler held tightly in his hand, the memory held tightly in his mind. Without even trying, he could remember Ray sucking him down, taking him all the way in—or taking him in all the way, depending on how he looked at it, depending on how much he could trust the rotten sod.

He refused to name his sudden rush to find sex anything close to desperation: refused to name a lot of other things, too. There was a club not far from here, one he'd become a regular of when first he came back to England from Africa and all the English women, in their frothy summer frocks or their hard make-up, seemed either too fragile or too hard for what he needed. A bit of sex, a bit of

welcome, a bit of comfort, that's what he had needed then: it was what he needed now as well.

Walking, now, Stuart left behind without a thought—Christ, what had he been thinking to go for a booze-up with *Stuart* of all people?—his footsteps inaudible under the sounds of traffic and the multitude of other people walking along the concrete pavement. Voices came and went as he passed solitary individuals and couples, laughter, argument, the sounds of strife indistinguishable from the sounds of a good time being had at any cost, the morning after be damned.

Round the corner now, to the relatively quiet street with its stairs leading down to open doors with looping neon signs beckoning the tourist, the traveller and the thirsty. The club had been here for years—except the door was shut, boarded over with cheap plywood, graffiti, and concert posters layered on it by year.

Now that really pissed him off. Face like fizz, he stalked off down the street, his need for sex growing exponentially as it was denied him. Any minute now and there should be the traditional lamp-post on the traditional corner, with the traditional mini-skirted, fishnet-stockinged prossie swinging her handbag. That, of course, had changed a lifetime before, but the idea was still the same, although nowadays it was easier to find someone if you were in a car. His car was still at HQ, where he'd left it days ago, driving down with Doyle—

The thought was cut off with ruthless efficiency: for this night at least, Doyle did not exist, because Bodie was looking for sex, so what did he need Doyle for?

Another club, one he knew by reputation, all of it encouragingly salacious. The familiar aroma of alcohol and tobacco, perfume and sex, after-shave and lust. Not the highest of classy places, but a lot better than many he'd been in. Better girls—nicer, posher, too, he thought, checking out what was on offer, his cock half hard already, making its demands known. Her, he decided instinctively, walking straight for her, not even bothering with the pretence of coming here for a drink. That wasn't the thirst he needed to slake tonight: it was this terrifying pit of emptiness in his belly, not the familiar hunger that could be fed anything from junk to gourmet, but an aching hollowness that was, more and more and despite all his efforts, beginning to carry Doyle's name.

He'd soon see about that. It was infatuation, that

was all—not infatuation with the person, he was quick to reassure himself as he neared the woman of his choice: it was infatuation with the idea, the novelty of it—even the taboo of it, Cowley’s views on non-fraternisation completely coinciding with Bodie’s. Lust, impure and far from simple, but satiable, and supplantable. All he had to do, Bodie told himself, assessing the natural and artificial charms of the woman he would want for the next hour or so, was fuck his brains out with someone who *really* knew how to please a man.

A movement off to the side caught his eye: a handsome, almost pretty young man with hard eyes and harder smile, everything calculated to attract the paying customer. Not, Bodie was pleased to note, his cup of tea at all. Simply not to his taste. With a swagger to his shoulders, he turned back to the woman he had been heading for, looked at her again, and discovered that some of the lustre had tarnished, the truth underlying the image showing through. He wasn’t quite sure—if only because he refused to work it out—why he’d lost interest in her, but at least, as he told himself, better now than later when he’d already paid for her efforts.

He began a slow circuit of the room, and hated the way he noticed the rent-boys as much as the female prostitutes. Hated the way he responded to them, when they moved a certain way, when they laughed a certain way, when they posed, one knee bent, crotch thrust forward, and a sullen tilt to their mouth.

He did not, he repeated, did not want Ray Doyle. Well, not for anything other than a good, hard fuck. Another slow perambulation, this time specifically looking at the men and the pretend-boys who were as old as himself. Maybe that’s what he needed: take another man, have him the way Doyle had refused. Get Doyle out of his system.

But then, what if it didn’t work?

Or what if he liked it, more than he ought?

Volte-face, and he was in front of a blonde with tiny waist and large bust, coming flat out with it, offering money, impatient for her reply. Dealing with her ‘friend’, restraining himself from grabbing her by the hand and dragging her off to the room nearby. Hating himself for the moment of wariness glimpsed in her eyes—hating himself for remembering most where he’d last seen that same wariness, that same near-fear of him, and his sex.

Christ, he thought with bitter amusement, keep this up and they’ll be running away screaming.

Or running away by standing still and saying nothing, Doyle on that portico, staring at those bloody trees, damned sunglasses—

“It’s just up here,” she said, interrupting him, and if it hadn’t been for the his cock pressuring him, he would have had a problem placing who she was.

“What’s your name?” he demanded out of the blue, to make this more than a nameless fuck, even though all he wanted was simple, uncomplicated sex, a quick in-and-out, nothing fancy, nothing hinting at romance.

“Sally,” the woman replied, keeping her eyes on this one. He was strange, this good looking young bloke who couldn’t possibly need to pay for sex, and she just hoped he wasn’t dangerous. “Why don’t we sit down and get comfortable?”

“No, thanks,” Bodie replied, making an effort to be civil, trying to treat her like a person and not just a hole, refusing to turn into the sort of bastard who deserved to be looked at like that, shadows behind her eyes, nervousness in the way she was edging towards the phone. “It’s all right,” he said, managing a smile, somewhat shamefaced at the way she was retreating from him like a virgin with Dracula. “I’m normal, just a bit... Well, I’m not exactly used to doing this, feel a bit funny about it.”

The little-boy charm worked as always, he thought, although Sally was more reassured by the way his fists unclenched and the way his eyes were no longer blank and distant. Having been through this a million times, the poor young husband not knowing what to do with himself when the wife’s doctor cut off the sex or old wives’ tales scared the young wife into celibacy, she asked with professional sympathy: “Wife pregnant, is she?”

Bodie stopped dead for a moment, and looked at Sally, and thought about Ray. “Yes,” he said, slipping into the balm of lying. “Yeh, and she’s well, you know...”

“Of course I know,” Sally purred, coming up to him now, running her hands over his face: he’d paid for more than just a quick fuck, and if his wife were pregnant, then she just might end up with another regular, which was always nice. “You’re left to do without, and it’s not as if you want to be unfaithful to her, is it? Well,” she said, teasingly slipping her hand across the front of his trousers, eyes widening in genuine pleasant surprise, “being

with me, that's just seeking professional services to help you through a rough spot, isn't it? Think of me as a sort of counsellor," she said, making the most unethical, in any other profession, reconnaissance of his crotch.

Bodie closed his eyes, letting her work her magic, impressed by the way she undressed him, the way she coaxed him to the bed, easing him down to lie there, persuading him to open his eyes to watch her. She was impressive at that as well, undressing with more bump-and-grind than the average stripper. Flat on his back, legs spread, one hand on his cock, the other on his balls, both hands moved in the same languorous rhythm of Sally taking off her red dress and black shoes.

He was hard now, and more than ready, suddenly, fiercely glad that he hadn't rung up one of his girlfriends: Sally was being paid, cash transaction, to give him pleasure, to let him fuck her. No obligation for him to return the pleasure, no duty for him to perform well. All he had to do was enjoy himself while she lay back and thought of her bank account.

"C'mere," he muttered, reaching for her, toppling her over onto the bed before she'd finished with the old-fashioned garter belt that played to so many male fantasies. Bodie didn't want fantasies, wanted only the reality of himself, fucking a woman, Ray Doyle a million miles from his thoughts. He rolled her onto her back, her name already forgotten, erased by the sight of her naked and spread and open. Bodie grabbed himself, positioned himself between her thighs, and sank into her, fucking her as hard as he could, fiercely, defiantly glad that he'd paid the extra fiver so that he didn't have to use a Durex. Should have done that with Ray, he thought, lowering his head until his mouth was open on smooth skin, her full breasts pressed flat under his chest, but not so flat as Ray, and too smooth, even her nipples soft as she lay there, gasping and groaning in the throes of passion, her hips writhing and undulating with superb skill, the entire performance picture-perfect.

And Bodie, in her to the hilt, found his attention wandering, found himself pounding into her as if it were a chore, something he had to do to relieve his cock. Unnerving, and he made himself look at her again, kissed her beautiful mouth, accepting her talented tongue inside his mouth, following it as it lured him inside her. Ran his hands over her, the softness of her buttocks pressing his hands into the

bed as he cupped her, the smoothness of her thighs, the richness of her breasts, nipples peaking hard now against his palms.

Ray had fought him, lean, lithe, hard, cock digging into him, fingers digging into him, the passion a twisting, turning presence between them, driving him to distraction—

He wiped the sweat from his forehead, and from his cheeks, set himself doggedly to caressing the woman under him, the woman whose name he didn't remember, the woman whose eye colour was a mystery to him, the woman he had been inside before he had even registered her natural hair colour. He knew every mark on Ray, every scar, every muscle, even that small mole at the top of his inside right thigh. Knew the colour of his eyes in every mood, knew the way he moved, the way his mouth worked when he swallowed a man. Knew how his hair felt between Bodie's fingers, his hands tangling in long, straight blonde tresses that were but a substitute. He'd had Ray under him, bucking like a wild thing, ready and desperate for him, and now he couldn't get that thought out of his mind, even as he fucked a woman he would normally think beautiful, a woman with an abundance of every feature he preferred, and he didn't want her, a feast turned to famine.

Bodie slammed into her, hating her, hating himself, hating Ray. Furious with his boredom with what he was doing, furious with his body for betraying him. Praying that he could come soon, that he wouldn't lose his erection and his pride.

Permitting himself, finally, to think about Ray under him like this, legs wrapped around him, hair tossing wildly, hips thrusting up to meet him—

Joylessly, he came, his body flooding her with his release, his mind numbing in self-defence. Polite even here, he rolled off her immediately, refusing to check his watch.

Sally, less polite perhaps, looked at the clock beside the bed.

"It's all right," Bodie told her again, sitting up, stretching the kink out of his lower back where all the muscles were protesting as much as his mind, "I'm not staying. You won't have to put up with me again."

"Oh, it's not that at all," Sally told him with all the brightness she could muster after having been flattened like that.

Bodie wasn't listening to her, was trying not to listen to himself. There was an en suite bathroom—

ought to be, for what he'd paid—and he used it, the water too cold on his cock as he washed himself off. As if he were completely alone, he went back into the bedroom, dressing himself with routine efficiency born of too many years of active duty. Tonight, he felt like an old man, aches and twinges appearing for the first time without benefit of injury, nothing wrong with him but over-exertion. Or depression.

He didn't leave her a tip, didn't even acknowledge her presence. Instead, wrapped in thoughts he didn't want to have, he left, going down the stairs one at a time, coins and car keys jingling merrily.

There were taxis passing every now and then, their yellow lights beckoning, but he ignored them, walking steadily, his easy pace covering the distance quickly, the effects of tonight's beer slowly fading. It took him a while, but he was, eventually home, shutting and locking and bolting the door behind himself. All he wanted was to crawl into bed and sleep for a month. Almost there, and the flashing red light on the departmental phone caught his attention.

"Fucking hell," he said to no-one and nothing in particular, reluctantly coming to pick the phone up. "What is it this time?" The connection went through, and Sparks, who'd been on night-ops for as long as anyone could remember, was telling him to hang on a minute, the line clicking into silence before he could protest.

"Right," Sparks said, "message from Mr. Cowley."

Bodie groaned aloud at that.

"And well you might," Sparks said with singularly unwelcome cheeriness. "He's sending you to Macklin."

"Christ, what for? And when?"

"First thing tomorrow morning. Oh, wait, no—that's first thing *this* morning. Macklin's expecting you in..." a smug pause, Bodie far from smug as he checked his own watch, "four and a half hours."

"Message received, Control," Bodie said, following the perfect letter of the law, slamming the phone down and giving it a two fingered salute. "And fuck you too, Mr. Cowley, sir."

He stomped off to bed, hoping that once, just this once, his flat could be bugged, and with a direct line to George Cowley's left ear. "Fuck you!" he shouted.

But the only answer he got was the people next door thumping on the wall.

Miserable, and horribly aware of why, Bodie crawled into bed and pulled the covers over his head. His last thought, as he sank like a stone into sleep, was to wonder where Doyle had been when his message had come through. And what the hell he was going to say to his partner in the morning.

"I can see," Macklin said, arms and legs akimbo, blond hair not even the slightest bit ruffled, "why George sent you two back to me. He always did believe in throwing the minnows back. And you two," he crouched down between them, his trainers very white against the dust of the floor and the filthy state of the two agents lying thereon, "must be the most pathetic things George ever managed to bring in. What's the matter with the two of you?"

Every joint creaking, Doyle hauled himself up into a sitting position, wiped the dust from his hair and face. "Thought that was your job."

"Oh, so it does still have some balls left. I was beginning to wonder," Macklin sneered in so pleasant a voice. "Come on, Doyle, it's obvious. You and Bodie aren't communicating—you're not even working as a team. You two were better together the first week you were partnered than you are now, and you had better pull your socks up."

"Or else?" Bodie asked from where he still lay on the floor, right hand over ribs that would have been broken if Macklin hadn't been pulling his punches so much.

"That's right, or else," Macklin told him, deft fingers lifting Bodie's shirt up to check the ribs, sharp eyes noting the way Doyle's gaze slid sideways, looking at Bodie then looking away again.

"Or else what?" Bodie wheezed between Macklin torturing him under pretence of examining him. "He can't fire us—too short-staffed."

"You're right about that," Macklin agreed, tugging Bodie's shirt back into place, half his attention on watching Doyle. "But there are fates worse than being fired."

"All right," Doyle said tiredly, "I'll bite. What's the fate worse than death?"

"Being demoted," Macklin replied calmly, picking up the wickedly sharp steel-toothed comb he was going to use for the next little lesson. "If you two don't measure up, he's going to shove you both into B-Squad."

"He can't do that—"

“Yeh, he can, Ray,” Bodie told him, getting to his feet carefully, eyeing the way Macklin was playing with the sharply gleaming steel. “It’s right there in the small print.”

“So’s everything else, and most of it’s illegal.”

“And since when has that ever stopped George Cowley, eh?”

They were both standing now, slowly circling the deceptively becalmed Macklin.

Doyle didn’t have time to answer, Macklin coming at him just as Towser, shrieking like a banshee, came bursting through the door, and battle, euphemistically known as a ‘refresher course’, was once more joined.

It had, or so it felt, been going on for centuries. Every bone ached, every muscle had been strained or pulled or torn. Their brains were every bit as sharp as hot porridge, and neither of them could muster the strength to more than blink. The two camp-beds were side by side, Doyle lying flat on his back on the one under the window, Bodie on his stomach over beside the back wall, his face turned, instinctively, towards the door, left arm hanging limply to the ground. Neither man was up to talking, even if either one of them had known what to say. After all, what could they say? It was inescapable and beyond covering-up: witness how quickly word had got back to Cowley. Even they could see it staring them in the face. The rapport was gone, their teamwork a thing of the past, the partnership in tatters.

Without shifting his head, Bodie could see Doyle. Could see when his partner made the tiny move that warned Bodie that Doyle was about to look at him, Bodie averting his eyes quickly, focussing blindly on the door rather than meet Doyle’s eyes and the knowledge that was in them.

They both knew. Couldn’t help but know. But there was no law that said Bodie had to admit it.

They did, however, glance briefly at each other, Macklin’s encroaching footsteps a threat.

“Well, well, well, I am surprised. I thought the pair of you would be Sleeping Beauties by now. I’m obviously going to have to work you harder tomorrow.”

Doyle didn’t even groan, just turned his face to the wall, only to snap his attention back to Macklin when the light went out. Either an enforced and welcome bedtime, or another attack. Across the room, he knew Bodie would be just as tense as he, although he could no longer sense it. Experience

told him what Bodie’s first moves would be—always supposing Bodie hadn’t come up with some new variation.

“Right, you two,” Macklin said, and despite all their problems, Bodie and Doyle would have looked at each other in sheer astonishment at the gruff affection audible there, “this conversation doesn’t exist, right? If you so much as hint about it to anyone, I’ll call you liars to your faces, and if you mention it to George, I’ll come after you both and kill you.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Bodie said, exhaustion and irony threatening to make him collapse into giggles. “So what’s this non-existent conversation about then?”

“What d’you think it’s about, Bodie?”

“It’s about us,” Doyle said, disembodied, his comment drifting across the room. “It’s about me and Bodie, and what’s gone wrong.” A pause, and Doyle found it in him to be grateful to Macklin for giving them all the benefit of darkness. “You know, don’t you?”

“About you and Bodie? I’ve been watching you—of course I know. And it’s not as if you two are the first this has happened to.”

“What,” Bodie said, and his voice, flat and blunt, had been intended to be sharp and cutting and outraged, “the fuck are you trying to imply?”

“Don’t bother, Bodie, it’s too late to lie your way out of this one. Come on, I’ve seen it all before, and it’s my job to get to the root of whatever’s wrecking a decent partnership. And it’s obvious with you two.” And later, Macklin knew, when they weren’t so tired, when they weren’t both so completely wrung out, they’d realise just how much they’d actually given away there, when neither one of them asked what the hell made it obvious—or even what ‘it’ was.

If it weren’t so sick, it would be funny. In fact, because it was so sick, it had a lovely humour all its own, and Doyle laughed, briefly, unpleasantly. “Yeh, well, me and Bodie know all about what’s gone wrong and why. Don’t we, Bodie?”

Through the uncurtained window, Bodie could see the slight lightening where the sky appeared above the blank wall of the next door warehouse. Could see a couple of stars between the clouds, not that he could be bothered with so much as bothering to remember which stars they were. To one side, he could hear Macklin breathing, waiting for him. Diagonally from him, he could hear Ray, or

really, Doyle's camp-bed, the canvas and wood creaking. "Yes," Bodie finally said, making it all real, and inescapable. "Yeh, we both know what went wrong."

"Do you?" Macklin asked sharply. "You think you do, because you're a pair of know-it-alls. But I wonder if you've any idea of what the real problem is."

Doyle was still finding this all amusing in its own Pythonesque way, was surprised that Bodie had sounded so dour and solemn. "So you don't think two of CI5's best—two *men*—fucking each other is a real problem?"

"No."

The flat, undramatic denial shocked two people in that room.

"Are you trying to tell me," Bodie said carefully, "that if we were to do what Doyle said we did, it wouldn't wreck the partnership."

"Of course that's what I'm saying. I've told you, Bodie, I've seen more in life than your dirty little mind could ever imagine, so believe me, partners fucking each other isn't the big problem you think it is."

It might well have been the first time in his life Macklin heard the comment, Bodie's voice very still in the darkened room. "Then you're a complete idiot. You don't think that would be a problem? Then how come Cowley's sent us here, eh? And how come you think we're finished, if us fucking isn't a problem?"

"The fucking isn't the problem. The problem," and Bodie and Doyle could hear him get to his feet, and Macklin could see them now, as faded and colourless as corpses in the dim moonlight, "is you two fucking it up."

Footsteps, three, four, then silence as Macklin stopped again. "I'm recommending a medical leave for you both, overwork, stress, the usual excuses. I can get you a week, and then you'll both be back here, and then in to see Doctor Ross. A week, that's all. And if you can't get yourselves sorted out—"

"Then it's B-Squad. Babysitting, inter-departmental liaisons, observations, Grade 2 operations..."

"Fate worse than death," Bodie said, thinking about what he'd done, thinking about values and trust and caution.

The door shut behind Macklin, and Bodie's unanswered comment lingered between the two men shut in the small, dark room.

"Suppose that means," Doyle said, proffering the first verbal olive branch, "that we can go home now."

"Suppose it does. D'you want to?" Bodie himself wasn't sure he knew what he was asking, knew he was supposed to be trying to sort out the mess, and horror of horrors, that meant they might actually have to talk. The B-Squad. He'd leave before he'd move down to that lot of podges—always hoping that Cowley didn't throw an entire book of small print at him.

"Don't know if I have the energy to move."

"Don't much fancy staying here."

"Don't much fancy," Doyle told him firmly, bringing all the unspoken little details right out into the open, "doing anything much more strenuous than breathing, so if you think you're going to have me on my knees tonight—"

"Oh, get off it, Ray," Bodie snapped, too tired to care overmuch about his aggrandised image, only the pathetically impotent stupid enough to claim potency under these conditions, "who the fuck would have the energy for sex after this little lot, eh?"

"So we're going then?"

"In a minute," Bodie replied, lying there, listening to Ray breathing, listening to the sound of a barge going downriver, a dog barking in boredom or loneliness.

"It's been a minute," Doyle said, after about twenty minutes, hauling himself to his feet, moving before he couldn't stay awake. Carefully, acutely aware of how delicately they were dealing with each other right now, their partnership a poor, shrivelled thing shivering in the dark. "Are you coming, or would you rather sleep here and maybe we could see each other tomorrow?"

It would be so easy, Bodie thought, watching the gathering clouds scud across the sky. Just say 'see you', let the problems cement between them and that would be it. Resign from the squad, and if Cowley wouldn't let him resign, just disappear anyway. Back to Africa, any number of real money-makers over there. There was Sri Lanka, and India. Not to mention the rest of Asia, and Hong Kong. Any number of places, any number of jobs. And for the first time he could remember, the idea of leaving England uneased him, some part of him having grown old and settled down when he hadn't been looking. Not so easy then. That was the moment when Doyle moved, his trainers squeaking

slightly on the concrete, his profile passing in front of the multi-greyed clouds. Head downbent—Bodie was willing to bet the mouth would be as well, that expression having grown more familiar over the past little while. Yes, the mouth would definitely be downturned.

Hadn't kissed that mouth. Not that he would, of course, because real men didn't kiss other men.

But that prossie last night. He'd kissed her, and did he dare be that honest? To relive what he'd been thinking with his mouth on hers, his tongue inside her?

"Look, Bodie," Doyle said, hands on hips, sportsbag between his feet, determination knitting his brows, "if we leave it as it stands right now, we'll never be able to face each other again, right?"

Bodie didn't have to agree, both of them knowing human nature and each other.

"So this is it, isn't it? If we split up now—"

"Then we'll've split up for good and bugger any stupid notions about sorting it out later..."

They both of them knew there wouldn't be a later, not once they were out of this cocooning dark and facing each other in the light, the distance of festering embarrassment and humiliation seeping between them. Doyle had made his choice—had made it the night he let Bodie push him into fellating him—and now it was Bodie's turn. Well, he laughed at himself as panic threatened, he had claimed he wanted to be top man, hadn't he?

"Don't suppose you've got anything decent in by way of food?" Bodie demanded, brusqueness heavy to cover his nerves.

"You're never hungry!"

"I'm always hungry—said so yourself," Bodie replied, struggling to find the old patterns to paper over the new cracks. "And not for any of that healthy crap you're always trying to make me eat. Worse than Stuart's idea of conversation."

A small comment, well-camouflaged, but Doyle had always been good at reading between Bodie's lines.

"That supposed to be an excuse for the fairy jokes or an apology?"

"What fairy jokes?" Bodie asked, stuffing bits and pieces into his holdall. "Oh," he said in the voice of discovery, "those jokes! Anyway, don't know why you got so bent out of shape over them. Not as if they had anything to do with *you*, was it?"

Stiff-armed, Doyle stopped Bodie dead in his tracks, his hand hard and immobile against Bodie's

chest. "Let's get something clear right now," he hissed, furious enough to rock the proverbial boat. "You don't fucking lie to me, d'you hear me? I don't lie to you, and you don't lie to me. You think you're the only one that's done things he shouldn't've?"

"Yeh, but unlike you," Bodie said in the spirit of telling the truth and nothing but the truth, "I admit it."

"*Touché*," Doyle replied drily, half wishing he hadn't been quite so keen on truthfulness. "So don't you go trying to pull the wool over my eyes so that I think you've turned into some bloody saint—"

"Can't," Bodie told him dolorously, needing to push aside all of this soul-baring stuff before he left himself more naked than he was quite happy with yet. "My Da wouldn't let me take Holy Communion. Wrong church."

"All right, Bodie, I get the message, and I tell you what, I'll let you off the hook for a bit."

"Oh, you're too, too kind."

"You won't be saying that this time tomorrow."

Having seen Doyle learn everything he knew from Cowley before adding a few particularly effective twists of his own, Bodie knew he was in for something closely resembling the Inquisition. "No," he said, blindly, the whole idea too much, too close, too soon. "No, I'm not going to sit around spilling my guts like a fucking pansy—"

There was a second, a fraction of a second, where Doyle wanted to bring his hand up and hit Bodie, hard, break the smug, macho bastard's nose, teach him a few lessons the hard way. But almost as quickly, and fast enough to avert incipient disaster, his own underlying emotions reared up, reminding him rather forcibly of how powerful certain deep-seated feelings and fears could be. Give him time, he reminded himself again, finding it easier than he had expected. There was a patience in him that few ever tapped, but Bodie seemed to have found the motherlode. "All right, all right," he said, his own soothing tone taking him aback, his hand softly stroking where stabbing fingers could have killed, "I won't push it, not yet. In your own time, eh, Bodie? Give you a bit of time."

Bodie, a well of cowardice opening up inside, almost asked him 'time for what'. Time, he knew, to let him come to terms with something he couldn't even name yet, something that Macklin had been careful not to mention in a conversation that didn't exist.

"Been a bit of a shock, I suppose."

"What has?"

"All this," Doyle said quietly in the dark, leaning in that bit closer, nearing temptation, referring to both Bodie's self-unveilings and his own discovery of love.

Bodie could see him, could feel Doyle's breath on him. Knew he could kiss Doyle if he wanted to. If he dared to.

"If we don't get moving, we'll still be standing here come morning."

"In that case," Doyle stood aside, ushering Bodie in a neat reversal of their usual ploys, "lead on, MacDuff."

And there wasn't a snowball's that Bodie was going to give him the correct quote on that one.

On the deserted street, several cars parked, two of them belonging to Bodie and Doyle.

"Which car?"

"Mine," Bodie said, predictably.

In silence, they climbed in; in silence, they drove, still not speaking when they arrived at Doyle's flat, the excuse of lugging their gear in and throwing together a late, late bite to eat giving them enough banalities to make small talk over.

Dirty dishes on the floor beside the sofa, the television had long since abandoned itself to the national anthem and the radio was reduced to things even Doyle's mother would find boring.

"We're going to have to call it a night some time," Doyle said into the quiet.

"Suppose so." Flat, telling neither of them anything.

"We've already said we neither one of us are up to anything," Doyle reminded him, not allowing himself to be annoyed by Bodie's skittishness—as if Bodie was the one with cause for concern.

"Yeh, we did, didn't we? Right," Bodie got to his feet like a statue coming to life, his aches and pains visible if not entirely audible, "where d'you keep the spare blankets this time?"

Still curled up in the corner of the sofa, Doyle stared at him through eyes that were very large and very green, and in anyone else would have been called guileless. "Bed's big enough."

"Where're the blankets, Ray?" How long was it now since he'd been comfortable sharing a bed with Doyle? An eternity or a blink of an eye, it was all the same. There was sex between them now, and

it was one thing to use the bed to fuck in, but it would mean something else entirely if they were to sleep together, as sedate and sexless as any old married couple. "The blankets," he said again, willing to make an issue of it.

"Cupboard at the top of the stairs. And the distalgesics are in the medicine chest."

"Right."

A few minutes later, and Bodie was back, this time to hand Doyle a couple of the painkillers, leaving him to it, actually clearing the dirty dishes into the kitchen. The hint was, admittedly, somewhat heavy-handed, but Doyle had looked too settled sitting there on the sofa where Bodie was supposed to be sleeping. Not too long ago, he would have tossed the extra covers over Doyle's head, laughed at him and gone to sleep in Doyle's bed himself. But to do that now would be tantamount to inviting Doyle in beside him, would be almost like asking Doyle to incite them to sex again. He couldn't face that tonight, sex sounding more like work than pleasure, and there were too many things echoing through his skull, from the emotions he kept on glimpsing in Ray's eyes to Macklin's shockingly blithe acceptance of the idea of two men fucking each other. Macklin, of all people, not seeming to think it made either one of them any less a man, or treating them one whit differently from before. That conversation might not exist, but it was only a spit away from tacit approval of him and Ray, Macklin and Cowley hand in glove when it came to enforcing internal policy.

Then there was the not so minor matter of what the hell had shown, what the hell had tipped Macklin off—and who else would see it? Who else had already seen it? How many people already knew?

Head pounding, the painkillers still twenty minutes away from kicking in, Bodie leaned on the kitchen counter, dizzied as much by what had happened as by his own conflicting emotions, innumerable desires at war with other wants and needs, and all of it tangling like string in the aftermath of a kitten. Doyle would be upstairs by now, safely out of the way, so he went back into the living room, relieved to find himself alone, Doyle's absence some small proof that perhaps they could rebuild the old rapport. Automatically, he went round turning all the lights out, checking the locks again, listening to the small sounds coming from upstairs. The sofa was long enough for him to lie

out full-stretched, and new enough that the cushions were comfortable, the blankets heavy enough to make him feel secure, warmth helping soothe his muscles.

He had no intention of pondering over anything, had no wish to think a single thing through. All he wanted was to sleep, and sleep, and sleep.

Too early, he heard a noise, smelled something, the combination making him stir from his nest of blankets.

"Here," a distinctly bleary and seriously dishevelled Doyle said, plonking a plate piled with toast on the coffee table, two steaming mugs and the bottle of painkillers already quite at home amidst yesterday's newspaper and Bodie's folded clothes.

"God, Doyle," Bodie groaned, blessedly forgetting the none-too-subtle changes in their relationship, his brain still deeper asleep than his body, "what time is it?"

"Quarter to nine. Needed another tablet, didn't want to chance it on an empty stomach."

"And misery loves company." Still, he pulled himself upright, remembering everything all at once the moment Doyle looked at his bare chest, at nipples Doyle's fingers had played with while Doyle's mouth had been busy elsewhere. Trying to make it look natural, Bodie pulled the covers up a bit higher, knowing he was just begging for a sarky comment.

"Oh, my maiden aunt," Doyle said, sneering, for all that his eyes were dark with something other than contempt, "is the poor little innocent afraid I'm going to jump him?"

"You're doing your prima donna again," Bodie sneered right back, tired and vicious and annoyed that Doyle was being so unnecessarily difficult.

"Me? I'm not the one sitting there," Doyle was very quiet, so quiet that not even Bodie could pretend not to see the pain and corroded trust behind the nastiness, "worried shitless that he's going to be raped, am I, Bodie?"

Doyle turned on his heel and left, as angry with himself for letting Bodie wind him up like that as he was at Bodie for doing it in the first place. At the doorway, he looked back at Bodie, saw the lost, confounded expression, and remembered why he had fallen for Bodie in the first place.

"Oh, for god's sake," he said roughly, "get some rest. You look like something the cat dragged in."

Then he was gone, and Bodie was left alone with enough toast to feed a battalion, and enough guilt and confusion to defeat an army.

Two hours he lay there, knowing Doyle was upstairs, almost directly over his head, fairly sure that Ray would be no more asleep than he was.

Two hours of going round and round and round in circles, coming no closer to a solution than when he'd started. He wanted the sex, there was no doubt about that—what he didn't want was the skipping around holding hands and pressing wild flowers between the pages of poetry books.

Not, of course, that Doyle owned a single poem let alone an entire book of them. And not that Ray had ever shown the blindest bit of interest in flowers as anything other than a way of sweetening up some bird. At least, Bodie had always thought they'd been for girls. Never knew, though, did you? Look at him: he'd let men suck his cock, would fuck them too. None of the queer stuff, though, not him.

Convenient, wasn't it, to forget about kissing Sally and wishing her to be Doyle.

Nah, he would be happy with the sex, and Doyle would just have to see to it that he didn't fuck things up by being too emotional about it all, too sentimental, all clinging, simpering at him...

And when, Bodie asked himself with a sudden stab of honesty, had Ray ever done anything like that? If it hadn't been for someone bumping into him in that pub that night.

Unpleasant, threatening thought—for all that Doyle was willing to do down on his knees for Bodie, there was no escaping it: Doyle was very much a man, the same man he'd been from the first day Bodie had met him, from the first time he had saved Bodie's life. Not some effete, precious little queen, but a man who liked men, who didn't feel himself unmanned by taking another man's cock into his mouth, or taking a man up the arse, or any one of a million things Bodie could imagine, lying there, his cock responding to the erotica in his head. Would Doyle be willing to do all of those things? And what would he demand in return?

His cock pulsed once, the heavy throb almost frightening to a man who thought himself straight and was becoming aroused at the imagining of what another man would do to him.

Overhead, the bed creaked, shuffling footsteps, the toilet flushing, the reversing of the sounds.

Without thinking about it, drawn like a moth to the flame, the image of a naked, sleepy Ray Doyle a candle leading him on, Bodie went up the stairs, his own clothes left behind, nudity no problem now that it was his choice, and him in control. The bedroom door was characteristically left open, and Doyle was curled up in the bed, duvet right up over his head. The venetian blinds were tightly shut, and the room was almost dark, the rattling of rain on the window panes finally registering with Bodie. The sound made him shiver, and he came closer to the bed, lifting the duvet and climbing in to Doyle-scented warmth, his sleepy partner welcoming him automatically, octopus limbs wrapping round Bodie.

"Like a block of ice," Doyle mumbled in Bodie's ear, hot hands rubbing his back to take away the chill.

Bodie didn't say anything, simply permitted Doyle the liberty of making him warm, putting up with the hands that strayed all over his body. Didn't argue when his cock had the predictable response. It was only sex, he told himself again, and Doyle wasn't some prancing little poofter who was going to embarrass him in front of his friends.

He felt Ray's open mouth on his body, felt Doyle slowly descend, the tacit offer to suck him. Bodie eased over onto his back, and spread his legs wide in anticipation and invitation, one that Doyle was quick to take him up on. The wet mouth was cool at first, then warm enough, and then hot as the blood rushed to Bodie's cock, making him fully erect, making him more than enough to fill Ray's mouth. Here in Doyle's bed, with Doyle putting every last ounce of skill into it, it was better than the first time, and Bodie couldn't stay silent. He shoved the duvet out of the way, kicking it aside until he could see Ray sucking him, could see the curve of Doyle's naked back as he knelt over Bodie. Watched, fascinated, lost to lust, as Ray reached between his own legs to fondle his own cock, the foreskin long, sliding back and forth silkily.

The rhythm was the same, Ray's mouth on Bodie's cock, his hand on his own cock, making the experience one and the same thing.

"Like that, Bodie?" Doyle asked, lips still brushing Bodie's arching erection.

Inarticulate with passion, Bodie reached down to press Ray's mouth back on to him, only to be frustrated.

Doyle, smiling, eyes feral, cock tapping against

his belly, crawled up Bodie's body, his cock coming to rest, briefly, against Bodie's, rubbing with slick pleasure immediately, his words so inciting they made Bodie forget he had another man's cock rubbing against him. "D'you want to fuck me?" Ray asked, tongue tip tasting Bodie's right nipple. "Want to fuck me enough to keep me clean?"

Bodie hadn't even realised he'd made the decision until that moment, hearing himself say it. "Where d'you keep the Durex?"

A brilliant smile for that, and then Ray scrambling, never once completely letting go of Bodie as he got a condom and the cream he'd need for himself. More sucking, Bodie's cock wonderfully big in his mouth, and then he was smoothing the condom down onto Bodie, cream lubricating it just enough. "All right," Doyle whispered, rolling onto his back, bringing Bodie with him, letting Bodie have the illusion of being on top, "fuck me, go on, Bodie, put it in me."

Bodie grasped his cock, pressing it to the small hole, gasping as the muscle dilated and he sank slowly into incredible heat and even more incredible pleasure.

Doyle lifted his knees higher, pulling his legs up out of the way, exposing himself more, Bodie entering him more deeply, until Bodie's abdomen was hard against him, pubic hair caressing his balls, belly hair rubbing against his own hard cock.

"For fuck's sake, Bodie," he groaned, trying desperately to rub harder, "touch me. I need you, oh, christ, give me your hand—"

Had it been anyone else, Bodie would never have done it. But this was Ray, whom he might yet have to give up, and this was better than any sex he'd had before. Reluctant at first, he wrapped his fist around Doyle's cock, the skin so soft over such hardness. He stroked, once, and was rewarded by the sight of Doyle tipping his head back, the utterly vulnerable throat exposed in pleasure.

"Oh, yeh," Doyle murmured, feeling Bodie inside him and around him, "oh, yeh..."

Bodie couldn't tear his eyes off Doyle's throat, the Adam's apple bobbing with every word Doyle said. Couldn't resist the unprotectedness of it, couldn't resist the trust, and he lowered his mouth, open lips and teeth following the lines of Doyle's throat, mouth feasting on skin, cock caressed by the deep smoothness of Doyle's inner body. His cock was devouring Doyle, and he held Doyle's cock in the palm of his hand, and he felt himself more of a

man than he had in years, for Doyle was helpless with pleasure under him, legs splayed, arse open wide, manhood given over to Bodie. Mouth gaping open in wordless murmurings, and Bodie fucked him harder, held his cock tighter, stroked harder, bit him there, on the lobe of his ear, sucking on his skin, all of Bodie concentrated on the pleasure of being inside Ray Doyle and bringing him, powerfully, to orgasm.

“Yeh, Ray, that’s it, feel me up you. Love it, don’t you, being fucked, eh? Being fucked by me, no-one else, not ever anyone else, won’t want to. Feel that?” he thrust forward, his cock completely encased in Doyle’s body and rotated his hips in tiny, soul-destroying circles, Doyle grabbing Bodie’s shoulders, pulling him close, bringing them more tightly together.

Eyes wide, Doyle stared up at Bodie, couldn’t believe his ears, couldn’t believe how good this was, what Bodie was willing to do. Loved it, and loved Bodie and wasn’t afraid of it. Felt orgasm thunder through him, felt himself erupt over Bodie’s cradling hand and onto Bodie’s belly, felt Bodie’s cock so huge inside him as his arse spasmed around the heavy flesh. And then, there it was, Bodie suddenly still, a canopy over him, orgasm claiming Bodie too. Dissolving, dissolving, blending together until it was as if nothing had ever changed, the two of them in perfect, flawless harmony.

Bodie was heavy on top of him, but that wasn’t a problem yet. How could it be, with Bodie looking so dazed and bemused, still not quite back in the land of the living, his eyes closed, his mouth open. Common sense still to return, it was too much to resist, and Doyle pressed his open mouth to Bodie’s, tongue softly stroking.

Bodie felt the tongue against his own, and knew he should be shocked and appalled, but all he could feel was a terrible tenderness for this man. He allowed the kiss, refused to give it up when Doyle made the first attempt to break it, followed Doyle’s tongue with his own, exploring Ray’s mouth, coming to know it as well as he did his own. It was only when he heard himself groan, and that sound disappeared into Ray, that it hit him

what he was doing. Practicalities gave him something to do instead of look at Doyle, so he busied himself with getting rid of the condom and cleaning himself off, his mind boggling as he mopped another man’s semen from his belly.

How long would it be, a treacherous part of his mind wondered, before he would be wiping cum from his arse? A glance over his shoulder to find Doyle lying there wide open, staring at him. Bodie stared back, at the man he had fucked, and the man he had kissed.

“Lightning hasn’t exactly struck you dead, has it?” Doyle asked him gently, careful not to touch, careful to let Bodie be in charge of that for the moment. “It can’t have been all that terrible a thing.”

And didn’t Doyle realise that that was what made it all so much worse? It hadn’t been terrible—it hadn’t been so different from kissing a woman. Apart from that tenderness, apart from the way he had needed to kiss Ray. Not something he wanted to deal with. Not something he could ignore.

“Christ, Ray,” he mumbled, looking away, folding in on himself, “what am I going to do?”

Doyle rose up onto his knees, putting his arms around Bodie, offering what little comfort he could, wishing desperately that he knew what to say, that he knew what would help. Everything he could think of sounded like platitudes, and those were worse than nothing. He eased Bodie around, reassured when Bodie co-operated, didn’t fight him at all. “Come on,” Doyle said, pulling the duvet up over them, able at least to keep them warm, “we’ll sort it out. We’ll make it work.”

“Will we?” Bodie demanded, having to look at himself in a new light, absurdly, ashamedly wondering if he would recognise himself in the mirror, if the difference would show. Would it be worth it? Could anything be?

“My god, Ray,” Bodie muttered, turning away, curling up into a ball, “what have you done to me? What have you made me?”

And all Doyle’s answers to that were things Bodie would never want to hear, so he kept his silence, and kept his distance, and prayed that they would, somehow, make it work.