

SEBASTIAN

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WONDERFUL TONIGHT

I've heard some say that Sebastian is a Goddess.

She is.

Period. Full stop. Point.

This story reaffirms her place in the pantheon. In fact, it reaffirms the viability of slash as a (sub?)genre of fiction. It elevates erotic/psychological writing to the highest level. How I wish I could take Wonderful Tonight and fling it at the world saying, "Read this people! See what you're missing. Some of the best writing today is hidden underground, accessible to only a well-informed few." But I can't. We remain carefully guarding our secret fiction from those who wouldn't understand.

But you do. You possess this story. Read it and rejoice in Sebastian's strong, clear words and in her power to transport you into the heart of two men. Their lives are not always wonderful; in fact, they're often dreadful, but things were wonderful tonight for a while, and—eventually—they may be again.

*For Helen Raven
—because of Heat-Trace*

PART I
(SEXUAL) INVOLVEMENT

THE MEAL HAD BEEN A GOOD ONE, ITALIAN, THEY MUST SURELY REEK OF GARLIC,

but it didn't matter. If you'd had it yourself you never noticed it on someone else.

They split the bill 50/50, after a bit of an argument because Bodie claimed Doyle's starter (langoustines) had cost unacceptably more than his own (tagliatelli), but Doyle had defended with the contrary evidence of Bodie's liqueur coffee and extra helping of garlic bread. So all was settled amicably.

"You comin' back with me?" Bodie asked quite casually as they reached the door. Doyle had wondered whether the offer might be forthcoming, and whether he would accept it if so: now he found himself agreeing. For better or worse.

Back at Bodie's flat—Regency, all high ceilings and ornamental plasterwork—Bodie made him a coffee and watched him while he drank it. He was looking, Doyle decided, particularly attractive tonight, his classic dark good looks accentuated by the smart suit he wore, the crisp blue shirt—"You goin' on somewhere tonight, Ray?" Bodie asked him, and Doyle made wide eyes at him over the rim of his mug.

"Wasn't planning on it. But I can if you want me to."

Bodie shook his head dismissively. "Nope. Just thought you might be planning to pay a call on Linda."

"Susanna," Doyle corrected.

"Susanna now is it. Whoever."

Doyle shook his head, made expressive eyes. "Too tired."

Bodie shot him a glance. "Really?"

"Not that tired," Doyle amended with a smile, inwardly disturbed. Bodie was so unpredictable; you could never guess what he intended from one day to the next, and the rules seemed to change with the turn of the wind.

"Nice meal," he said at last, sitting down and swinging one leg up and down gently.

And Bodie the amiable buffoon of the evening had shed that mask the instant they walked through the door here.

If it bothers you so much, Doyle decided, still

rocking in his seat, why do it at all...

"Yeah, it was okay. Filled the right holes, anyway."

But that was one mystery he had never come close to solving.

"Drink?" Bodie jerked a moody eye towards the bottles on his bar.

They had had a fair bit already, in the restaurant. "Depends," Doyle said, and risked a little upwards curl of his lip, chipped tooth flashing, and then it was gone again as he leaned back in his seat. From across the room Bodie eyed him, the intensity of his scrutiny affecting Doyle, making him act for it, stretching a little, playing with a button on his shirt, undoing some, slipping his hand inside.

"Just yes or no'll do, Doyle," Bodie growled, and Doyle's mood shut like a door. —Okay, that was it.

"Just no, then. About time I was going, I reckon." He began to rise to his feet, chilly with rejection, but Bodie was there beside him looking down with such brooding trouble in his eyes that Doyle sank down again with a sigh.

"Look, Bodie, do you want me to go or stay? I'll do either, only spell it out for me, will you. Reading your mind's never been my strong suit."

Reading his body was easier. He slipped his hands around Bodie's waist and Bodie stayed still for him. So he unbuckled Bodie's heavy leather belt, taking his time over it, letting it swing loose; button, zip followed. It made a little rasping sound as he drew it down. No action from Bodie: he stood there with his head averted, his eyes on some distant thing, but it was clear by now he was going to let Doyle do it.

Doyle released Bodie's cock from its musky nest, let it spring free and jut proudly forth, stiffening further at his touch until it perched bolt upright against his belly, strung on its own taut suspension. He ringed it with one hand, rubbed rapidly up and down. With the other hand he undid his own jeans, thrust a flat palm inside, propping himself in a half-sitting pose along the couch.

"Was beginning to think you weren't interested,"

he said caustically as his hand laced a delicate path around Bodie's swollen cock, pinched the foreskin up between finger and thumb, mirroring the actions of his other hand on himself.

Bodie gave a short, harsh laugh. His eye wandered to the opening of Doyle's jeans; with a grin of understanding, Doyle said to him, "Want to see, do you?" pushing himself up, dragging his jeans down his thighs. Bodie shuddered: his cock wept a tiny, glassy teardrop.

"Closer," Doyle told him, and leaned out to kiss the drop away, dipping the point of his tongue into the slit with a little murmur of pleasure. He slid his hand around behind Bodie now, pulling him closer, opening his mouth.

As Doyle lapped at his cock, eyes closing, mouth- ing the tip, the desperation in Bodie grew; his eyes darkened as they passed from one thing to another, from the lush pink mouth closing over the dusky helmet of his cock, to Doyle's hand moving lazily inside his own jeans; his eyes lingered there, the sight of Doyle jerking himself off always an intense and violent thrill for him. Holding on the wooden back of the settee he leaned over the other man now, pushed himself deeper, began to fuck his mouth with a fast, hard rhythm. Within moments the deep, dark sweetness focused and flowed out of him down the warm grip of Doyle's throat; he felt Doyle swallowing, and swallowing again, each convulsive movement pulling out of him the last, the very last drop of pleasure.

He stayed there for a moment, heart thundering in his chest, the pulse of blood heavy in his veins, Doyle's mouth resting gently against him, then turning his head to watch the other man's hand on his own cock. As his eyes rested there Doyle's flying fingers stilled with a jerk, and Doyle sighed, intense, as the white stuff hurled itself out and upwards, landing on his tipped-back throat, his rumpled shirt, his own dark pubic hair. One droplet landed on Bodie's hand; he stared at it for a moment before bringing it up to his mouth, tasting it and swallowing it with a casual voluptuousness noticed and stored away by Ray Doyle even as he gasped for breath, forcing himself to breathe slower, his heart slowing with it as the pleasure echoed fainter, and more faintly still.

His eyes dwelt on Bodie, narrowing as Bodie turned his back to rearrange his own clothing, following him as he began to walk away. He flung one hand up over his eyes.

"Tissues," he commanded tiredly, and some landed by his head. He swabbed himself off in silence and then chucked them in the bin. He could hear Bodie singing away in the bathroom, which didn't surprise him; the aftermath of sex always seemed to lighten Bodie's mood even as it darkened Doyle's.

He was sitting up, hands behind his head, when Bodie came back into the room wearing his dark red dressing gown. Doyle tipped his head back, met Bodie's eyes.

"Think I'll go on home," he said; after all, there was no point staying now.

"Yeah?" was all Bodie said.

Doyle shrugged. "Might as well. Got a few chores to do."

On his way out past Bodie he stopped, took hold of his wrist, looked deep into his eyes. Bodie offered a cool resistance, both to the look and the hold.

"Got anything to say?" Doyle asked him, curious, and then dropped Bodie's wrist, shaking his head. "Forget it, forget it. See you tomorrow."

He flew down the steps three at a time, opened up the Capri and swung himself inside. As he did so he glanced upwards at Bodie's window: nothing, no light showed.

His teeth showed in a grim smile. Well, he hardly expected Bodie to be there, calling over the balcony perhaps, imploring his return: —'It is the nightingale, and not the lark!'— He turned the key and the engine sprang into life. And as he pulled away from the kerb into the dark London street he did not look back again.

It seemed to him that Bodie's tension coiled up day by day, hour by hour, a little at a time: sex with Doyle defused him at a stroke. Tomorrow his mood would be cheerful, gleeful even. But dark introspection had already begun in Doyle; why did they do it? He asked himself that every time: release of tension, after all, could be as speedily achieved alone with one's right hand and a bottle of body lotion.

Bodie had even asked him once: Doyle's moody silence had prompted a little, bitter smile from him and the comment, perhaps a question: "I don't know why you go along with this, Doyle. Don't enjoy it much, do you?"

He had not answered, because Bodie did not need an answer, knowing as well as Doyle just why they did it: because having started it, they could not stop.

Doyle turned the car onto the long wide sweep of the North Circular Road; joined all the other cars in convoy, all the lights of London spread out

low beneath the sky.

—*HOW* had it started?

Bodie was thinking this, looking out along the empty darkened street: remembering the first time.

Routine stuff really: he had infiltrated a ring where the punters were introduced to some temptation, drugs, underage prostitutes of either sex, then offered a gambling circle to get them out of it, nothing so very much out of the ordinary and scarcely of interest to CI5, except that the poor punters tended to have Home Office links. Cowley, on the scent of some triplethink espionage connection, had set himself and Doyle onto it: Bodie as one of the unfortunate punters, presumably because he looked more likely to have ministerial connections than his scruffy partner, who was assigned to the other side, a recruit to the ring itself, a pimp with a whole string of tasty little chickens in his stable.

Only someone had rumbled Doyle, or thought they did, though he had played the part with ease, hardeyed and ruthlessly indifferent to perverse sexuality; sentenced to death in someone's flat by a firing squad of two he had kept up his facade to the end, fighting and protesting to the very moment he was left, blindfolded and tied, against the wall.

Then he had gone quite silent.

Bodie, sweating ice, did not have to imagine what that silence cost him; he was fighting the same battle. Clearly Doyle was thinking along the lines he was: that the whole execution setup was a bluff, to get Doyle talking. But if it was not—?

He would blow the gaffe on Cowley's op. just like that, no question of it, if it would save Doyle's life. But it seemed to Bodie that there would be no spirit of generous forgiveness in the room. And then they might both end up dead.

So...they had sweated on it. Ice and blood.

Eyes on that jeaned figure against the wall, defiant and cold to the last, perhaps ten seconds away from death with the barrels of two Lugers trained on him, Bodie would not have blamed Doyle for breaking down, falling to his knees, crying out for mercy; he had seen the strongest of men turn into children when they realised death was there for them. But Doyle had shown the deepest, steadiest courage: he had simply waited, without a word, or a breath.

And nothing had happened.

Having failed to break him or out him they had hit him about a bit and thrown him aside. It was all

over by nightfall.

Bodie had driven then after midnight to Doyle's flat, found him there awake in the dark. Still in darkness, in silence, they had come together, found something which had taken them both by storm.

Something they had not been able to leave behind.

Bodie turned away from the window, and the night, and went to bed.

SUSANNA was a nice girl, not long out of some boarding Seminary for Young Ladies, and keen to make up for lost time: Doyle was only too willing to help her. Clearly, by the way she clung on to Doyle's arm and hung on to his every word she had never met anyone quite as rough, quite as hard, quite as carelessly sexy as Ray Doyle before, and Bodie could imagine from the way Doyle looked at her from time to time just how all that toughness would turn to sweetness when they were alone, how he would undress her with the gentlest of touches, how careful he would be not to hurt her, how he would take care to please her. Susanna had glossy dark hair and sweet brown eyes which followed Doyle everywhere he went, a neat little figure and expensive dress sense.

So different from his own girl-child, here reluctantly at his side tonight; she had wanted Bodie to take her bowling tonight and instead been dragged here for a drink with Ray. Mary was her (unsuitable) name, a lankhaired blonde with a pale sullen mouth and sexy brown eyes. Beside Susanna's elegance her cheap leather skirt and net stockings looked cheap, tarty.

Not that Bodie had one moment's doubt as to who had the better deal here. Girls like Mary were the type to get you going, every time: you had to work on yourself to appreciate the likes of Susanna. Pity really, but that was the way it was. Despite the fact that he couldn't keep his eyes off Mary's creamy black-netted thigh, Doyle obviously felt he had to rise above such base impulses and persevere with some less exciting, classier material. Personally Bodie felt he was making a big mistake, but there you were.

The pub was a Kosy-Korner type of place, all inglenooks, dark wood and mock log fires. Mary was bored, lighting her eighth Silk Cut of the evening from a green plastic lighter, having downed her first gin and tonic very quickly. Bodie and Doyle were nursing pints, while Susanna was halfway down a fruit-juice and saying very nicely to Doyle:

"I don't think it would be convenient this month.

Perhaps in April?"

Doyle was looking disappointed. Fancied a free weekend in the country at Mummy's expense, no doubt.

"You ashamed of me?" he drawled.

Her instant denial flowed like balm. "You know I'm not."

Of course he knows you're not, sweetheart.

"Don't ever think that, Ray."

He doesn't, sweetie. He knows quite well you think he's the bees knees, wings, arse n'all—not to mention the honeypot.

"I don't know why you want to meet Mummy anyway. She's incredibly boring," Susanna said, the clipped brusquery betraying of her breed.

"He wants to put the make on her, darling," Bodie drawled. "She's nearer his age than you are."

"The thing is, there's a bit of a family crisis at present."

"Do tell." Bodie veered near her conspiratorially. Baiting Ray's girlfriends was essential to him. This one didn't like him.

"It's Sebastian—"

"Sebastian!" Doyle sucked in a breath, rolled his eyes.

"My brother. He's got tangled up with this artist chap from Cambridge, and, being my brother, he can't keep it to himself and wait for things to die down, he has to come home and announce to my parents that he's gay, the whole Oscar Wilde. And Mummy is *wildly* upset."

"Well, she would be," Bodie approved. "There goes the family name."

"—Threatening to throw him out of the family altogether unless he goes into therapy—"

"Quite right too. Filthy little bugger," Bodie enthused, rubbing his hands together. Doyle's eye sought out Bodie's, but found it evasive.

"Well, Mummy certainly thinks so. And so do I, actually," Susanna said briskly. "Even if he *does* get—feelings like that, he should jolly well—he should pull himself together and do the right thing."

Mary withdrew her distant gaze from some bowling-alley vision, exhaled a thin stream of smoke and said in her husky little voice, "What's wrong with it? Poor bloody guy. Leave him alone."

"Well, tolerance is all very well in principle," Susanna said crisply, averting her head from the trail of smoke particles, "but I can assure you, one feels rather differently when it's a member of one's own family."

"Yeah," Bodie said with an aristocratic snort. "Not in *my* backyard, thank you."

"Bodie." Doyle gave him a quelling look.

"Used to kick queers round the camp barearsed," Bodie said, quite unrepentant. "Who wants those filthy buggers eyeing up your kit when you're not looking? Should bring the death penalty back for it. Trouble is, they'd probably enjoy it."

"*Bodie.*"

"I suppose, during your sheltered life on the beat, you never encountered any cases of autoerotic asphyxiation?" Bodie winked at him kindly.

"It's not funny, Bodie," Doyle said, deadly quiet.

"Who's joking?" Bodie met his eyes dead on.

"Mummy's right in this case. Little Sebastian should keep his unpleasant tendencies to himself."

Doyle looked at Bodie carefully, noting that his partner did not seem to be joking, had trotted it all out without a trace of humour. Something very odd here. At least it was distracting him from Mary—so irritating, that his cock moved like a magnet at the sight of her, cliched though her style was. He'd just bet she was wearing suspenders, the full tackle, beneath the short, tight skirt—and yet not only was she Bodie's bird, but he actually preferred the cool elegance of Susanna, by a mile.

Trouble was, old JT down there didn't seem to agree with him, wishing it were in Bodie's place with all its might.

Feeling disloyal, he put his arm around Susanna's shoulders, squeezed her tightly. His eye engaged Bodie's boldly, chased it when it evaded his, held it firmly. "You hate queers, do you Bodie? Funny. I never knew."

"Every proper bloke hates queers," Bodie growled.

"That's not the fashionable way of looking at it these days, though, is it?" Susanna agreed with Bodie, for about the first time ever. "It's all *tolerance* and *we understand* and *you get on with it, chaps*, these days."

"Yeah, and why not?" Mary chipped in, flicking the ash off her cigarette onto the floor. "Don't harm no-one, do they?"

Doyle would have let it drop, but he was intrigued by Bodie's attitude. He leaned forward a little. "Yeah, come on, Bodie. What's wrong with it?"

"You've never heard?" Bodie said smoothly.

"Oh Ray," Susanna said, unwillingly on Bodie's side, "It doesn't bear thinking about—what they do."

"Sodomy?" Mary said, and gave an excited little wriggle.

"What the hell's it matter what they do? It's no-

one's business what they do in bed but their own. I'd say the same about any of us, wouldn't you?" Doyle said very deliberately.

"Ah, come on, Ray." Bodie said soberly. "You gotta set some standards."

Doyle gazed at him in disbelief. Bodie must be very trusting, very trusting indeed, that Doyle was not about to blow the lid off all this hypocrisy with a few well-chosen words. All he had to say was—

"What I've never understood," Susanna said, "is why any man should want to muck about with another man."

"Well, quite a lot of 'em do, sweetheart," Doyle drawled. "Must be something to it, mustn't there?"

"Can't see what you're getting at." Mary addressed herself to Susanna. "*You* like to muck about with a man, don't you? Why shouldn't another bloke get as turned on mucking about with Ray as you do?"

That was when Bodie chipped in happily with: "Maybe that's what he's trying to tell us."

Susanna gazed at Bodie with ill-hidden contempt, but Doyle did not see that; looking out over her head towards Bodie with cool deliberateness he said: "Got time to listen?"

"Drink, anyone?" Bodie was on his feet, blue-eyed and gallant and collecting glasses.

"Mine's a double," Doyle said, and his mood remained dark, introspective all evening despite everyone's attempts to cheer him up.

THE phone rang at about one: cursing, Doyle rolled over in bed and grabbed it, three-quarters asleep.

"Doyle," he growled in the most surly manner possible.

"Don't sound so pleased, will you? I could have been Betty, finally got up the nerve to ask you out for a date."

"Well, you're not, are you?" he said sourly, and dropped his head back on the pillow, nesting himself further down in the warmth with the phone still clamped to his ear. Bodie's voice came tinnily and cheerfully down the line:

"Just as well, mate, or she'd have hung up by now. But I'm not so easily put off."

"Don't tell me—you're ringing to ask me for a date?"

"In a manner of speaking—"

"Dunno how you've got the nerve, after your little performance tonight."

Bodie slid out of this gracefully. "Nothin' wrong

with my performance, mate. Mary's not complaining. How about Sus—hanna?"

He would never, he knew, get Bodie to talk about it. There was a dark tangle of thorns inside Bodie, no admittance without the magic sword. He cut through Bodie's loud and fairly tuneful rendition of 'oh—Susanna—*won't* you marry me—dadadadedadedadeda, me banjo on my knee—' with a forceful, "No complaint either. At least, I never heard one."

Bodie's voice dropped to a low whisper. "Was she wearing a bra, under the cashmere?"

Doyle smiled to himself, cradling the phone against his ear. He knew this game of old. "I'm not playin', Bodie."

"Ah, c'mon." Bodie sounded disappointed, then his voice swooped down salaciously. "I'll tell you if you tell me."

"Too tired. Out of juice. Whatever."

"Out of juice!" Bodie's voice came across astonished. "Not you, Ray. Never. How many times was it, tonight then?"

He had to grin. "Three. How about you?"

"Only once," Bodie countered immediately, "but once with Mary wrings as much out of you as three times with any other bird."

That he could believe. "What was she wearin'?" he heard himself asking, but Bodie's introductory chuckle dragged him instantly to his senses. "No, *don't* tell me, Bodie, I'm too tired for this. It's nearly mornin' for godsake."

"Pity," Bodie said, crestfallen. "You mean I stripped off for nothing?"

Doyle spluttered down the phone, grinning broadly to himself. "Surprised you expected anything different, after your attitude tonight."

"Nothing wrong with my attitude, old son."

Straight over Bodie's head again. *I just do not understand you*, Doyle thought, *you are just such a mystery to me.*

"If that's all—"

"No, it isn't. What are you doing next weekend? Bank holiday and all that."

"Why?" Doyle asked cautiously.

"Mary's cousin works as a steward in one of those lodge complexes up beyond the border. Cowley country, y'know? Time to time he gets an empty one to pass on to friends, family, what have you. She thought we might go up there next weekend, and it sleeps four."

"Me and Susanna?"

"Yeah."

“Mary wants us to go in a four?” Doyle tested, in case it was one of Bodie’s crazy ideas.

“She suggested it, yeah. She likes another bird around for a bit of bird-talk—can’t screw all the time and she doesn’t like darts.”

“She does. But—okay then. Don’t see why not. I’ll ask Susanna but I reckon she’ll go along with it okay.”

“Eating out of your hand.”

“And other places,” Doyle said; he put the phone down.

Bodie’s warm chuckle was still reverberating in his ears as he turned over to go back to sleep, shrugging the covers up over his shoulders, feeling warm and relaxed. Talking to Bodie on the phone in the middle of the night had an intimacy about it he found comforting.

Also, exciting.

THE miles sped past the window.

“Gonna be bloody cold up there,” Bodie said cheerfully, one hand on the wheel, one resting on the gearknob. “Pack your sporran, did you, Ray?”

“We must be mad,” Doyle said glumly. “Beyond the Tartan Curtain—in *February*?”

“I’m sure we’ll have a lovely time,” Susanna said bracingly.

“It’s free, innit?” Mary added.

“So’s a dip in the Thames,” said Bodie, meaningfully.

“Ooh, look!” Susanna squeaked, thrusting her face up against the car window. “Lambs—look, Ray—”

Secretly, Doyle was beginning to find the extreme exuberance of youth an irritation. Get this weekend over—give her a really good time—and then—

“Yum yum,” Bodie slavered. “Mint sauce, any-one?”

“Should get there by tea-time,” Mary yawned, and curled up on the rear seat for a nap.

Bodie slammed the car down a gear then gunned it up again with a tremendous roar. “Lunchtime,” he promised evilly.

The miles went on speeding by.

They arrived at the holiday estate about three and were directed to their accommodation by the receptionist. It was possible to drive to the door, through straight roads. The whole place reminded Doyle of a lego town—neat, artificial. Each lodge was designed in the shape of a wooden triangle rather like a Swiss

chalet—but less pretty. The lounge area was large, being at the foot of the triangle; the two bedrooms, at the apex, were tiny. Both were galleried—clearly the target inhabitants was your average nuclear family, two adults and two small children.

“—Togetherness!” Doyle nodded upwards.

“Don’t you worry, Ray. We’ll keep our ears plugged.” Bodie pulled Mary to sit on his knee. “Won’t we?” Fortunately Susanna was across the room in the kitchen area, making a cup of tea.

“Gerroff, Bodie, I wanna fag,” Mary was brushing off his wandering hands briskly and tumbling to sit beside him. She was wearing today another short, tight skirt, black leather boots with long pinpoint heels, and a little T-shirt. Over this she was wearing one of Bodie’s thick chunky sweaters, onto which her thin blonde hair tumbled untidily. Devastating.

Susanna, sensibly attired in jeans and a pink sweater, arrived with a tray of tea. Mary’s cigarette smoke began to curl thinly and bluely through the air; the girls began to fuss about with the tea. Bodie’s eye travelled around the room and came to rest on Doyle.

“Glad we came?” he said, beneath the chatter and the clattering of cups, and Doyle made an expressive face at him.

“I’ll let you know.”

At night, they left the little house and went to the Leisure Centre in the main complex; considering it was off-season it seemed quite busy and cheerful, though the main area had all the atmosphere of a school dining room, long wooden trestle tables, hatches, that school-dinner smell. Fortunately there was a bar, which gladdened the hearts of at least three of the party. Most of the room away from the bar was taken up with a bingo game, very popular; Mary, an aficionada, was determined to join in. Surprisingly, Susanna took to it instantly. Doyle played out a few cards himself, but got bored with it quickly; as for Bodie, he looked half asleep after the long drive.

“Shall we go?” Doyle tried at about 9PM. There was a boxing match tonight on ITV and he rather fancied settling down in front of it with a can or two of lager, a packet of crisps—

“Oh, not yet, Ray,” Susanna said in surprise, setting up her cards for the next round. “I’m really getting into this,” and Mary did not even look up from hers.

Bodie drained his pint of beer and set down the empty glass. “Leave ‘em to it, Ray? Holmes v. Ali in

twenty minutes.”

Amazed as ever by the way Bodie’s mind and his, essentially wide apart, moved along the same lines, Doyle nodded, pushing back his chair and getting up.

Bodie made the girls a sardonic bow. “Take as long as you like, ladies.”

Mary shushed him vigorously as the teller’s sonorous voice intoned the starting ritual “Eyes down everybody—” and Mary said, “Just bugger off if you’re going, will you?”

Out in the chill night air Doyle shivered. “S going to be bloody cold in there.”

They were walking down a narrow track between the lodges. It was very dark, the sky pitchblack and aggressively parading stars.

“Chilly, sunshine?” Bodie’s voice in his ear made him jump. He turned to look at him, and Bodie slipped an arm around his shoulders as they walked on, without breaking stride. “Never wear enough clothes, that’s your trouble.”

Doyle shivered again. A vision came to him of those two small bedrooms, side by side, open to the gallery. Bodie and Mary—

Bodie squeezed his shoulder tight, tighter, bruising him; then let him go as they got to the door, searching in his pocket for the key.

“Think the girls’ll be all right walking back?” Doyle asked, looking back from the doorstep at the long dark trail.

“If they remember the chalet number,” Bodie said, and opened the door.

The rooms were very cold and Bodie went to switch the heating on at the kitchen unit. Without putting the lights on Doyle ran up the open-plan staircase in the centre of the room, tossing back to Bodie: “Going to have a shower before the fight starts, okay?”

The water was unexpectedly hot. It sang in his ears; he squeezed his eyes shut as the scalding needles prickled his skin and gave himself up to vigorous washing. When he opened his eyes again, it was to see Bodie standing there, leaning against the door, deep, dark eyes trained on him. A big man, brooding, and powerful.

“Didn’t hear you come in.” His heart, indeed, was thudding with shock.

Bodie stirred a little; his eyes did not leave Doyle. “Funny time to take a shower.”

“Save time later.”

Bodie smiled at him then, the look which dwelt on

him warm and the words which followed low and sensual, “You think you’re going to get lucky, yeh?”

“Reckon I might,” Doyle said, with a little smile, and he stood his ground as Bodie approached him. Water fell on Bodie’s navy army sweater and lay there glistening. Doyle looked at Bodie’s square, strong hands that reached out for him, took hold of him, settling comfortably around his waist, slipping around his back.

“Very lucky,” Bodie whispered to him warmly, passionately, and began to kiss his shoulder, his neck.

“Bodie, no,” he said. “Don’t,” but made no move to stop him, his head tipping back and a deep sigh escaping him as Bodie swiftly knelt, pressing his face against Doyle’s loins, turning his cheek against him and closing his eyes. *We shouldn’t be doing this*, he thought, watching the top of Bodie’s dark head, *too dangerous*; but at that moment he felt Bodie’s lips brush against him sweetly, and the last resistance in him dissolved away as he looked down at his own body, and Bodie’s mouth, and bliss gathered inside him like a storm.

Afterwards Bodie seemed oddly buoyant, while Doyle himself felt a vague dissettling anger which he did not bother to hide. Bodie clattered about cheerfully and energetically, clearly feeling he had scored some point too subtle for Doyle to see; his eyes were bright, his air provoking.

“Why are you looking so damn pleased with yourself?” he asked sourly and rhetorically. He sprawled out on the sofa and watched the television, whence hoots and cheers and catcalls emerged as the two fighters danced around each other on screen as the bell rang and the bout commenced.

“Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, Doyle.” Bodie mimed a few sharp punches where he sat.

“Yeah, that’s your motto all right.” He still felt quite dangerously moody; when the girls returned he was hardpressed to summon a smile for Susanna, let alone anything else when eventually, after too many cans of beer, they got to bed.

“What’s the matter, Ray?” she whispered to him, into the dark.

He lay on his back, openeyed. “Nothing. Tired, ’s all.”

“Okay,” she whispered, sounding very quiet, very young, and turned onto her own side of the bed.

Sorry, darlin’.

Definitely she was too good for him. Guilt was about the last thing he needed. He could hear Bodie and Mary giggling as they half fell up the stairs,

exchanging some sort of hilarious banter over the barmaid who had caught Bodie's eye earlier—

"Look, don't let me stand in your way, Romeo. I swear she was giving you the eye."

"Are you kidding? See her moustache, did you? I'd rather go to bed with you—" A noisy kiss.

"Sure?"

"Come to that, I'd rather go to bed with Ray!"

This was said right outside the alcove where Doyle and Susanna's bed was situated. It seemed to strike both Bodie and Mary as exceptionally hilarious.

"At least I wouldn't have to say *'I love you'*," Bodie mimicked himself in a cruelly light falsetto.

Well, no, there was that.

"Thanks, Bodie," he heard himself, unwisely sharp and clear. "Course you wouldn't. Wouldn't want me to get the wrong idea, would you?"

More scuffling and hilarity. Well, he was glad to have amused them. Nice to know his existence wasn't a total waste of time.

All of a sudden he became aware that someone was standing in the archway, a dark silhouette. An unsettling image for a man who lived by shooting at shadows; although he knew it must be Bodie still he found it disturbing.

"Okay, mate?" the shadow murmured.

"Oh, yeah."

Bodie's shadow stayed there a moment longer, head turned towards him eyelessly, then it slipped away. Doyle lay tensely, wakefully at the edge of the bed, and listened to Mary's giggles, the slaps and scuffles and whispers. Which, some time later, became either in his imagination on the edge of sleep or in reality whimpers, then moans; the rhythmic creak of the bed. Doyle touched himself restlessly, head turning to one side on the pillow. Susanna was asleep beside him, breathing deeply, evenly.

Feeling unreasonably alone, Doyle shut his eyes and blocked out the world.

NEXT day was bright, if chilly; they drove to a beauty spot on the nearby hills, and went for a long walk. Doyle held Susanna's hand in his and breathed in the fresh Highland air and felt content, fit, good to be alive. Susanna was in a sweet, serious mood; she looked good and she smelt good and he had spent the night with her and made love to her this morning, and yet still Doyle could not rid himself of the sense of utter detachment from her: the sense that if he

never saw her again from this moment on it would not trouble him at all.

What's wrong with me.

Maybe nothing. Maybe just a sign that it was time to move on. Bodie had his arm around Mary and his head very close to hers, whispering—secrets?—perhaps, and Mary was giggling, chewing gum, running with him over the springy grass when he urged her on and shrieking when he ran too fast. Doyle felt odd watching them, an outsider.

Why the hell did I come, that's what I want to know.

Back at the leisure complex they studied the notice in the reception area to see what activities were on offer. "Oh, look, Mary—" Susanna had discovered a projected visit to the local film set for some Highland soap opera. Doyle rolled his eyes at Bodie.

"Not my idea of a perfect afternoon."

"You surprise me." Bodie was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, looking dark and moody and bored. Susanna and Mary were hard at it discussing the acquisition of tickets.

"Looks like we're going, though," Doyle added, resigned to it.

"No way, mate. They want to do that, they're on their own."

"What about us then?" Doyle asked, grinning at Bodie's scowl.

Bodie's eyes met his, a darkly vivid flash of blue. "We'll think of something."

WHAT are you and Bodie going to do?"

"Maybe go fishing—" he kissed her offered lips as they stood waiting for the coach, liked it, kissed her again— "shoot on the ranges, something like that."

"Will you be all right?"

"Course we'll be all right. You'll be back by evening." Another kiss. Over her shoulder he could see Mary, locked in an embrace with Bodie; from the waist down she looked like a forties film star, seamed stockings and high heels. "Here it comes," he added, releasing her, stepping back as the coach drew up at the kerb.

"Don't sit with your backs to the engine," Bodie added, materialising with Mary.

"That's trains," Doyle enlightened him, and "Enjoy yourself, sweetheart," to Susanna, who didn't seem to want to let go of him, though Mary was already climbing up the steps. Doyle's eye dwelt on her slim thighs in the short, split skirt, and met Bodie's cynical gaze watching not Mary but

himself, watching her.

They waved the coach off and went back to the lodge to collect their shooting gear. The activity amused them for an hour or so but the afternoon seemed unnaturally cold and grey, a raw wind shrieking around them on the exposed ranges, and they were the only people there, which took half the fun away: only each other to show off to.

Eventually Doyle rubbed his numb fingers briskly on his jacket. "Go back for a cuppa?" he said through chattering teeth, "Warm ourselves up a bit," and Bodie agreed, shouldering the borrowed rifles to return them to the office while Doyle jogged back to their lodge and put the kettle on, whistling to himself as he got out a packet of mini swiss rolls bought at the on-site supermarket that morning. For no obvious reason he felt happier today, settling in, ready to take things as they came. He heard the lodge door open and close, bringing with it a draught of chill air.

"Watch this, Bodie," he called, and as his partner appeared he tossed a swiss roll upwards, tipped his head back and caught it in his teeth like a rose, posing for applause.

Bodie gave him a slow clap or two, then strolled over and stole the cake with his mouth, swallowing it down in one go and pulling Doyle close to him, twisting one arm behind him in an arrest grip. For a moment, eyes dark, unreadable, he stared down into Doyle's face. Then he kissed him on the mouth.

Bodie tasted sweet. "Mmm," Doyle said, amused, savouring the taste thoughtfully, "Not bad, these, are they?"

Bodie held him there a moment longer and kissed him again, the front of his body thrusting hard and arrogantly against Doyle's. Just as Doyle began to close his eyes, opening his mouth, giving himself up to the kiss, Bodie pulled abruptly away from him and walked into the lounge area. Abandoned, Doyle dropped his head back, exhaled hugely. He was getting tired of trying to second-guess Bodie: the other man's moods seemed to wax and wane like the phases of the moon, only not half so predictable.

He finished making the tea and took it in through the archway. Bodie took his with barely a grunt of thanks; his eyes were fixed on the TV screen, some afternoon chat show. It was already four o'clock, and getting dark quickly; too late to bother with anything much except wait for the girls to get back. Doyle briefly considered going for a swim in the large indoor pool back at the complex, but he didn't much

fancy the idea, barely warm yet from the brutality of the sojourn outdoors. He wrapped his hands around the hot mug of tea, slumped on the settee a fair distance from Bodie, but it turned out he had misread Bodie's mood one more time, because Bodie said, "Come here," in a gentle sort of way, and put his arm out. Doyle leaned against the solid warmth of him and sipped slowly at his tea, resigning himself guiltlessly to laziness.

After a moment Bodie plucked the mug out of his hands, set it on the floor, and leaned over him. Sensing what was coming, Doyle's heart began to pound, leaping as Bodie began to kiss him again, every nerve in his body tingling in its instinctive, blind response to the smallest things Bodie did to him, to the hardness of his lips pressing Doyle's against his teeth, the taste of his mouth and the scent of his skin. Bodie kissed him into another world, another mood, where desire was the only sense he had, so that he lay there exposed and wanton and hungry for the hard, sure exploration of Bodie's hands, the liquid warmth of his mouth, the warm press of his body.

Caught in some nuance of pleasure, his eyes wavered open, travelled from the dark top of Bodie's head beneath his chin to the windows beyond; dusk was gathering, he could see their reflection in the glass. The coolness of sanity intervened: he hit Bodie's side. "Curtains are open," and when this produced no response he moved sharply, dragging his nipple out of Bodie's suckling mouth with a shocking pang of pain, pleasure. "*Bodie*. Anyone could look in."

"Let them," Bodie said lazily. "Not illegal, is it?" His slowly questing mouth searched for and recaptured its prey.

"Not officially, maybe. But I'll just bet Cowley's got small print on the matter. *Bodie*—!" He removed Bodie's mouth again, with difficulty, from where it strayed.

"What's up with you?"

"Don't keep doing that."

"Ah, you love it."

"Yeah, all right, I know." He shut his eyes as pleasure unsettled him, lanced down to his cock. "You'll make me come..." he whispered.

"That's the idea, isn't it?" Bodie's low voice caressed him, arrogant and amused, and his hand went to the fly of Doyle's jeans, pushing inside the open zip. Doyle summoned every last little atom of reserve and pushed him away.

“Upstairs. Upstairs, Bodie.”

Bodie, stripped already and lying back on the bed, watched through half-closed eyes his partner undress. Head drooping, knee turned outward, Doyle fiddled with each button of his cuff in turn, then his shirt buttons, taking his time over it, finally shrugging the shirt off. His hands moved to the buckle of his belt, unfastened it, let it swing loose as he found his zipper, easing it down, pushing his jeans down his thighs and then off. Lastly his pants—dark green—which he kicked off and lobbed gently toward the bed so that they landed across Bodie’s face.

“Mm,” Bodie said, muffled. “Warm—smell of you—”

Doyle vaulted neatly onto the bed and whispered close to Bodie’s ear, “Would really, wouldn’t they?”

“Think they’d fit me?” Bodie plucked them off and tried them against himself for size. His cock was hard up over his belly, rigid and extended, weeping a diamond tear which trailed in his navel like gossamer.

“Not at the moment,” Doyle said kindly. “But you can wear ’em tomorrow, if you like.” He himself loved to wear Bodie’s shirts next to his own skin and borrowed them often. He leaned up on one elbow next to Bodie, let his eyes trail over his face; perfect, familiar, it hid its secrets well. As he leaned over to kiss him he noticed a flash of pink beneath the pillow, pulled out Susanna’s nightie and tossed it aside.

Bodie noted its path with a languid eye. “God, Ray. Is that what she wears?”

“Think it’d look better on me, do you?” Doyle said. His hand wandered down Bodie’s chest, pinching up his nipples on the way, travelling swiftly down towards the dense dark hair at his groin. As his hand approached Bodie’s cock lifted and swung up off his belly, a blind move Doyle found both exciting and also touching: watching him, following his gaze, Bodie murmured with a lick of lazy fire, “It likes you, poppet.”

“Yeah, I wonder why?” Doyle answered in the same soft tone. At moments like these he knew how easy it would be to love Bodie, really love him, to the exclusion of everyone and everything else in the world.

Bodie’s hands twined in his hair, seeking to push him down, seeking the rapture of his mouth; Doyle resisted, ducking his head away, wanting Bodie to ask, just for the sheer kick of it.

“What d’you want then, Bodie? Eh?”

“Go down on me, you little cocktease,” and Bodie’s voice was a rich sexual purr which shivered down his spine like a shower of stardust.

“And then what?” Dropping his head he kissed the tip of Bodie’s cock, savoured it, kissed it again. “What will you do for me?”

Bodie’s voice stroked him again as his hand stilled itself, and flowed instead through his hair and over his scalp:

“Then I’ll suck you to kingdom come.”

They stayed in bed for nearly two hours, drifting in and out of sleep and sex. Then they got up and showered in good time for the girls to come back, Bodie cheerful, clowning around, while Doyle was pensive, depressed almost, by one throwaway remark of Bodie’s in answer to his own malicious comment:

“They’d never guess how we spent the afternoon, would they?” and Bodie had looked at him, one eyebrow quirked, eyes cool: “What?” he had said, just as if nothing had happened.

As if he had never touched Doyle, never closed his mouth over Doyle’s and kissed him deeply as he came, sweetly, violently, never shared with him some rune of possession, madness, passion.

Now Bodie kept two feet away from him and would not talk.

The comparison drew itself for him: he had been through it many times himself with countless forgotten lays. It was exactly as if Bodie had had what he wanted from him and now he had lost all interest, dead, cold.

Could not even stand Doyle too close to him.

For now.

So Doyle withdrew as well, wrapped himself in his own dark thoughts, and they stood together in silence on the cold exposure of the drive and waited for the coach to sweep around the corner and bring their ladies back to them bright, chatty, and excited.

“Last day tomorrow,” Susanna yawned. She was full of Doyle’s best party-piece pasta. Bodie and Mary were washing up, giggles and shrieks punctuating the clatter of pots and plates. Obviously Bodie was feeling frisky. Chasing her around the table with a dishcloth, or something.

“Mm,” he roused himself to reply.

Susanna looked at his taut profile, the sultry pout of his mouth. “Ray?”

“What?”

“Is something the matter?”

He rallied himself with an effort. “No—sorry. Just—tired.” He summoned a smile for her. “How about an early night?”

Quite honestly, he fancied she looked less than thrilled. Well, there you were then. Back to the singles bar.

The last day. They spent the whole of it touring around the local beauty spots, stopping for a pub lunch. Two pints at lunchtime always turned Doyle sleepy. He had his arm around Susanna, her dark, sweetscented hair on his shoulder. Bodie was wrapped around Mary as usual, hand roaming under her little black leather jacket. Watching Bodie’s macho heterosexism, his possessive way with her body, Doyle felt a streak of something unreasonable that made him turn his head away from them, concentrate on Susanna.

“Don’t think much of this, do you?” he said, picking the lasagne over with a fork.

“It’s not as good as yours.”

He threw the fork down. “You cook at all?” he asked, making conversation.

“Not really.”

She was quiet today. Relaxed and affectionate with the beer he pressed himself closer to her, and felt immediately her resistance.

“No domestic science at Roedean, then?”

“Only the thickies do it.”

“Right,” he said, put in his place.

“Dunno what that says about you then, Doyle,” Bodie said, eavesdropping unashamedly as he nibbled Mary’s ear. He wasn’t, Doyle noted sourly, having half such a difficult time with her as he was with Susanna. Well, breeding would out. Mary was a little trotting show-pony, bedecked and beribboned. Susanna was a racehorse, nervy, moody, apt to rear.

“Right little Fanny aren’t you?” Bodie was adding. “Craddock, that is.” He withstood Doyle’s poisonous glance with some style.

“What time we leaving tomorrow?” Mary asked with a yawn.

“Not too late, I hope,” Susanna said. “Because actually, I’m quite looking forward to getting back.” And Doyle answered her with a little chill, a little edge:

“Homesick?”

She looked at him without smiling. “Not exactly.

But I haven’t seen as much of you as I’d expected this holiday.”

What? “We’ve been together all the time,” he defended himself.

“When have we?”

“Today.”

“Yes, okay, today. But there was yesterday—”

The injustice of this stung like vinegar on a graze. “You didn’t have to go, you know!”

“Well, you knew *I* wanted to go. It wouldn’t have hurt you to come with me. Not to mention the fact that you and your *mate* have left the bar every single evening before the dancing started—”

“Didn’t know you had any interest in dancin’, sweetheart. It’s the bloody bingo you go for, innit? Dunno how *Mummy* would rate that, I really don’t. Not quite up there with bridge parties, is it?” He was angrily amused by all this: why hadn’t he seen it coming?

Well, no mystery there. Truth was, he had been far more interested, excited, caught up by, his other affaire of the heart to notice much, or care, what this girl was thinking. A streak of remorse softened him after his bitter selfdefence, taking hold of her averted chin in his hand and saying with lowered voice, a little tenderness, “Look, I’m sorry you feel like that.”

“Sorry isn’t much good. It’s too late now, we’re going home tomorrow.”

“Oh dear,” Bodie leaned forward solemnly, “Reckon she’s sussed our little secret.” He looked mournfully at Doyle, whose heart leaped and began to pound violently.

“What?” he said, to buy time, mind flying on; he didn’t trust Bodie, didn’t trust him one iota, not to come right out with it and say it, for mischief alone.

“Can’t leave your beautiful body alone, can I?” He leered in at Susanna, who flinched back. Bodie eyed her delightedly. “He didn’t give you that old ‘partners’ line, did he?”

“*Is that supposed to be funny, Bodie?*” Doyle exploded: trouble from Susanna, Bodie playing with fire, everyone against him. He hunched himself up tighter and glowered defensively.

“I’ll bet he has got a beautiful body, though,” Mary said, and he loved her for that, stepping in to save him, taking the heat off.

“I’d tell you, if I could remember,” Susanna said, with more cool wit than he would have given her credit for.

Doyle stood up, pushing the table back. One knee bent outward, one hand on his hip he slouched,

moody, withdrawn. "Shall we go?"

The day improved a little as they walked along some beautiful coastline scenery, but not that much. Susanna was obviously punishing him for some slight, real or imagined, and he didn't feel inclined to press it. They made little conversation, and only on the subject of the views (breathtaking) the weather (bright but raw) and history, since apparently some famous naval battle had been fought along this strip of coastline. Bodie had brought a camera, and photographed Ray and the girls sitting astride a huge cannon mounted on the cliff-top; he kept commanding Doyle to smile, which at last he did, laughter finally dragged out of him at the sight of Bodie's bug-eyed face.

They ate chips along the front of a little off-season seaside resort, sea dark grey and rhythmically pounding the harbour wall, hands so cold they fought over who was to hold the hot paper bundles. Then the drive back to the lodge. Looking out at the dusk, the sparkle of the moon on the sea, Doyle hardly spoke a word all the way home.

Back late, they got ready for the potential battlefield of the evening out. Doyle washed his hair in the shower, paid great attention to his personal hygiene, put on his smartest trousers, a clean shirt, tie and jacket, ran his fingers through his curls, and looked in the mirror.

"Ugh, horrible." Bodie's reflection loomed up darkly behind him and admired itself over Doyle's shoulder. So there they stood, Bodie just the taller, short dark hair groomed, satanic gleam in his eye, a little, cynical smile. And Doyle, odder looking altogether beside Bodie's heroically masculine style. He scowled at himself and turned away, thereby missing the moment when his stilted self-conscious pose turned itself into a casual, abstract beauty, though Bodie did not, tracking him with his eyes.

Susanna was looking very lovely tonight, in a long flowing skirt with a pretty blouse. In a few years she would be the classic Home Counties wife, well-dressed, aristocratic bone structure, well-styled hair. Mary wore a little black dress, and managed to look like a pert French maid even without the frilly apron.

There was a band playing tonight, smooth MOR, and a crooning singer. Doyle danced with Susanna, holding her close, her head on his shoulder; the softness of her body aroused him, and the scent of her skin, the youthful sheen of it: she was so young. Too

young for him. He had blooded her, and now he was going to have to let her go, to some undeserving Yuppie type. That was the way of the world.

He relinquished Susanna to Bodie when hassled to do so, and found himself dancing with Mary instead. A different proposition entirely.

Where Susanna, shy, would hold herself a little away, Mary went straight for it, hustling her hot little body up against him, thrusting her belly in exactly the right spot. She knew, all right, knowing little minx, and laughed throatily in his ear when he pressed involuntarily closer.

He closed his eyes. "Will you marry me?"

She was ready for him, delighted to play. "Not before our first date."

"How about tomorrow?"

"You'd have to go through Bodie."

Doyle grinned, smoothed back the lank ashblonde hair at her temples. "You think I'm afraid of Bodie?"

"No, I think he's afraid of you." Her reply came quickly, leaving him not knowing if she was serious, or not.

"Maybe we could share you?" he offered, and she looked at him soberly, brown eyes, gypsy eyes. He wanted to kiss her.

And knew he could not.

The music was slowing, coming to an end, and he released her, not without regret. "I'd better let you go, sweetheart. But if ever you get tired of the Tarzan treatment, just let me know."

Bodie relieved him of Mary and delivered him Susanna in one swift and easy exchange: his sharp eyes swooped in on Doyle, malicious. Doyle knew Bodie had not missed a thing, was savouring every moment of his reaction to Mary. Not that that mattered: but it did matter about Susanna, who was looking at him quietly, uncertainly. So he took her in his arms for the next dance, and was attentive, even affectionate, for the rest of the evening.

At one time both girls went off the the Ladies' to refresh themselves. Bodie leaned across the table towards Doyle, almost avuncular in his manner: "You enjoying yourself?"

Doyle shrugged. "It's okay." And then, at Bodie's faintly disbelieving stare, "Maybe we've just been on holiday too long."

"You want to get back to work?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I think I do." Actually, he was suddenly sure about that: his job was something he was uncommonly good at, and although by definition the job of a CI5 agent had no parameter and no safe

houses, he was at home there, he knew what he was about.

And Bodie knew exactly what he meant, nodded at him over the glasses of beer between them. "Fish out of water, aren't we. Tell you what though," he added, "I wouldn't wish tonight over too soon."

"Why not?" Doyle took a drink of his lager, looked at Bodie.

Bodie gave him a slow, satisfied smile. "Mary's a little goer, isn't she? And don't tell me you don't fancy her. I saw the way you were dancing with her."

Doyle smiled, looked into his glass. "Okay, so I fancy her."

"Pretty obvious, that was. Surprised you didn't wear a hole in her dress." And he grinned at Doyle's quick, involuntary glance down at himself.

"You noticed how they always go to the loo together?" Doyle said to change the subject.

"Discussing our technique, probably. A very short discussion, in your case—" he ducked so that Doyle's halfhearted swat went past his ears—"and I tell you, mate, you wouldn't last long under Mary's regime. What she's got planned for me tonight—"

"Well?" Doyle glanced over at the door of the Ladies' Room; it was just opening. "What has she got planned for you tonight?"

Bodie smiled down at the table. "Special treat," he said laconically, and he would say no more.

Back at the lodge, Bodie and Mary turned down coffee and went up to bed, claiming extra tiredness: an early start was planned for tomorrow. Doyle could not get Bodie's comment out of his head; he was listening, he realised, all on edge for sounds from above; and that, he knew, was just what Bodie had intended, telling him half the story, leaving him guessing.

All right, so he would love to be up there watching.

And, Doyle gave a little inner smile, Bodie would like that. It gave both of them a kick, a real charge, to watch the other getting off. Bodie would agree to it like a shot. Even Mary might. But Susanna, now...

Out of the question.

Well, he had brought the girl along with him; he owed her this one last night. *Jaws* was on the television again; he'd seen it before, but Susanna seemed to get into it, shrieking rather appealingly at the scary parts, clutching on to him. It was like his teenage years, being with his girl in the back row of the pictures on a Saturday night. One foot up on the

coffee table, Doyle sipped from a can of beer and kept an arm around her; by ten when the film finished he was kissing her, losing himself in her sweet pink mouth, hot little thoughts running through his head.

"Sanna," he murmured, his lips seeming to want to cling to hers, burying his face in her hair. It smelt summery. Like a meadow.

She was pushing at his chest. "Ray."

"What?" He opened his eyes.

She was pulling away from him, evading his searching lips. "I want to watch this. The golf. It's being transmitted from Daddy's club this week."

"Okay," he murmured, and heaved a sigh. He settled back again, one hand on her breast, feeling the smooth heavy contour of it, immensely arousing, intriguing, to any male. He could imagine the soft, creamy skin beneath as he reached over to undo the buttons of her blouse, slipping his hand inside to caress the lacy frill of her bra.

"Ray." A definite cool warning there.

He desisted, shut his eyes, tried to be good. He could always think about work. For example: the Bader-Meinhof setup, the cache of weapons CI5 had discovered two weeks ago:

But then again. Time enough for all that tomorrow. His thoughts went back, inexorably, to Bodie. Bodie and his special treat. Mary had promised him a blowjob tonight, perhaps? Bodie turned onto that like nothing else, well, what man didn't.

Couldn't be that simple. He'd just bet Mary blew Bodie every time he felt like it, no inhibitions there on either side. Nothing out of the ordinary about fellatio, not among consenting adults: only the very young balked at it.

Susanna, for example, had never offered, and he hadn't pressed it.

He ran through a few more options, from a little light bondage (Mary would definitely look the business in handcuffs) all the way out to watersports and back again, and rejected them all as incompatible with a borrowed bedroom, clean white sheets, and two other people just a stairwell away.

Well, Bodie would probably tell him. Would definitely tell him, either to boast, or because he knew it would turn Doyle on to hear about it.

It was one of those nights when sex and sensuality seemed to suffuse through every physical and mental sense he had and leave him hypersensitive; at home alone he would have tossed off by now and got it over with. He didn't want to wait any longer. He undid Susanna's blouse again, gently so as not to

disturb her, and stroked the soft skin of her bare breast as he saw it in his mind's eye; round, swelling, a little pink nipple puckering pertly to his touch—

As if in a dream he leaned over her to seek her mouth, trailed his lips down her throat to the sweetly perfumed skin inside her blouse, shutting his eyes in pure pleasure.

“Ray. Don't. Please. I'm trying to watch this.”

But he was urgent this time and not to be denied, closing his mouth softly over her nipple while his hand roamed over her body, towards the top of her skirt.

It was then he became aware that she was really resisting him now, trying to push him away hard, saying more loudly, “Ray. Ray. Stop it.”

He drew back half an inch. “What's the matter?”

She was looking at him seriously, without any hint of a smile. “It's been such a lovely evening. Do we have to spoil it?”

Took his breath away. He gazed at her narroweyed, his pulse thundering in his ears, his body throbbing almost painfully as she went on, almost petulant, “Can't we even sit here and watch the television together without you getting ideas?”

They were—so far apart. He wiped the back of his hand over his mouth, said with a flash of vivid anger, “Look darlin', only today you were complaining we hadn't been together enough.”

“Yes, I want us to be *together*. But it seems to me the only times we *are* alone together your mind's only on one thing.”

He threw himself back on the settee, closed his eyes, fighting to get himself together.

“Christ, Susie.”

Women. His mind briefly juggled with notions of capricious injustice while his body thrummed sweetly, insistently with desire and would not let up on him.

To compound the lack of understanding, within moments she was squeezing his hand in an anxious kind of way; his own, sullen, did not respond.

“Ray.”

“What?” He opened his eyes, bitterly. “Well, what *do* you want us to do? Discuss Shakespeare? The meaning of life? Nice game of backgammon, perhaps?” And his teeth briefly showed in the flash of a smile with no humour at all; had she known this man in his other life she would have seen the danger and begun to run.

But she did not know the Ray Doyle of the streets; she drew his head down for a kiss. He held back for a

moment, then gave in to it, his mouth opening to hers. Instantly his body was on alert again, kicked right back into play.

That was when she pushed him away for the third time. And this time it was harder for him to rein himself in.

She looked into his eyes, a little nervous now, trying to explain. “Ray, I'm not in the mood tonight. It's not that I don't *love* you. I just want to sit here with you and have a nice cuddle, without—well. Without it leading to anything else.”

Dark thoughts, the darkest, swooped in on him. Her clothes were flimsy, her skin fragile: so very vulnerable against his own masculine strength. She had been a virgin when he had taken her first, blood on his cock. It would be so very easy for him to push past her reluctance now; there really would be very little she could do about it.

And then she saw the look on his face and guessed what it meant and fear flashed across her whole body, her eyes going wide and frightened, terrified.

He let go of her at once.

“Okay,” he said, breathing hard and fast, trying hard for control.

“Sorry. I'm really sorry. You do understand, don't you? You don't mind too much?”

Mind.

“You pick your moments, that's all.” He gave her a small cold smile: encouraged by her answering one he took the hand he still held in his own and moved it down the front of his body. Okay. So she wasn't in the mood. But upmost in his mind shrieked the primitive male instinct that she had got him into this state and it was unfair of her to cry off. Well, she didn't have to get involved: he still felt she owed him something.

She touched him reluctantly, but he didn't care about reluctance, if anything it made it sweeter. After a minute he unbuttoned his fly and pushed her hand inside, closing her fingers tight around his cock, but she had never got the hang of this, too halfhearted, and he was too strung out by now to fantasise his way through some inept groping; he needed something hard and direct.

Running on pure instinct, he cupped his hand around the back of her neck, began to push her down. Some sixth sense alerted her to what he was wanting.

“No, Ray. I can't.”

“Yes you can.” Nothing about this was pleasurable to him any longer, he only needed to get it over with as quickly as possible. His body no longer seemed to

know what was going on, he had been there, not there, there again, and now his insides were beginning the heavy throb of pain he remembered from teenage years.

"I can't. Honestly."

"Course you can. Come on, it's not that bad," he soothed her, urged her, stroking the nape of her neck. "I won't come in your mouth, I promise."

"I just don't—"

"Ah, please, sweetheart. Do it for me." Her head lowered, and he felt something wet fall upon his belly.

That was when, belatedly, he heard the previous note in her voice, categorised it, saw the panic in her eyes, already beginning to resolve itself in angry, frightened tears.

However old was she? Eighteen. A teenager.

What the hell was he doing?

Sanity drenched him in a rush and froze him up. He took his hand away from her, completely away, and spread his fingers out around his own eyes. Selfcontrol was easy to come by this time: brought to the brink once too often his desire had fled high and tight inside him, hurting him, tying his guts in a knot, but very far away.

"Ray?"

He ignored her anxious query, opening his eyes, pulling his shirt down and tucking it in, buttoning his jeans over his rigid cock, swift, precise, everyday actions.

"Ray, I'm sorry, I really am."

He jumped to his feet, not bothering to reply.

Her voice rose in a teary wail. "I wish I could make you understand. It's just—I feel sometimes—you only want me for one thing."

He bit down hard on the cruellest answer and went to the front door, dragging on his leather jacket as he moved.

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

He slammed the door, hard, on her reply, left her sitting there crying in the dark, in front of the television screen where a green-trousered golfer paddled his feet, sighted in the ball, raised his club, and struck.

Upstairs, Bodie came wide awake at the sounds, the reverberation of the door downstairs slamming. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and reaching for his clothes.

"Wha'wazzat?" Mary spoke drowsily at his side.

"Sh. 'S okay." He was already onto his sweater

by now.

"You goin' somewhere?"

"Sshh. Go back to sleep. Won't be long."

On his way to the door he passed the settee where Doyle's bird lay all in a heap and crying into a (no doubt) lace handkerchief. He spared her no more than a glance as he snatched up his jacket from the hatstand, checked his pocket automatically for car keys. For the second time that night the door slammed.

Doyle had not gone far before Bodie caught up with him on the moonlit paths around the lodge complex; unmistakable, the sight of him in the shadows, he always had the faint look of a hustler beneath a lamppost even when he wasn't skulking the streets at midnight.

"Oi. What's the matter?"

Doyle turned away from him, kept on walking. "Sod off, Bodie."

Bodie grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him round. The first impression he had had, the midnight hustler, was only reinforced: the swollen mouth, the hazed look about his eyes told their own story to Bodie, who had seen Doyle that way before. He shook him a little, not ungently.

"Doesn't she love you tonight, sunshine?"

Doyle shivered, and shivered again in the cold night air. He wore only a thin shirt under the leather blouson. Bodie slowly released the handful of Doyle's jacket that he held, put his hand in his pocket, jingled his keys:

"Frigid little cow," and the chill contempt in his voice startled Doyle, lifted him out of inner obsessions, made him look at Bodie with attention.

"Come on," Bodie said, and touched him lightly, turning back towards the Capri parked by the side of their lodge. With the ease of long partnership he did not look back to see if Doyle followed.

In the car it was no less cold than outside. Bodie put the key in the ignition and the fans leapt into action along with the engine: he didn't put the car into gear, just sat there with the engine idling for a moment.

Doyle clenched his hands together in his lap. The tension knotting deep inside himself was a real, physical thing. When Bodie leaned over towards him with the best will in the world he could not prevent himself from flinching away, all his nerves on edge. "Sorry," he said, looking away from Bodie, out of the side window, seeing nothing.

“Not good enough for you tonight, am I?” Bodie asked him, head cocked, a humorous quirk to his lips, and Doyle felt a little warmer, a little less estranged from reality. That was the thing about the two of them together: there was, beneath everything that was between them, an intuition verging on the psychic. Bodie would not play the wrong card.

He even managed an answering smile. “Too far gone. You know how it is. She got me so worked up I didn’t know if I was coming or going—”

“Hmm.”

—“Now I feel I’d just lay one on anyone who tried to touch me.”

“Lover’s nuts,” Bodie assured him sagely, and he put the car into first and drove off, gunning through the gears in true racing style. “We’ve all been through it, Raymond, believe me.”

“Yeah?” Doyle asked, grinning a little despite himself. “Gotta magic cure?”

Bodie’s reply was swift and succinct. “No, I mean it,” he added with a sidelong glance when Doyle only snorted. “Just get yourself off, sooner the better. Want me to stop the car?”

“Something makes you think I can’t do it going along?” Doyle challenged.

“Come to think of it, I know you can,” Bodie said softly, reminiscent; and Doyle’s mind flashed back to a wild incident of some months past. But even the twinge of pleasure at the memory hurt him deep inside, and he folded himself over, one arm across his tender belly, cradling it.

“Look, I just couldn’t right now, okay? Hurts too much.” He felt as if sex would be the last thing he would ever want in his life again. Hanging onto the door strap as they rocketed around a corner, the disaster of the evening replayed itself in his mind again— “Must’ve lost my touch with women,” he said bitterly, looking out into the dark: he expected Bodie to join in on this theme, mock him and his sexual technique with the fairer sex, but Bodie did not, frowning out into the dark, following the maze-like trail out towards the open road, prompting the question from Doyle, “Where we going?”

“Just sit tight, sunshine.”

Not that it mattered. The last thing he wanted was to go back to where Susanna was; give him time to cool off a bit. Bodie’s company was helping him already, he felt Bodie’s sympathy around him, but Bodie not making a big deal out of it, no fuss, the ‘it happens’ attitude calming him down where pity would have tipped him over the edge.

He had calmed down enough to talk about it now. So he began to recount to Bodie the battlelines of his own private war of the sexes, beginning with ‘you don’t spend enough time with me,’ all the way up to ‘It’s been a lovely evening—*don’t let’s spoil it—*’

At this Bodie, who had listened silently until now, shifted in his seat and said: “Bitch. Bloody little bitch.”

“Yeah,” Doyle said wryly, “Makes you wonder if birds come from the same planet, doesn’t it?”

Kings would give up their thrones for it, women got headaches.

“It’s not as if I was laying anything heavy on her—” his resentment surfaced again.

Bodie’s voice had a naughty lilt to it. “Nothing *extreme*, Raymond?”

And Doyle shook his head, still remembering. “‘Spoil it’. I ask you. She obviously didn’t enjoy it much all the times before, did she?”

The note of strain was back in his voice again. Bodie glanced quickly his way: sexual ego was a fragile thing, even Ray’s presumably. “She didn’t deserve you, sunshine,” was all he said. “Next bloke up she’ll realise how lucky she was to have you.” He flicked the indicator on, left.

“Yeah, try telling her that.” He felt bruised, wounded by rejection.

“I might just do that.” Bodie’s voice held no obvious threat and yet the quiet tone of it chilled Doyle to the bone. He backtracked quickly:

“Ah, forget it, Bodie. What does it matter, after all? I’ll get over it.”

Bodie smiled at him then, a smile of such sweetness it lit up his eyes and his whole face and was reflected in the softness of his voice as he answered Doyle: “I know you will.” He pulled the car up beside the kerb, and the rasp of the handbrake broke loudly into the sudden silence. “I thought it was somewhere here,” Bodie said in another tone entirely, opening the car door.

“Thought what was?” Doyle squinted out of the car window. Naziras Stores, read the sign above the little shop; all its lights were on, and it was 11.30 p.m.

“Never miss a chance of a bit of business, Pakkies. I mean,” Bodie added, bending down to look in the car at him, “our coloured brethren.”

Doyle watched Bodie push through the door of the shop, tall, dark, broadshouldered. And racist. Even his black girlfriend of a few years’ back hadn’t cured Bodie of that. He could see Bodie through the shop window, behind the exercise books and the paint-

brushes clustering up at the glass; he was talking to the Asian shopkeeper. Bodie was shaking his head, both hands flat on the counter. But whatever it was Bodie wanted it was obviously not on view, because the man was disappearing now out of the side door.

Booze and fags, that would be the main trade at this time of night. Or something else, perhaps.

Doyle shut his eyes, put his head back on the seat. His insides still ached, to the very entrails of him, a steady, dull pain locked up inside him. He felt tense, edgy, unreal... He sat up with a jolt as the car door opened and Bodie eased himself into the driver's seat, tossing something onto the back seat, turning the ignition key all in one go.

"The things I do for you, Doyle."

The shopkeeper was looking out through the glass at them. Bodie gave him the smoothest, most ironic of smiles, and accelerated the Capri away with a burst of speed James Bond would have been proud of.

"What?" Doyle was canting his head towards the back seat. The cover of a glossy magazine glinted there in the dim light. He couldn't quite make out the title, but the picture was—interesting. "What the hell's that?"

"Bedtime story for you."

Pornography of some kind, obviously. His heart began to beat faster. "D'you know, if I'd been guessing, I'd have said it was dope you were after."

Bodie's hand stilled on the gearstick. "Want some? Could go back."

Doyle considered it for a scant second. A joint might be just what he did need, they could share it here in the car, get high and relaxed together.

"Nah," he said, not without regret, and Bodie began to urge the car on again, changing up from third to fourth. "Reckon if I get the drug habit, it might stick with me."

"Pot?" Bodie said scornfully. "They'll legalise it one day."

Doyle said calmly, coolly, "It'll still be a drug." Bodie might be safe. But Doyle had always recognised in himself an addictive personality.

The car streaked on, far too fast as always, out into the night. "Where we goin' now?"

Bodie's brow furrowed. "Bit of a problem, that one. Unless—" He grinned at Doyle. "Got your gloves with you, Raffles?"

Doyle told him he was mad. He was still telling him even as they stood in the dark outside one of the empty lodge houses, Bodie wielding one of the select little tools they always had about them. The flimsy

lock of the holiday home proved to be a walkover; they were in.

"It's going to look very good if we're caught," Doyle said, vaulting up the stairs behind his partner, imagining the list—breaking and entering; possession of obscene material; possible indecent acts to follow.

"Could have been worse, Doyle." Bodie appeared from behind the bedroom door, enigmatic and unsmiling.

"Could it?"

"We'd have been carrying, wouldn't we, if I'd gone back for that dope?"

"One sin off my conscience, anyway," Doyle said with a wide, slow smile at Bodie as he kicked the door shut behind them.

The bedroom was freezing, but otherwise comfortable, made up ready for visitors. They had the lights very low and the curtains tightly drawn in case by some miracle the security guard, seen every night in the bar totally ratted by 10 PM on mild and bitter, should take it into his head to patrol the grounds in the middle of the night. Doyle stripped off all his clothes except his T-shirt and got into bed, sliding between icy sheets, watching Bodie kneel before the gas fire, feeding it with 10p pieces. A rush of affection for the other man stole over him: this tough dark fighter, his partner, here with him, loyal, sorting him out, chasing his blue mood away with the genius of intuition.

"Look after me, don't you?"

"Try to," Bodie answered him, rising to his feet and turning; and Doyle was struck by the deep dark blaze of Bodie's eyes, the blue of the deepest ocean, narrowed in attention on him. Some little part of him felt disturbed by the intensity of it, the way Bodie's gaze seemed to sight him in, ready for the kill. He also felt a leap of the most thrilling excitement, for at that moment there was as much power, as much attraction, about Bodie as he had ever sensed in his life before.

And then Bodie's smile, creeping across his face, dissolved away the air of danger about him as if it had never existed.: Doyle breathed again, slowly settling back. Bodie was adding, "Not easy sometimes, the birds you land yourself with." He was stripping off his clothes now, leaving, like Doyle, only a T-shirt, black, tight, his muscular arms shrugging off his gun and holster: a manhunter.

Doyle picked up the magazine that lay with them on the covers and flipped it open at random. "Think she'd suit me any better?" He held it open for Bodie

to see. *She* was about fourteen stone, with an unusual liking for vegetables.

“Mm,” said Bodie admiringly, getting in beside him. “Well, you’ve got leanings that way, haven’t you?”

His bare, strong thigh touched Doyle’s under the covers. Doyle pressed back against it, hard, with his own. He gave Bodie an arch, flirtatious look from beneath his flicked-up lashes: “Have I?”

Bodie smacked him on the cheek. “I *mean*, your cupboard’s always full of that healthy stuff.”

They arranged themselves comfortably in the bed, Bodie propped up against the headboard and Doyle leaning back against his chest, lying between Bodie’s legs. Bodie’s skin was warm against his own, and he could feel the tender press of Bodie’s genitals against his back, Bodie’s arms wrapped around him, Bodie looking over his shoulder. Doyle propped the magazine in his lap and had both hands free to turn the pages.

“Did he ’ave any more of these? We could go back with ID and raid ’im in the morning,” Doyle said with a copper’s righteousness, pausing at one particular page. “Reckon this is definitely a prosecutable item, Bodie.” Certainly the page in question showed a prosecutable act, though Doyle couldn’t remember any convictions offhand. The magazine was most definitely hardcore, catering for every possible taste, none of it new to him, but it was not the sort of thing he usually scanned for kicks and for that very reason it made it mysteriously exciting to gaze upon these astonishing depictions of bizarre sexuality, find them arousing and feel no guilt, Bodie here with him to share the experience.

He paused for a long time at one page, bondage with a hint of blood and worse.

“Like that one?” Bodie said in his ear, soft, quiet, curious, no more.

“It’s—pretty—”

Bodie’s teeth grazed his ear, sending shocks along his skin. “Which one are you?”

Doyle smiled, remote, faraway. “Oh, either, I should think.” The next page made him wince. “That looks painful, dunnit?”

Swift as a snake, Bodie’s stroking hand struck at his nipple, pinched it up tight in his fingertips. The arrow of pain resolved itself in his loin, fierce as pleasure. Bodie smiled at the gasp of reaction, the grimace.

“I dunno, Doyle. I reckon you’d get off on it.”

His tone was admiring. Doyle sighed, arching

back into his partner’s arms. “Do it again.”

His nipple looked pretty, reddening in Bodie’s fingers. Bodie went on to soothe it, petting it as he gazed abstractedly at Doyle, mulling some preoccupation, deciding to speak it.

“How far *would* you go, Ray?”

“How d’you mean?”

“Anything you wouldn’t do?” Bodie asked, clipped and precise.

It was the wrong time to ask, if some serious answer was required, for at the present time, when his body was alight and blazing his instincts were not to deny it any thrill at all.

“Don’t think necrophilia appeals to me.”

“That’s all?” Bodie prompted after a while.

“Coprophilia?” Doyle offered, a rich pageant of perversion running through his mind.

“What’s that?”

“Page 15,” Doyle told him succinctly, and Bodie flipped through, found the place.

“Oh, I dunno.” Bodie smirked.

“You *are* joking. Well, you can try that one on your own. Or with Mary, since she’s so obliging—” and that reminded him, and he stared up at Bodie, eyes wide, limpid. “That reminds me. When Susanna was busy pointing our relationship towards a higher plane, I suppose Mary was givin’ you your special treat as planned?”

For some reason, he could see that brought Bodie up short, that he didn’t want to talk about it; but that only made him the more determined to know. “Well? Did she?”

Finally Bodie conceded him a grin. “Yeah, we got there.”

Doyle was in there like a rat up a line. “And? So? What was it? You’re going to tell me, Bodie, or I’ll never lie to George for you again, I swear it.”

Bodie evaded him for a while, but had to give in in the end. “The old Greek thing,” he said lightly, pulling Doyle’s curls through his fingers, not looking at his eyes. “You know... look, there was a photo of it somewhere. Centre spread, I think.”

It turned out to be Doyle’s prosecutable act. Doyle gazed at the picture, not speaking; the girl’s skin had a lovely sheen to it, the curves of her body so beautiful it scarcely mattered that you could not see her face. The male, all grace, all strength, like a powerful cat sprung on her back, the joining of their bodies stretching the unaccustomed orifice wider than seemed possible. The picture moved him strangely, strongly.

“That’s what Mary let you do tonight?”

There was a pause, then Bodie said softly into the silence, “Yeah.”

Doyle’s gaze searched him out, and held him, transfixed, his eyes so wide and so clear that while what he was thinking was the very opposite of innocence, yet it was not depravity Bodie read there but a perfect clarity, a kind of essential truth. For a while, lost there in the remoter places of Doyle’s psyche, Bodie forgot to breathe for a while. Then:

“Want me to tell you about it?” he said gently, and Doyle did not reply, did not need to, lying back in Bodie’s arms while Bodie’s soft voice spoke to him of what he had done, and Bodie’s hands coaxed sweetness out of him slowly, surely, returned him to the point he had left behind hours ago, unlocked him at last. So it was only moments later when he came, easy, endlessly across Bodie’s fingers, and when it was over he draped himself over Bodie, panting, his sweating forehead on Bodie’s shoulder, his arm flying around him, gasping into Bodie’s ear:

“Do it again.”

“Now?” Bodie asked him, laconically.

He nodded. “Yeah. Do it hard.”

His eyes opened wide and stared across the room as Bodie’s hand struck magic down through his cock again, and he felt the ghost of something wonderful—only just out of reach—

“Really hard, Bodie.”

DOYLE wandered into the Quiet Room and stood for a moment watching Cowley and Bodie at work. His hand was wrapped around a mug of tea, from which he took an occasional sip. He was wearing a cream linen shirt casually unpoppered to midchest, its sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm, his gun in place. Tight, faded jeans and white leather Kickers completed the picture of a scruffy young tough, selfconfident, prone to violence, and very very fast on the draw.

The man in the chair noted all of this: *Oh Christ. Another one.*

“Who’s come to play today, then?” Doyle wondered aloud.

“This is Jimmy Edwards, Doyle.” Cowley answered him. “But he’s not playing—yet.”

“Doesn’t seem to understand the game,” Bodie chipped in; he was always in tune with Cowley, just exactly as if Cowley was the leader of the gang, a bit smarter, a bit more intelligent than the rest, and Bodie

his favourite thug. Bodie played to this role no end, much to Doyle’s disgust.

Cowley, he sensed, did not like him one tenth so much as he did Bodie. There was just—something—about Bodie which Cowley especially loved. Well, that was all right by Doyle. He wanted to be free: to question Cowley every step of the way, if he had to.

“It’s hide and seek, Doyle,” Bodie told him, eyes never leaving the man. “Jimbo here knows where our friend Anwar’s gone to ground.”

Doyle screwed up his eyes and considered a long mental list. “Anwar. The butcher, the baker—or Anwar the bombmaker?”

“That’s the one, Doyle. Only part of what he does for a living, though,” Cowley said, disagreeably. “I won’t go into it all, it would spoil the taste of your tea.” He directed a look at the mug Doyle held.

“Sorry, sir. Did you want one?” He took a last sip, unhurried, and set the mug down on the tools table. Then he moved over, softly, to the chair where the man sat.

Hardeyed, bullet-headed, no pushover here; he looked up at Doyle with cold defiance.

“You on for the game then, mate?” Bodie asked of his partner, smiling gently.

“Might as well. Nothing better to do.”

The man was not fettered in any way, but he was not fast enough, unlike George Cowley who had stepped back at just the right moment out of reach as Bodie and Doyle moved into action together, working as one unit: Bodie tipping up the chair as Doyle dived for the man and pinioned him in place with a friendly hand on his windpipe. Bodie beamed down genially into Jimmy’s purpling face. “You’re going to tell us, you know.”

Doyle released the pressure, just a little, in case anything useful should be trying to emerge. “I want my lawyer,” the man gasped, “entitled—civil liberties—”

“Sorry, mate,” Doyle shook his head regretfully, “Didn’t quite catch that. Got your knife, Bodie?”

“Why, gonna sharpen your hearing?” Bodie quipped, and found himself very amusing as he dangled the knife in front of Doyle’s nose.

Doyle took his time over extracting the thinnest, sharpest blade, watched by three pairs of eyes, two dispassionate, one wary. “Where d’you think I should start?” Doyle enquired delicately of Bodie.

“I’ll never forget you at catering school, Doyle.” Bodie chuckled, shaking his head. “No-one could flay a fish closer to the bone than old Doyle here!” he

informed the man genially. “Think yourself lucky, mate. Some of the butchers we got round here, and we got in an expert, just for you.”

Doyle spun the knife, a little bit of circus artistry. “Tongue?” he suggested.

Bodie said, scarcely moving his lips, “My grandmother was Jewish, did I ever tell you?”

“Really,” marvelled Doyle, testing the blade over the skin of his thumb, wincing—

—“I promised her, on her deathbed. As many converts as possible.”

“Only natural. Ease her passin’ moments. Well, that’s it, then. Deathbed vows are sacred.” And, watching the approaching knife, the smiling violence in the eyes of the men who held him, the nodding, avuncular approval of the older man—

“Unzip ‘im for me, will you?” Doyle asked casually, and Bodie moved to do it: only stopping as the outburst from the chair scaled new heights around them—

“All right! All *right*. Put the fucking knife away, will you?” and Doyle tossed it, caught it by the handle, sheathed it, not without regret.

Despatched afterwards to deal with the new information they had won, Doyle caught Bodie’s arm on the way to the car. “Hey. Want to come round to my place tonight?” He hadn’t seen much of Bodie off-duty since the Scottish trip last week.

Bodie shook his head without looking at him.

“Sorry. Busy.”

“Tomorrow, then?”

“Got a very busy week, mate. Some other time, hm?”

Doyle stared hard at him, but Bodie was already ducking his head in under the doorframe, getting in ready to drive off. After a moment Doyle did the same, and made no further comment, though his mind was racing on it: such utter indifference. However else could it stand, but at face value?

All right then: he would leave it.

But even doing that gave all the power over into Bodie’s hands.

He supposed Bodie saw him as a passing sexual fancy, one he could access whenever the heat was on: *oh, good old Ray, he’ll come across for me tonight, no questions asked*. Well, fair enough. Up to a point, that suited Doyle too.

But he was not willing to be used whenever Bodie felt like it and cast off when he did not. Treated, in fact, exactly like some tarty bird hanging around,

okay for a poke when you were so desperate a letterbox would do.

The instinct for revenge was fully developed in Ray Doyle; he stored every little arrow Bodie sent his way, if not consciously, certainly instinctively, and this day’s rejection sent them just one step nearer a crisis.

“PRESS the next number in sequence.”

Doyle frowned as he concentrated. Through the grid he could see Bodie, who always looked supremely happy as he did these tests, chuckling to himself as he flexed his fingers over the keyboard. Just as if every single answer came to him pat.

Curious, Doyle had once made the effort to get a look at Bodie’s intelligence profile, and found it almost identical to his own in overall quotient, Bodie scoring more highly on certain areas of verbal ability, and Doyle on spatial awareness, but for the most part they were just about a match. Both a high average: not genius material, but no way dim, either. So Bodie’s projected confidence was an act, no more; he must be struggling just as Doyle was struggling, to choose one of six silly variables to continue a pattern. Doyle shrugged, recklessly chose. Across through the grid Bodie did the same.

Doyle sat on Dr Ross’ desk when it was over, Bodie behind him. She had always seemed quite immune to their charm but that was no reason to stop trying. Her glacial good looks appealed to him, and she was certainly a challenge: his natural male instincts were intrigued by that and determined to engage him in combat.

“Well, you’ve both achieved your usual score,” she said, with that natural condescension which made one feel that the score was deficient in no small way. “Which of you boys wants to go first for the interview?”

“Oh, I think Ray can go first, while he’s fresh,” Bodie murmured, looming in over Doyle’s shoulder and fixing Ms. Ross with a dark, malicious eye. “No staying power, this lad.”

And it was directly to this point Dr Ross led him once they were alone and after he had dutifully drawn his House-Tree-Person icons for her inspection:

“Does it ever annoy you, that your partner continually puts you down in the company of females?”

“Bodie? Hadn’t noticed.”

She registered disbelief by a narrowing of the gaze. “Come on, 4.5. He does it all the time: he makes subtly, correction, not-so-subtly, degrading references to your size, your sexuality, your success with women.”

He fixed her with a cool stare. “It’s not important. Just his way of going on.”

“Yes—but a particularly consistent one, with a main theme of building himself up at your expense.”

“Well, that’s just Bodie. No-one takes it seriously. Look, what is this? You tryin’ to put me against him, or something?”

“Not at all. Quite the opposite. I’m trying to establish whether or not it bothers you. And if it doesn’t, then its relevance to you is zero—its relevance to Bodie, of course, what his motivations are, is another matter. Let’s look at it another way. The nicknames he has for you.” She read them slowly, through pursed lips, making a meal of each one. “Goldilocks. Doyli-carte. Sweetheart. ‘The boy’. Doubtless there are others. Do you begin to see a common theme here?”

Some of the things Bodie called him in private would interest Dr Ross quite a lot more than those. Doyle coldly played the idiot card. “No.”

She was never at a loss for words, old Kate Ross. “So. You’d say, from your point of view, that you were getting on well with Bodie.”

“I’d say so, yes.”

“Just as well as ever?”

“I said—yes.” Unlike some lines of questioning she took, he could actually see that this one had some relevance; naturally Cowley would want to be fully *au fait* with any ripples in the partnership which might affect the teaming. But he was bored now, he’d answered the question, and his eyes slipped past her to the open spaces beyond the window.

“You’ve just been away together, haven’t you?”

“Yeh. With Bodie’s bird and mine,” he added.

She was looking back through her file, leafing through several pages. “Let’s recap, 4.5. The last time—no, the time before, I think—that you underwent this psychological profile, in the course of your ‘Partner—Relationship’ evaluation, you told me that you and 3.7 were regularly involved sexually with each other.”

His heart began to pound. Hadn’t seen that one coming. He leaned back in his chair, flipping a pen in his fingers. “Yeah,” he drawled. “So I did.”

She looked cool, unconcerned. In her job, she’d heard it all before, and many times worse. “Is that still

the case?”

“Yeah.”

She was making quick checks on a chart. Her well-cut dark hair swung around the pale curve of her cheek; impatiently she brushed it back. “But, presumably, this sexual involvement drops off whenever either of you has a relationship going with a girl.”

“Not really, no,” he said, thinking that if that were the case he and Bodie would never get it together at all, since one or other or both of them was *always* involved with a girl. Usually several.

Dr Ross’ head came up, with that slow intent stare which meant that something he had said had engaged her attention. “So, are you saying, that this sexual contact with your partner isn’t just a substitute—a stopgap, shall we say—between heterosexual relationships?”

“No.” Was that wrong? She was writing at speed now, pen flying across the paper, dark strands of hair flicking as she wrote. He tried to read it upside down, but as usual could not.

“But, for example, when you were on your holiday with the two girls last week, presumably your sexual relationship with your partner receded into the background—”

He hesitated. “Couldn’t say that exactly.”

“Elaborate for me,” she said, dark eyes intently dwelling on him, and he took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and told her.

Half way through his account—truthful, but edited—she laid down her pen very carefully and sat quite still. And when he had finished her gaze remained fixed on him, as blank and unreadable as a camera lens scanning and scanning for information.

The silence began to make him uneasy. He didn’t think he’d told her anything all that shocking, no details: just times, places, frequency. None of the emotive words of sex and passion there, no mention of lust, desire, fellatio, nothing about the way he had whispered Bodie’s name as their bodies touched in the night, the way Bodie’s kiss had lingered, with love, on his lips—

“Let me get this quite clear,” she said at last, quiet and uninflected, “You and 3.7 take two girls away for, what, four days. In that time you have sexual contact with your girlfriend, twice, and with Bodie, six times.”

Put like that—

He shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, but it wasn’t—” It was all far too complex to explain. *‘Bodie took me by surprise.’ ‘The girls were out.’ ‘Susanna wasn’t in the*

mood.’ all sounded in the analytical light of day like poor excuses indeed.

“Anything wrong with that?” he asked aggressively, going all out for attack.

She shook her head briskly. “How you manage your personal affairs isn’t a matter for me to make moral judgements on, Doyle.”

He picked on the word instantly. “So you *are* sitting there thinking I’m immoral?”

“Morality is of no concern to me,” she said coldly, “except as to how it affects *you*. And more specifically, how it affects your performance in the job you’re paid to do, ergo how it affects your relationship with your partner. Just one more question, 4.5—”

He grinned at her, mocking. “Got it in one. You want me an’ Bodie to take *you* away for a weekend in Scotland.”

“—which of you usually takes the dominant role? I mean here,” she added, pen poised, “in a purely sexual situation.”

“Neither of us. Either.” She was always hinting at some sexual ambiguity in him: fortunately it didn’t bother him one bit. If you played both sides of the line you had twice the fun, that was how he saw it. But he was damned if he was going to give her what she was angling for and confess that he played the girl in bed to Bodie’s he-man, because it didn’t happen to be true.

He left the session feeling, as always, vaguely moody.

What went on between Bodie and Kate Ross he didn’t know: they were supposed to keep their sessions confidential, and for the most part Doyle was happy to go along with that; the woman had a way of digging out of you points of character you would prefer to keep to yourself. But he did ask Bodie if Dr Ross had asked him about their Scottish weekend.

“Yeah, she touched on it,” Bodie said, eyeing Doyle’s sandwich.

Resignedly, Doyle tore it down the middle and handed Bodie half. “Not liver sausage again,” Doyle queried, and let Bodie take the first bite, only risking his own when Bodie said thickly, “Ham.”

“What did you say?” Doyle asked. They were in the CI5 canteen at the time. Formica tables and a very grumpy tea lady, illnamed Glad.

“Ham,” Bodie repeated, and Doyle kicked him under the table.

“To Kate Ross.”

“Forgotten now,” Bodie said uncommunicatively.

Doyle shared out the other half of his sandwich. “Better get back. Cowley said ten minutes.”

“Man’s a bloody workaholic. Have you ever seen him eat?”

“Don’t remember it. Probably sets up an intravenous drip while he sleeps.”

“You still seeing Mary?” Doyle asked as they walked together out of the canteen.

Bodie was making a polite farewell bow to Glad the tea lady. “Yeah. On and off. You still got that hooray, henry bird?”

Doyle grimaced. “You *are* joking, I take it. It would never have worked out.”

“I could have told you that.”

Doyle shot him a glance. “Was all right while it lasted.”

“Yeah, yeah, course it was,” Bodie agreed faintly, to humour him.

Doyle was still looking at him. “Come to that, I haven’t seen much of *you* lately.”

“Only every day, eight till six.”

“You know what I mean. Gone off me, have you?”

He meant it to be humorous, but Bodie only twisted around to see if anyone else was in earshot, then gave him an obscure look, “Drop it, Doyle, will you?”

Doyle raised an eyebrow, shrugged. Inside him an instinct for trouble stung. Because something was offkey in his relationship with Bodie at the moment. Bodie was cool with him everywhere but in bed, and he found himself following Bodie’s lead, contradictory and snappy, not particularly goodhumoured beneath the joky veneer. Yet he could not pinpoint the moment or the phrase which had turned the course of things. It was—just a feeling. That everything was not all right with their world: or at least, with Bodie.

“—WHAT the—”

Startled awake, his eyes sprang open and searched the darkness, every nerve tense and on alert.

“Ssh.” Bodie, moonlight on his naked skin, pulling back the covers and getting into bed with him. “‘S only me.”

“Mad bastard,” he grumbled thickly, relaxing, stretching, turning over in the bed. “Made me jump.” It was the middle of the night, the luminous green numerals on his alarm clock reading 2:14. Bodie was covering Doyle’s body with his own, pulling Doyle’s rumpled T-shirt up and out of the way. Their cocks kissed sweetly, lushly.

“Mm—you’re warm—” Bodie murmured into his ear, between nuzzles at his neck, his ears, his throat. Bodie smelt faintly of alcohol and faintly of Aramis: his sensual assault on Doyle was tender, knowing. Through rapidly spinning senses Doyle tried to fix onto the notion that he was annoyed with Bodie, and should be saying no. It was impossible: his body was already going along with it, nipples erect, stirred by Bodie’s firm chest, cock up like a lightning rod and seeking to snub itself blissfully against Bodie’s belly.

Saying no was off. He was slipping hazily back into fantasy, the echoes of a dream still with him. Bodie a sheik, come to his tent in the middle of the night, to ravish him; yeah, that was a good one. The darkeyed, silent stranger would be merciless, despite his struggles. In the bed, he struggled.

Bodie spread his thighs, pushed them back to his shoulders, kneeling up over him. Heart pounding violently, Doyle dug his nails into Bodie’s arms, sweat sliding on sweat, Bodie’s harsh fast breathing a counterpoint to his own. Bodie and Mary flashed into his mind, the images which had haunted him; frailty and innocence overcome by brute force, the slick and savage invasion, the melting of resistance into sudden, shocking rapture—

Let it happen.

Fervently imaginative, strung out, he waited, on the very edge of tension. And when Bodie knelt up again and kissed a trail down Doyle’s stomach on the way to suck him off, Doyle opened his eyes wide into the dark. As Bodie’s mouth paid sweet attention to his cock he twisted himself away, taking hold of Bodie by the shoulders, pulling him up the bed. Bodie had frozen, offput by such unusual resistance: Doyle pulled him down fiercely into an embrace, pressed himself hard against Bodie.

“Not that way. Let’s really go for it.”

Bodie raised himself a little, one palm flat on the bed either side of Doyle’s face, his eyes a glimmer in the darkness. “You know, like you did it with Mary,” Doyle said softly, flat on his back, looking up at him. “Ever since you told me, I’ve been thinking about it.”

“Christ, Doyle.”

“Come on.”

Bodie said nothing, but his cock was ironhard, moving a little instinctively, pressing against Doyle’s between their bodies. Doyle shoved himself upwards, hard.

“Come on. You did it with her, where’s the difference?”

“You’re not a bird, that’s the difference.” Bodie’s

voice was a little husky.

“What the hell does that matter? I swear to god, I can’t get it out of my head since you told me. Just do it, Bodie. An’ don’t be too gentle.”

Bodie seemed quite still, shocked perhaps; but his mouth came down to fasten on Doyle’s, kissing him with just the kind of savage possession Doyle was after. He opened his mouth to the kiss and drank Bodie down with a powerful thirst for the man, the masculinity of him; his body lying open, defenceless beneath his weight. Still kissing him, snatching at his mouth in a fury or a desperation, Bodie rolled them both over so that Doyle lay on top of him; he brought both hands down to Doyle’s hard lean buttocks. They thrust together for a while, finding the same desperate rhythm. Bodie’s hands traced thrillingly around his arsehole. And when he stabbed inside him with a thrust of possession, aggression, Doyle cried out throatily as he came, his body spasming all over, clenching around Bodie’s finger in strong convulsions of delight as his cock spat rivers of fire across Bodie’s belly.

A mindless while later, still panting for breath, struggling to order his boneless body he got to his knees and discovered that Bodie had come too; he lay down again and made himself comfortable in the loose circle of Bodie’s arms. And later, much later, Bodie half-woke him, made love to him again, easy this time, and gentle, a draught of simple water to a thirsty man.

“I could get used to this,” he yawned, in the morning. Bodie, fully dressed and shaven was setting down a mug of coffee on the bedside chest. “How d’you fancy marrying me?”

Bodie was very pale, very darkeyed this morning. “That a serious offer?”

“Oh yeah. Cowley could be Best Man.”

“—oh, and I had him pegged for bridesmaid.”

“Which one of us would he be givin’ away though, that’s the question?”

“Oh you, Doyle, no question of it. After your performance last night.” Bodie didn’t say it particularly lightly, not out for a laugh, but not in a macho, scoring-points sort of way, either.

Doyle didn’t take it seriously. Why should he?

“I’m concerned about this pairing, as you know.”

It was Major Hannay’s turn to put in his penn’orth. “Well, I have to say, George, I can’t think

why Dr. Ross is concerned. Physically and mentally they're the best team you've got. Timing, training, fitness—it's all there. And, begging your pardon Doctor, that seems to me more vital than any airy-fairy paper test failures."

Cowley was paying them both his best attention, thoughtful and alert. In a long, long list of facts and figures and statistics, Bodie and Doyle's scores did set them consistently ahead of the pack: both Cowley himself and Major Hannay would have been more than happy to dismiss them and move on to the next partnership up for review.

But Dr Ross disagreed.

And, Cowley reflected, while that undoubtedly had its annoyances, that was after all why she was employed—to give his operatives a battery of psychological testing, to see a different view, to look beyond mere physical statistics to the men beneath.

"What's the nature of your concern, Doctor?" he enquired, rather disagreeably—psychiatrists needed no excuse, he had found, to become longwinded, and must not be unduly encouraged.

The octagonal conservatory where they held their meeting was an attractive and elegant setting, with mossy green carpets and stylish wicker furniture. The sun fell through the huge glass panels onto Kate Ross' hair. She moved her head impatiently to be free of it.

"You're aware that 3.7 and 4.5 are sexually involved with one another."

"I'm aware of it, aye," said Cowley impatiently, "because you brought it to my attention in one of your previous briefings. Otherwise, the two of them keep it very much to themselves, I'm glad to say."

The Major chuckled. "Never seen them so much as holding hands in the gym." One freezing glance from Cowley informed him that he had not, after all, been open to lighthearted repartee.

"My stand on this," Cowley said, addressing the psychiatrist, "is as I made clear to you at the time: far better for them to resolve that kind of feeling than to let it fester—You remember Aisling and Browne—that sort of thing. Very unhealthy."

"Well, I'd agree with you," Kate Ross said. "That really is the essence of any therapy—to bring out what's hidden, to face up to it, to learn to live with it comfortably. 3.7 and 4.5 have taken the first step—they feel a strong sexual attraction towards one another; ergo they have sex together. So far, so good. Now, if we take them individually—4.5 is dealing with things really quite well. I'd expect that from him: he's generally quite secure in his self-image. He has

his moments of doubt, the 'why-am-I-here' syndrome I call it, but on the whole he feels at home with himself, he believes in himself, he thinks he's on the side of the angels, as it were."

She paused. "The story with 3.7 is rather different."

"Och, Bodie's all right," Cowley's voice broke in, stopping Dr Ross in her tracks. "The man's not had the easiest of lives, you know; he's doing just fine despite that."

"Mm," Ross said noncommittally. "But I think you'll see what I mean if I show you—" she leaned forward and did something to the video machine on the cabinet, and the familiar rounded profile of Ray Doyle was suddenly captured there on the large TV screen, half-face to the watchers, looking not to the camera but across the desk to his inquisitioner.

Here in person, she turned up the volume in time for her own recorded voice to filter into the room, saying: "*Do you feel any sexual attraction to your partner?*" and then she froze the screen again to explain coolly to the two Majors— "This is the first time I've put this question to him, so one would definitely be looking for some reaction here."

And yes, the film had perfectly captured the man's surprise, his extreme stillness; and then the caution in his voice as he queried it— "*Are you asking me—do I fancy Bodie?*"

You could only admire the matter-of-fact, almost impatient cant of her interrogation: "*Yes, that's essentially what I'm asking.*"

Auburn curls drifted through restless fingers, and Ray Doyle hitched one denim-clad leg up across his other thigh. He said, with half a smile, a look almost flirtatious, "*Bodie's a very attractive man. You'd have to be—very straight up and down—not to notice Bodie—*"

Immediately Kate Ross stopped the tape and the screen went dark. "There. Notice how quickly he recovered from the question—which I introduced deliberately out of context, so that he wouldn't have a prepared response. And here's an interesting thing: you must have noticed the ease with which he surmounted the most difficult part of it: he isn't uptight, it doesn't stress him at all to admit that he isn't 'straight up-and-down' himself, as he puts it. Many, in fact the majority, of people with bisexual inclinations, would have found that much more difficult than he did."

"Yes, yes," Cowley said irritably. "Fascinating. And your point is—"

Unfinished, she withdrew the tape and slotted in

another. There was Bodie, now, up on screen, in all ways a contrast to his partner: bigger, darker, smoother, more masculine. Whatever that meant. Cowley found himself wondering just what it did mean, in the light of Kate Ross' excursions into the dark world of the male psyche.

She was fully into the swing of it, leaning forward. "Now listen to this. And watch the man's body language; that can sometimes tell you a hell of a lot more than words ever could."

Even to a lay observer it was clear that Bodie was very tense; leaning back in his chair he nevertheless managed to look as if he was on the verge of drawing a gun on his tireless questionmaster.

"—do you find him attractive?"

Bodie's voice was low, cool. "Yeah, I suppose so. Gets his share of the birds, anyway. Suppose that pathetic look brings out the mother in 'em."

"I said—do you find him attractive?"

At this point, Cowley could only admire Bodie's restraint. Instead of landing one on her, Bodie pointed a finger at his own chest, looked pitying, superior, shocked.

"Me?"

"You'd say you feel no sexual attraction towards your partner?"

Bodie still looked pained. "I dunno whether you've noticed this—easy mistake to make, what with the curls and the bangles an' all. But Ray," he said, slow and clear and mocking, "is a fella. No doubt about it. I've seen his—passport."

"But some men do, of course, find other men attractive."

"Maybe," Bodie growled. "But I'm no poofter, Doctor."

Bodie's face a study in grim refute, Ross froze the image there, then killed it as she turned back to the other two men in the room. "You can see that the difference is very marked. He isn't happy with the subject, he's dodging round the question. He doesn't actually lie about it, which is in itself interesting, but he comes damn close. I tried a few more angles, but it wasn't leading anywhere, and he was so uncomfortable with it he was getting more and more defensive."

"I thought myself the man was remarkably restrained," Cowley said, all brighteyed challenge, "considering how much he must have yearned to tell you to keep your nose out."

The Major, more at home with the honing of bodies than minds, was following all this as best he could. "Wouldn't it just be easier to say to him that

you know that he's carrying on with 4.5?"

Kate Ross shot him a cold, cold look of condescension. "Easier in what way? I know he's having sex with 4.5, and he knows it too. He doesn't know that I know that, of course, but that's the only missing fact, and scarcely a relevant one." She continued, spelling it out, carefully and precisely, for her IQ deficient audience, "The point of interest is not whether or not he is in fact having a sexual relationship with his partner, because we know that he is, but why he is at such pains to make the very idea seem unthinkable."

"Well, and what are your conclusions?" Cowley asked her briskly. "Is he ashamed of it, is that it?"

"I don't know why, yet," Kate Ross replied. "Although of course I could make a guess. But until I know for sure, I strongly suggest you keep a 'watch' notice on those two, despite their apparently good condition, and don't hesitate to call them in for a reappraisal ahead of schedule if you've got the slightest worry."

THIS particular photograph never made the papers: Cowley had strong views on his agents appearing in the press. So Bodie calmly relieved the pressman of his camera, spooled out the film, and handed it back.

"You can't—" protested the media man, astounded.

"Just did," Bodie said, flashing out his ID and then palming it away again. "D-Notice."

"As of when?" The photographer glowered at him, and Bodie smiled affably back.

"Five minutes' time." He wandered over to join Doyle, guarding the door to the Minister's apartment.

"Pity," said Doyle, watching the exchange with a laconic eye. "Think he got my best side."

"Nothing to choose between 'em, darlin'," Bodie drawled, pocketing the film.

"Anyway, I could always take it to be privately developed."

It might even be worth it. There was Ray Doyle, disrespectfully leaning on the door with his arms folded, legs crossed. Jeans, a scruffy linen shirt, cuffs folded back, one thin silver circlet drooping down his left forearm, he looked about as tough as you could get, on high alert, on line to whip out his gun and kill anything that tried to get past him, and yet there was something unusual about him, something exotic, fey perhaps. The contrast was fascinating.

"Don't let this get in the way of your draw, will you." He picked up the bangle off Doyle's wrist

between finger and thumb—and found himself looking down the business end of Doyle's Browning. "Just testing, just testing."

Doyle spun the gun lefthanded and rehoused it. "What's going on in there, anyway?" Bodie nodded at the door.

"Go in if you want to," Doyle gestured him past. "Old man's got Forensics in there, but it looks like the usual."

"No suspicious circumstances?" Bodie queried. At that moment Cowley appeared at the door, his face grim and set— "Bodie!" and Bodie wagged his eyebrows at Doyle.

"Love you and leave you."

"What's the password again?" Doyle called after him.

"Sal's home phone number," Bodie's reply floated back to him, and Doyle grinned to himself, and closed the heavy wooden doors with the big brass knocker and leaned against it again, on guard, ready to defend it to the death from thrillseekers, pressmen, gossip columnists, all jostling for the details of the death of a Minister in circumstances widely rumoured to be sordid.

He joined Bodie in there later, once Forensics had done their stuff and the ambulance men had carried out the red-blanketed body on a stretcher, and the press presence had dwindled to one or two night watchmen.

Inside, the flat was very swish in a Mayfair kind of way, all mahogany and dark carpets and cabinets of porcelain ladies. "Ah, Doyle," Cowley greeted him, "I'll leave the clearing up to you and Bodie.... More your style than mine, I think."

The old man had his glasses off, was rubbing his eyes; only for a brief second, but you could see he was tired. "Any message for the press, sir?" Bodie was asking.

"Och, it'll come out soon enough. Leave it."

"Any foreign connection?" Doyle asked, wandering over to join Bodie by the wardrobe.

"No sign so far. Looks like a straightforward suicide. Reason or reasons unknown."

Bodie turned round with a large brassiere in his hands. "Oh, I don't know, sir. If I were a 44-inch E-cup I think I'd feel like topping myself, wouldn't you?" and while he and Doyle cracked up, Cowley gazed at them with distaste.

"He was a good man, in his way," and they sobered under his quelling eye. "Good in his job, a good family man. Look through everything—with

respect, if you can manage it." And with that he left them alone in the dead man's flat.

"All very well. But how can you respect a man who thought he looked good in a ballgown?" Bodie produced one with a flourish, huge red satin frills, on a hanger. Doyle ran the stuff of it absently through his fingers, poking his head around the door of the wardrobe. It was a transvestite's paradise in there, wigs, dresses, corsets, very large sling-back shoes.

"I've never understood this," Bodie pursued the matter with distaste. "How could any fella get a kick from dressing up in women's underwear?"

Tired of mucking around—he wanted to get home, start ringing around for a date—Doyle pulled out a drawer, began a systematic search for anything Cowley might be interested in—blackmail notes from the Eastern bloc being top of the list.

"Well, it's sexy, innit?"

Bodie's question had been rhetorical. "What is?"

"Women's underwear." He felt Bodie's gaze on him and wheeled around to meet his eyes. "Isn't it?"

"Only," Bodie said economically, "on women. Christ, Doyle! he must have weighed 15 stone. Can you imagine what he must have looked like?"

Doyle looked at the enormous suspender belt Bodie dangled at him and had to agree, it looked capable of strapping up the Eiffel Tower. He laughed some more when Bodie slipped into a huge pair of red patent highheels and tripped about with his hand on his hip.

It was a long time before they had searched everything to their satisfaction, and then it took some time to replace everything in order. All ready for the relatives. Well, they had some surprises coming.

"How did he do it?" Doyle asked, shutting the wardrobe door on the finery within.

Bodie, who had seen the body, grimaced. "Strangled himself. *Not* a pretty sight." He was closing drawers with a firm snap.

"Funny way to go. If I were going to top meself," Doyle mused, "I'd go for a nice quick bullet through the back of the head."

"Yeh, but he didn't leave a note. My guess is he didn't mean to do it. Strung himself up for kicks, and it went too far."

Doyle shuddered. "Now there's a kinky way to get your thrills."

"It's the pressure," Bodie said seriously. "Gives you one hell of an erection."

"Tried it, have you?"

"—so I'm told."

Doyle stood in front of the huge dressing-table mirror and frowned at himself. "Nope, I still don't fancy it."

"You'd prefer the women's underwear?" Bodie asked behind him, with no particular emphasis.

Doyle grinned at himself. "No question."

"I worry about you sometimes."

"You don't have to, it doesn't bother me."

"Doyle."

Doyle answered him, in the same deadly serious tone. "Yes, Bodie."

"—forget it, it doesn't matter."

"Yeh, c'mon, say it."

"I said, it doesn't matter."

"No I haven't," Doyle said, amused. He could see Bodie in the mirror behind him, a dark and brooding presence hovering there.

"Haven't what?"

"I thought you were goin' to ask me if I had a deep dark secret. Like, pink Janet Reger underneath me Levis."

Bodie exhaled behind him. "Well, can't blame me for wondering."

The room was darkening as dusk drew on, the heavy drapes at the tall windows caught back and bunched at each corner. There was by now a certain quality of silence in the room. Doyle said to him, low:

"I think you really go for the idea. Don't you, Bodie? It turns you on." And as he said it he entertained for a mad moment the idea of dragging Bodie over to the huge fourposter bed and having it there and then. The thought that Forensics might yet be back, pick up on it, was the only thing which stopped him.

Bodie was right there with him in thought too; Doyle closed his eyes as his partner took hold of him, bruised his lips with a searing kiss. and when Bodie broke the kiss and whispered to him, just his name, no more than that, there was an urgency, a raw longing in the harshness of his voice. For a moment, the facade cracked, and a depth of yearning yawned between them—

"Doyle—"

Doyle wiped the back of his hand over his mouth. "Wha—?" he murmured. Opening his eyes he looked full into Bodie's face, catching an expression there which astonished him: a sort of hunger, a despair even, the like of which he had never known nor understood. "What is it?" he said, soft. "What's the matter?"

"I want you," Bodie said abruptly, almost coolly,

but his body was hot and hard, demanding.

Doyle broke away after a moment, having to fight seriously for freedom, backing off— "Bodie. *Bodie*," fending off the hands which reached for him, "Leave it. We can't do anything here, just use your bloody brain."

"No," Bodie said, quite sensibly, but he followed Doyle and was all over him again. Breathing in the heady scent of Bodie's aftershave as Bodie kissed his throat, his cheek, his ear, Doyle briefly entertained the notion of tossing Bodie off where they stood— probably wouldn't take long—then he shoved Bodie away again, hard, meaning it.

"Look, we must be mad. I wanna keep this job, it's the best I'm likely to get. Bloody press outside the door, Cowley might take it into his head to come back any minute, Forensics going over the place with a microscope. Come round to my flat."

"Time?" Bodie asked through compressed lips, his hands falling empty to his sides, clenching into fists. He was breathing as fast as a runner in a race, his pale skin flushed and damp with sweat.

"Bedtime?" Doyle suggested; the look he flashed his partner was very come-hitherish, and they walked to their separate cars alone, tense, disquieted, simmering.

"WHO is it?"

"Me," came the low voice over the intercom, from two flights down.

Doyle grinned to himself as he answered, "Which me?"

"Don't piss about, Doyle, it's pouring out here."

Bodie sounded plaintive, and certainly when he appeared through the door he was wet, droplets of rain running down the black gleaming cap of his hair and over his leather jacket. His lips were cool and wet, too, as Doyle came close for a kiss. "You eaten?" he murmured against Bodie's mouth.

"Yeah."

"Wanna drink?"

"No."

"Good. Come'ere, then."

He had no premonition of disaster, and anticipation had only sharpened his desire. Bodie's too, it seemed; it was as if the intervening hours had never happened, Bodie's hands, his mouth, as demanding as they had been in the Mayfair flat. On the stereo some mournful voice was softly singing to someone that they looked wonderful tonight; a sad, sweet,

eerie tune that forever after when he heard it brought Doyle back to this night, to now, to the clothes he wore, the scent of Bodie, the dark sexual tension in the room as Bodie's possessive hands swept over him, inside his shirt to roughly caress his nipples, and then, inside his jeans.

Apprehensive, he closed his eyes in sheer, heartstopping delight as Bodie's arrogant hand pressed through the satin, his bonehard cock sliding and slipping inside, blissful, silky.

Bodie made a noise, some inarticulate sound; he wrenched at Doyle's jeans in a frenzy and Doyle kicked them off and away; his heart was pounding at Bodie's extreme reaction, and yet this was the very thing he had courted. Because he had seen straight away in the Mayfair flat that this was an intense thing for Bodie: maybe, who knew, the deepest, most hidden desire he had ever had. Playing with fire he knew it had been, but he had counted on himself to be able to handle Bodie. He could always handle Bodie. Only not this time.

And as the man sang sadly that it was late in the evening, Bodie threw him almost casually to the ground, came down on top of him, eyes glittering, snatching a fierce and hurting kiss that left his mouth bruised; then moved down his body like a trail of lightning to kiss his cock through black satin, Bodie's eyes falling shut as he mouthed him through the silky stuff over and over.

Winded, breathless, Doyle lay flat on his back, violently excited, way beyond caution himself. Even when Bodie yanked the damp panties down to his ankles so that they manacled him, pushed his knees back to his shoulders, Doyle only squeezed his eyes shut until he saw stars, heard the music wail in his ears, love, longing, loss. And stars exploded inside him too as he felt Bodie's cock thrust at him and into the tight entrance to his body; and that was all it took.

The violence of his orgasm shook his whole body, lifted him and racked him with white-hot ecstasy; he was still coming in small, sweet throbs when Bodie scooped Doyle's own come off his chest and roughly wiped it on his own cock, the scent of it rising all around them, sweat and sex.

Won't be enough, Doyle's waking senses warned him, but it was enough, at least to get Bodie inside him with one hard plunge; and Bodie came almost straight away, five, six, short and brutal thrusts and then his cock shuddered inside Doyle's wincing, tender body.

"I love you. Oh christ, Ray, I love you," Bodie

murmured into his ear as it happened, quite lost, quite beyond himself; and Doyle heard the words but lost them afterwards forever in the face of what happened next.

For one moment, there was peace in the room. His heart pounded strongly in his ears. Bodie was heavy on him, hot, sticky.

My darling. You were wonderful. Tonight...

Then Bodie scrambled up and away from him as if he could not bear to touch him at all in the horrid aftermath, painful, awkward. His body raw and stinging, Doyle watched his partner thrusting himself back into his clothes in indecent haste; his own ankles were manacled still by the scrap of twisted satin, and he kicked it off. Bodie turned then and knelt and picked the panties up, looking at Doyle with a hard, cold stare, a face of stone which chilled Doyle's heart.

"These yours, are they?" Bodie asked.

Doyle cleared his throat, tried out his voice.

"Come off it, mate. Sandra's, I think."

"Pity," Bodie said, in that same dead, cold tone.

"They suited you. But then, they're tart's knickers, aren't they? And you—"

"Bodie—" He was getting to his feet now, touched, clouded by Bodie's dark, tumultuous emotion, finding his jeans—

"—are a tart, aren't you, Ray?" His mouth smiling, his eyes violent, Bodie slid the words out like silk, but every one struck home.

Doyle grimaced, raising his hand in a gesture of utter rejection. "Just fuck off, Bodie, if all you can do is spit filth." His voice rose. "I don't wanna hear it, okay?"

And the strongest will in the world could not prevent the wince as he moved, because Bodie had bruised him somewhere inside, and Bodie did not miss it, tracking his expression with a flicker of his eyes, his own face twisting as he said, "That's what you get, Ray, if you play dangerous games."

Doyle held his chin up, stared Bodie out bitterly. "I'm not complainin', am I?"

Bodie spoke softly, contemptuously. "You could have got your guts ruptured, *mate*."

"Yeah, well, it's a good job you only lasted five seconds then, innit?" He turned away from Bodie, weary, low in body and soul.

"You got what you asked for, Doyle."

"Yeah, and like I said, I'm not complainin'. Now fuck off, will you, and leave me alone."

"Are you okay?" Bodie said abruptly, staring at

his back.

“Oh yes, bloody wonderful, never better. Thanks for all the kind words.” He turned and went to the bathroom, slamming the door loudly behind him, giving Bodie plenty of time to leave.

Which he did.

DOYLE was in ahead of Bodie the next morning, already in Cowley’s office, perched against a radiator by the wall. Bodie’s eye leapt to him and wouldn’t leave. Doyle was pale, heavy-eyed, the session he had had in the bathroom that morning not one he looked forward to repeating. He met Bodie’s eye with cool steadiness and then looked away. Cowley took something off his desk to show them, took stock of them then favoured them with a glare over his glasses.

“Och, wake up the pair of you! You both look half asleep this morning—” and the briefing began.

In the car afterwards everything was much as normal; they had always, right from the start, been able to divorce the job from personal emotions. They did the day’s work. And the next. The weekend came and went. Nothing.

Well, Doyle was wary now, keeping his distance. Bodie had used him, then blamed him; the age-old story. Doyle wasn’t setting himself up for that again, thank you very much. Bodie’s fury had had something unnatural about it, something disproportionate. Okay, they had dabbled in deep waters. Doyle didn’t see that a lifetime’s purdah was necessary, even so.

Soap opera would have had him say, with a deep and earnest tone, “We’ve got to talk about this, Bodie—” But soap opera wasn’t dealing with characters like Bodie, who, if he did not refuse pointblank to talk at all, could not be relied upon to say what he meant, always assuming, that was, he had the necessary insight into his own reactions to know what he did mean; and certainly would let slip nothing at all close to his heart.

And what was close to Bodie’s heart—?

Loyalty, there was that. As partners they were just about as good as you could get. He and Bodie stuck up for one another, they looked out for one another; back to back against a world that was out to get them.

And Bodie fancied him; that was beyond doubt.

Half Bodie’s trouble, that. If Doyle led him on, he would follow.

So: in bed they were dynamite; professionally they were a perfect team.

In between these two extremes it seemed to Doyle that they had no common ground. A wasteland.

Bodie wanted it that way.

Doyle knew that to his cost: as happened when you sensed that here there could be something particular, some completeness of attraction, he had thrown in his line a few times with Bodie, just to see what he would get. But the line always came back to him empty. Message loud and clear. Bodie didn’t want to get involved.

So, no happy ending: no promises. No forever hints.

But then, what was he expecting? Bodie to declare undying love? That was a laugh.

All the same, the shock of it all had troubled him enough to make him consider, half seriously, telling someone all about it. Kate Ross, for example. After all, the woman knew him well, she was trained up to the eyebrows in human behavioural psychology and must have read all the right case studies. It might not yet be the thing over here, but in the States finding yourself with the map supplied by your therapist was considered not a mere luxury but essential to a fruitful life.

And how would he put it?

“*Thing is, Dr, we went a bit too far—*”

“*We had this thing with women’s underwear—*”

“*—yeah, I know, sounds bizarre, but—*”

“*See, the thing is, Bodie really went for it. In a big way—*”

“*He all but raped me, to be honest—*”

“*And then he couldn’t face up to it. Couldn’t take his share of—*”

Well, we’ve all been there, Doyle recognised: the delight of the really dirty act, the thrill of the taboo. The joy of, say, a four-year-old, pissing secretly in the sand—Doyle himself, aged seven or eight, playing doctors with Melanie Seaton next door—She had taken her role of nurse very seriously, probed his cock with various instruments culled from her mother’s manicure set, so exciting him that he had had a delicious, terrifying orgasm and fled the garden shed, feeling for days afterwards not only sore but a dogged sense of shame. Like any cheap thrill, it had not been worth it.

But it was Bodie’s reaction which had made it cheap, nothing else. It could have been—wonderful. The most intense things shared were the most special.

Obviously it hadn't been that special for Bodie.

DR Kate Ross looked measuringly at the young agent sitting across from her.

"I'll be honest with you, 4.5. Any breach of confidentiality here I take upon myself—"

Doyle said unsmiling, "I knew it. Cowley's got a secret woman. He's a dark horse, that one."

"—I'm worried about 3.7." she said directly. "Are you?"

That stopped Doyle in his tracks, made him draw in a sharp breath. He met her eyes, then slid his gaze away, wandering over the geography of the furniture. "Bodie's all right."

"4.5, you trust this man with your life. Every day of the week you go out there and it's him you're relying on to stop some assassin with your name on his knife. You don't lead a charmed life, you know; very often it's that man and no-one and nothing else standing between you and the underworld. So I'll ask you again: are you happy about 3.7?"

"Look—I trust Bodie to the hilt. Can't tell you any more than that. He's as sharp as ever."

Her gaze seemed to penetrate him, right through to the heart; he did not drop his own. Finally she relaxed it, looking abruptly away.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it. Your professional appraisal should be as good as anyone's; you're the one who has to work with him. How is your relationship off duty?"

He had known this had to be faced, but he winced none the less, clenching his fingers tight for one brief second.

"All right. Not seeing much of each other, but—" he shrugged. "Bodie's got several birds on the go—one for each letter of the alphabet, I reckon..."

"And you?"

"Yeah—one or two."

"So your sexual relationship with 3.7.—"

He groaned, put his head in his hands. "Look, do we have to go through all this today? I'm not in the mood."

"All right," she agreed, surprising him. "Let's go on to other things. Last week, for example. 3.7 was knocked out by a bomb blast, is that right? There was a trembler. 6.9 set it off with a wild shot when you were investigating a bakery on Ruston Mews—"

His face tightened. "Stupid fucking bastard. But Bodie was okay."

"—minor concussion, they just kept him in

overnight for observation, am I right?"

"Yeah. But he's fully cleared for duty again now."

"And, going back to the incident, you were there at the time, weren't you?"

"Yes—" He saw it coming. What a bloody marvelous day this was turning out to be. "It's all in my report."

"Have you anything you'd like to add, to me?"

"No, goddamnit." She saw the crease of serious anguish deepen in his cheek: he was upset about this, and no wonder.

"I wondered if, with hindsight, you might be able to shed some light on the matter. I think you'll agree, your behaviour was difficult to understand, to say the least."

"I can't explain it," Doyle said, tightly. "I've thought about it. But I can't..."

She pursued him relentlessly despite the signs of distress. "Your partner, knocked out by a blast ten feet away. Lying unconscious. Severely injured for all you know. What did you do?"

"You know fuckin' well what I did," he muttered, strung out.

"Yes, it's on several reports, including your own. Ignoring the most elementary safety guidelines you rolled your injured partner onto his back and shook him. Now, if he had internal injuries—an injured spinal column—"

"I know, I know. For chrissake, I *know*. D'you think I haven't thought about it?"

In every nightmare since, from the look of him. "What was going through your mind at that point?"

"I was worried sick, damn you! I thought he was—"

"Yes, I appreciate that. But losing control in the way you did—"

"Look, I've already had the bloody lecture from Cowley."

"It's not my brief to tell you what is and what isn't acceptable, 4.5. I'm simply looking for motivations."

"I really wanted to finish Bodie off, is that it? Turn him into a wheelchair case?"

He was at simmering point, ready to explode. Time to pass on. "Let's look at something else. When you go in as a team, let's say the old textbook standard, 'place where there may be a gunman in ambush'—who goes in first?"

Diverted by the quick change of direction, he looked at her. "I do."

"Why?"

"Bodie's a better long-range shot. Can give me

better cover than I could give him—”

She shook her head decisively. “Not on these scores, he isn’t. The difference is marginal. You can check them if you require confirmation.”

“Well, that’s the way we’ve always done it.” Narrowed eyes searched her, trying to get the point of this, see what she was probing for.

“Do you think it might all be part of the same pattern? Could it be that he sees himself as the dominant partner in your relationship?”

From the faint colour which had hit his cheek she guessed she had come close to home on that one, but then again, perhaps not, because he shook his head decisively enough in answer to her next question: “And is that how *you* see it?”

“No,” he said, “Can’t say I do.”

She abandoned that line of questioning and gave it to him straight. “The problem is, 4.5., despite the fact that many things are still going okay for you, all the indications I have are that the relationship is deteriorating, and the partnership in danger.”

“Oh, wonderful,” he said, listlessly. This interview had been a hard one for him. Kate Ross consciously relaxed her deep frown into a small smile for him.

“Don’t look so worried. It’s my job to worry about these things, not yours.”

Which was about the most human thing he had ever heard her say. “It’s my life,” he muttered ironically. “I have to worry about it.”

She was looking at him earnestly. “The thing here—you see, 4.5, I get the impression from you, consistently, that you care about your partner quite a lot. You enjoy being with him, you worry about him when he’s in danger; you actually prefer, quite often, his company to that of a female, or indeed, to anyone at all.”

“Nothing wrong with that, is there?” he said, offensively boldeyed.

“—I’m just saying that that’s the picture I get from you. But I get a very different picture from 3.7.”

It took a moment to sink in. He felt suddenly winded, as if she had lowered his guard then punched him in the stomach. His expression deepened to a scowl. “I get it. You’re saying you get the impression that Bodie—doesn’t care that much about me.”

Kate Ross noted with a frown of her own the way one hand came around himself, hugging his stomach absently. She felt abruptly sorry for him; this was a matter so delicate. So much pride and discretion and confidentiality on the line here. But she said what she could.

“It’s very difficult to get much out of 3.7 at all—”

He laughed, bitterly. “Oh, I can imagine.”

“—But you have to remember that for anybody at all, the most difficult things to talk about are the things which are the most difficult to face up to—”

He was off on his own tack now, scarcely hearing her. “No wonder the partnership’s deterioratin’, then; perhaps what he wants is a new partner altogether.”

And his smile was hard, artificial, every line in his body tense as he sat there not listening to her, mind racing on his inner concerns.

“Pay attention, 4.5,” she said impatiently. “That really isn’t what I’m saying at all. Since he can’t or won’t talk about his feelings, we can only use our intelligence and look at what’s there in front of us.”

“Well, what *is* there in front of you?” Doyle demanded, his eyes fixing on hers, searching. “What exactly does he tell you about me?”

“I can’t tell you that, you know I can’t.” Kate Ross regarded him with something like pity, but like all her emotions it was utterly detached. “And if I could, it wouldn’t help you much. Far more telling—”

“What?”

“—are the things he *doesn’t* say.”

Dr Ross took a deep breath. She rifled through her pages, pulled one out at random. “13th March 1979, oral sex in 3.7’s car. 17th March, similar incident off-duty. 25th March—training session—sexual incident followed—”

She looked straight up, straight into the hard green eyes blazing out of his pale face framed by those blessed curls— “I stopped detailing these incidents once they had established themselves as a regular occurrence. But every date, every time, every detail, I got from you, 4.5. 3.7 has never, not in any of his interviews with me since his sexual relationship with you began, given me any hint that it existed.”

DOYLE hefted down the most serious smg he could find in the armoury, took it out into the practice arena.

So, all his searching for complex explanations had been a waste of time: it was, in fact, all perfectly simple. Blind. He had been such a blind, stupid fool.

He faced the target, swung the gun up to his shoulder and kept his finger on the trigger, rocksteady as the recoil beat a pacy tattoo on his collarbone, the power of the thing vibrating in his hands as the bullets sped away and scythed through every target in turn.

Then he broke it in half, reloaded, lifted it again.

The pounding in his ears, the sounds of splintering wood right, left and centre, didn't antagonise him one bit. It was better, after all, than thinking.

Above the arena, looking down through a one-way glass window, Cowley rested his hands on the ledge before him and watched in silence.

"I hope it was the right thing to do," said the woman behind him.

"Aye. So do I..."

"But there really wasn't an alternative. You've seen 3.7's latest psychological evaluations, which I'm sorry to say only confirm my earlier predictions. He's in really quite a disastrous downward emotional spiral, and the relationship with 4.5 is not only not helping in its current configuration, it's actually making things worse. They have to break apart, resolve all these conflicts."

Cowley mused, looking down at Doyle decimating plywood with high-velocity magnesium flashing. "Can they do that?"

Dr Ross came to stand beside him. For a moment she too looked down in silence, watching. Then she said, "He's intelligent. Sensitive. Though today he was missing the point by miles."

"He'll get there," Cowley said.

"Let's hope so." She turned to go.

"Look," said Cowley. "Come here and look at this," and she joined him again at the window. A tall dark man was moving out behind Doyle and as they watched Doyle turned, a conversation took place. It was of the briefest: then Doyle shoved the gun against Bodie's chest, hard, hard enough to make him take two steps backwards, and pushed past him, hands in his pockets.

"They have to go back before they can go forwards," Kate Ross said, but Cowley had turned away from the view, away from her, and left.

"Don't talk to me." Doyle thrust the gun into Bodie's arms, hard enough to hurt him, and pushed past.

"—Ray—?" Bodie said, astonished. Murphy had come over to join him and they gazed together at Doyle's stiff-shouldered retreat.

"What's up with him?" Murphy raised an eyebrow.

"Wrong time of the month," Bodie quipped, but it was the wrong joke, the wrong time, the wrong man. After a frozen moment Doyle turned around. His eyes on Bodie were very direct, chill as winter, a white line of pressure around his mouth.

"Never give up, do you Bodie?" He stepped in closer, fast, delicate. Seeing it coming, but unbelieving until the last possible moment, Bodie raised crossed fists in front of his face, blocked the kick, but the fast following punch floated through under his guard and thudded solidly, with all Doyle's weight, into his belly.

With an 'oof' of pain Bodie went down. Doyle spun immediately on his heel to deal with Murphy, who was moving in on him to restrain him, knocking his hands away, ready for more. The other agent backed off before the light in Doyle's eye.

But Doyle's smile was sunny, almost sweet, his hair flying in the breeze as he asked, "Done laughing, Murphy?"

"I'm not laughing," Murph said very slowly, very calmly: deliberately turning his back on Doyle he bent down to see to Bodie.

Doyle turned away from both of them and left, moving fast for the exit, not looking to one side or the other.

It was after midnight when his doorbell rang. Just Bodie's usual time. Jarred awake, Doyle unpeeled himself from the sofa and then sat back down again, heavily.

Christ, he was tired. Drunk.

Had thrown himself with more than usual gusto into the mad disco beat of a London nightlife underworld, and it had helped him forget, for a while. But he had come home alone; didn't trust himself with anyone, not tonight.

The doorbell again. He crossed to the intercom. "Go away, Bodie."

"The hell I will. Look, Doyle: enough's enough. Let me in."

Bodie looked in no better shape than himself, whitefaced, red around the eyes, whisky on his breath. "Where've you been all evening? I've been trying you since six."

"Madder music, stronger wine," Doyle answered, pleased with himself. "You know—dancin'..." He groped about for the rest of it, found it delightfully to the point. "*Pale lost lilies*, and all that."

Bodie stared back at him without expression. "What are you going on about?"

"Dowson—"

"Oh, I know Dowson, all right. Surprised at you, though."

“Why—got a monopoly on literature, ’ave you?” Doyle was pleased with the way he had got the tricky words out. “Whoops. Wait a minute. Isn’t it supposed to be a girly sort of thing, poetry? That won’t do, Bodie.” He wagged a solemn finger. “Won’t do at all. You’ll have to give it up—take up the dogs instead. Ge’us a drink.”

“Haven’t you had enough?” But Bodie complied anyway and Doyle gulped at it in relief, feeling the fiery fronds warm the chill cast around his heart like a spell. Bodie came close to him then, too close for comfort. Doyle swung away, went to sit a distance away, gazed up at his moody dark partner with brighteyed malevolence.

“What you doin’ ere, anyway? Feelin’ frisky, were you?” He laughed, not pleasantly. “Stupid question. Why else would you be ’ere? Well, you can forget it. I’m not doin’ business tonight. If I’d been sittin’ in the window, red light on, hitchin’ up me stockin’s, well. Would have been different—”

“Stop it, Ray.” Bodie’s voice cracked out like gunfire.

“Well, you fuck off then,” Doyle said, and took another long pull at his glass. It really seemed to help. Pity the effect was so temporary—about thirty seconds a sip, he reckoned. And if he stopped pouring it down his throat, then nothing would hold back the tides of hurt and anger; sadness...

“What’s wrong, Ray?” Bodie paced round the room, hands in his pockets, very reined in.

Doyle hooted. “Oh, good one, Bodie, good one. Ask me what’s right. Would take less time to tell you.”

Bodie said in a tight, clipped way, “Is it what we—what I did the other night?”

Bodie had the guts to look at him anyway. Doyle pretended to consider, cradling his glass on his chest. “What was that then?” His eyes, mocking, ablaze, held Bodie’s hard. Bodie took a step towards him.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. On my life, I swear it.”

Doyle made a dismissive wave in the air. “Least of my troubles. Want to do it again, do you?” His hand went to the buckle of his jeans, opened them, halted. “Oops, wai’a’minute. You need me to wear the women’s panties, right? Ge’ me another drink and maybe I’ll put them on. Suspenders too if you like. Drink first.”

Bodie was watching him now with a hard, drawn expression; his mouth twisted. “You’ve had enough.”

“Haven’t had any at all,” Doyle said, and laughed, and hiccupped, delightfully. “Maybe I should just get

back to me beat after all. Turn on the red light, sit in the window awhile. Slack Alice, they call me, round the docks.”

Bodie turned away; his shoulders slumped wearily. “Ray, you’re not making any sense. I’ll come back—”

“Don’t bother,” Doyle said, and hurled his glass, with all his strength, at the opposite wall, right beside Bodie. “Not if you can’t even get me a fucking *drink*.”

In the aftermath of the explosion Bodie just stood there, brushing broken glass out of his hair. “Look, Doyle. The things I said the other night—I was—shocked. Didn’t know what I was sayin’. Shocked by what I did,” he added, staring dispassionately at his bloody palm, “Not you.”

“Yeah, you meant it though, didn’t you? Said it enough times. Think I’m a bit of a tart, don’t you, Bodie? You’re always sayin’ it. Ask Kate Ross. She knows.”

“Knows what?”

“Oh, but you don’t talk to her, do you? Made me look a right bloody fool, you did—” Bodie was turning his back on him, going out of the room. Doyle leapt to his feet, prowled after him, the rush to his head making him momentarily dizzy.

Bodie stood with his back to him at the kitchen sink, rinsing blood and water away. “And what exactly do *you* tell her, Ray?” The smooth, dangerous lilt was back in Bodie’s voice.

“Oh, I tell her everything, me. I thought that was the whole bloody point. I didn’t know it had to be a deep dark secret, stupid of me, I know.”

Bodie stood there, very still, with his back to Doyle.

“Yes it was. Very stupid.”

“Slackmouthed, that’s me,” Doyle remarked. “Slack everything, you might say. Turn around.”

And after a moment Bodie did, his face paper white, a deep bright vein of temper in his eye. Doyle took Bodie’s hand, looked at it: one quite nasty cut at the base of his finger, bright blood welling as he watched. He put it to his mouth, sucked it away, rich, salty sweet.

Then he dropped to one knee on the floor, looking up at Bodie’s face, provocative, dæmonic, Bodie’s blood on his lips. “What d’you want then? Blow job do? Be quickest. I tell you what, come in under a minute and I’ll let you have it on the house.” He rubbed one hand over his face, sniffed, sitting back on his heels all attentive for Bodie’s reply. Compliant and dutiful. Like the whore Bodie thought he was.

“You bastard, Doyle,” Bodie whispered, that terrible brightness back in his eyes and spilling over into his voice. “You bastard.”

Doyle was fully expecting a kick in the face, was braced for it, victory of a sort.

But Bodie simply pushed past him, gently enough,

and left. Doyle stayed where he was for a moment, listening to Bodie’s footsteps, the door slam, and far off, a car engine exploding into life, roaring away.

He leaned his head against the kitchen cupboard, sick, tired, dizzy. Well, that was it then.

End of the affair.

PART 2
WILDER JUSTICE

ANSON LOOMED BEHIND HIM AND WHISPERED IN HIS EAR, “I HEAR YOUR PARTNER’S gone seriously off the rails.”

“Yeah?” Doyle was pulling off his black balaclava, stuffing it in his locker, getting out his biking helmet, gloves. “Well, for what it’s worth, Rob, his scores were still up on 95% of the section.”

Anson wasn’t impressed. “Word is, they’re considering standing him down.”

“Well, if they do—” he turned and gave Anson a blazing smile—“play your cards right and it could be you an’ me, sunshine.”

Anson shuddered visibly. Word had it that Doyle was only one degree less off the wall than his psycho partner. Doyle was rumoured to be holding the partnership together—just. Cowley’s favourite team were flying wild, close to the wind, at present. But they were still flying.

Doyle didn’t watch Anson go; he was looking forward to getting home, stripping off his clothes, getting into a hot bath. Afterwards he had in mind a pizza out with his current girl, followed by a session at one of the all-night dance clubs—

“Ray.”

He straightened without hurrying, turned around to see Bodie there. Doyle regarded him for a moment: Bodie was tense, preoccupied, wired-up, and whatever it all meant it sure as hell wasn’t helping his field performance.

“You wanna watch yourself, mate,” he commented, not unkindly. “Cowley and Macklin got their eye on you. Just a friendly word of advice.”

“Yeah, right. Doyle—I need you to do me a favour.” Bodie’s nostrils were flared, his eyes sparkling, fairly fizzing with energy.

“What sort of favour?” They were walking out now, towards the carpark. Doyle turned towards his Norton, slipped on his gauntlets and straddled the

broad leather seat, swinging his helmet by the strap as he waited for Bodie’s reply. Bodie patted the saddle behind him.

“I want you to ride in a race for me.”

“What for?”

“No questions, Doyle. For old times sake—okay?” Still on that high of suppressed excitement, agitation, Bodie gave him some scant details and took himself off, leaving Doyle pensive, restless.

Old times, eh.

Oh, Bodie. What went wrong with us?

“SHUSAY’S opinion is that Bodie is very sick.”

Kate Ross spread her hands. “Haven’t I been telling you that?”

Cowley gave her a sharp glance, and made his reply as wordily pedantic as he could. “Indeed you have. But I feel I must point out, Doctor, that although you originally attributed 3.7’s emotional problems to his inability to come to terms with his sexual relationship with 4.5, the termination of that relationship has not brought about any noticeable improvement.”

“In fact, it seems to have accelerated some sort of a crisis,” Kate Ross agreed with him calmly, noting that Cowley sounded almost aggrieved. Just as if he thought that psychiatrists actually planted the emotional problems instead of simply reporting on what they found.

“So this doesn’t surprise you?”

“Bodie has a lot of conflicts to resolve before he can make any sensible decisions about his life, and at the moment, that doesn’t appear to include 4.5. In fact, both of them are pursuing new affairs—heterosexual ones—”

“Ah yes,” Cowley agreed. “Miss Jennifer Black...

Unremarkable, I thought.”

“I don’t imagine he has any long term plans for her.” *A smokescreen. Like Doyle’s girl, and the one before, and the one before that. A little cipher of normality, safe and unthreatening.*

“Women’s Lib would not approve of 3.7 and 4.5,” she said aloud, and Cowley darted a piercing glance at her.

“What’s your outlook on all this, Doctor?”

“I’m not in the business of haphazard prophecy, Major Cowley,” Kate Ross said severely.

Cowley sighed and resisted the temptation to criticise: for all he knew, he would have liked to say, 3.7 and 4.5 had been handling the matter in their own way without interference, however well meaning. Now what was he left with—? One good man, the best, a handsbreadth away from compulsory standby status; and one step away from the breakup of the best team he had ever had.

Sad times.

“Do you feel he harbours any resentment towards you?”

Doyle shifted in his chair. “I don’t know... Not on the face of it.” *He damn well would if he knew Cowley’d dragged it out of me that I wouldn’t be including him in my projected assault team—*

“And yet, in some ways, nothing seems to have changed—”

“Well, not for the better, no,” Doyle agreed ironically.

“—taking, for instance, the matter of the water pistol—”

Doyle groaned, hands flying up to rummage in his hair, tired of this one. “Look, we’ve gone over this before. He didn’t mean anything by it. It was a *joke*, for chrissake. I didn’t take it the wrong way or anything. Just Bodie’s odd sense of humour, thassall.”

The look she gave him was very direct. “You say you didn’t take it the wrong way. I’d say perhaps you did...if you accepted it as a simple joke.”

“Don’t tell me it had some complex hidden message. That’s the trouble with you lot, everything does. If I blew my nose you’d trace it back to something happened when I was five, wouldn’t you?”

“I can’t believe you’re so naive, 4.5, that you don’t see the symbolism,” she replied quite coldly.

“Look, you’ve spent a lot of time this year convincin’ me that Bodie really doesn’t like me all that much. Well, okay, I’m convinced. So when he

shoots me with a water pistol, what he’d really like to do is shoot me for real, is that it? Well okay, I’ll buy that. If it keeps you happy.”

Kate Ross only shook her head. “You’re still missing the point, 4.5. And since quite frankly I don’t see any chance at all of matters improving before 3.7 resolves this current crisis of emotion—one way or the other—I see no virtue in continuing. All your reports confirm you as fit for duty. Mine will concur. This interview is terminated.”

She spoke these last words into her microphone, then snapped it off. Still he lingered, wandering over to the window, then back again to perch on her desk. Dark head down, she was writing furiously. He couldn’t decipher it.

Couldn’t decipher any of it. He only knew Bodie’s obsession with these bikers, with the red-headed girl, was bad news, indicative of some deeper blacker turmoil within.

“Are you worried about Bodie?” he asked her abruptly.

“Very seriously worried,” she replied. Well, that was reassuring.

And as he reached the door her last words rang out behind him:

“If you want my advice—”

“It would be?” he said without turning.

“Don’t let him out of your sight.”

Over a half of bitter in the pub Doyle frowned to himself, replaying the interview in his head over and over, worrying. *“Don’t let him out of your sight.”*

All very well for her to say. He didn’t see that much of Bodie any more. Doyle had his own life now which he pursued with energy, and Bodie wasn’t a part of it any longer. He saw that as much Bodie’s choice as his own.

Mind you, he missed it. Wasn’t a day went by when he didn’t look at Bodie and be taken by surprise; his body remembered, too well, even though his intellect said no. Remembered the days he could throw out any little spark and Bodie would catch fire from it.

The sex had been magic: but what else did they have?

Well, what else was there.

Doyle did not even know, any longer, just what he was looking for.

“Do you think he’d have killed me?”

Bodie was referring to Cowley, walking away from them at this moment, getting further away all the time.

“Yeh, I reckon he might have.” Doyle crouched over, recovering his breath.

Bodie exhaled, long and hard. “And since he didn’t—” Bodie turned to look at him, not really taking him in, very far away.

“Since he didn’t, *I’m* going to bloody well kill you!” Doyle exploded.

Bodie clearly didn’t understand this, looking at him as if he’d flipped, which was ironic, considering.

“Look, Bodie, I didn’t want to be any part of all this. It was *your* thing, your personal vendetta, your war, and I don’t pretend to understand any of it. But we’re—partners, so for godsake, I went with you some of the way. Nearly got myself killed for you in that stupid race—and just so you could score some sort of a point off a man with even less brain cells than you. And then I’m bloody stupid enough to throw in my lot with you, in *your* fight, when I see you’re way outnumbered. Well, just whose fuckin’ side did you think I was fighting on, eh Bodie? Eh?” He punched a vicious finger into Bodie’s chest, eyes positively sparking with fury. “I was risking a heck of a thumping, I knew that—eight big mindless thugs and only two of us. Of *us*. Hah. And then I hadn’t even reckoned on being swiped by the bloke I was wading in to help.”

Bodie had cottoned by now, was shaking his head. “Didn’t hit you—did I?”

“Of course you did, you dumb crud. Walloped me with a bloody great tree trunk when I was coming in to help.”

Bodie’s navyblue gaze was focused right on him, very direct, very serious. He rubbed the side of his nose as he said, “I swear it, Ray, I never meant to hit you. Just lost my head a bit, that’s all.” He tried to smile but it didn’t work as a smile, came across more as a cry for help.

Doyle grumbled, “Yeah, you’re not kidding. You need to get yourself together, you do, mate.” He glanced across at Cowley, deep in conference with Kate Ross. “An’ funnily enough I know just the person to help you.” Bodie looked that way and grimaced.

“I’m off,” Doyle said, leaning down, plucking his jacket off the ground. As he came back to the vertical he glanced at his partner and caught his expression. Bodie was pale, tightlipped, face set. “Ah—don’t look like that,” Doyle said, voice dropping, but the eyes

which flicked up to meet his were still shadowed, haunted. Doyle moved in closer, the old, sick hunger in him, and he closed his fingers around Bodie’s muscular forearm. Bodie was trembling, deep and fast.

“*Bodie*.” Doyle enfolded him in a hard embrace, not caring if Cowley was watching. “Look, mate—if ever you need me—You know where I am.”

Bodie didn’t move at all, and didn’t move in his grasp; his nostrils flared a little, his lip curled as he looked down at Doyle. So Doyle let him go, slowly, and loped off through the woods to his car without looking back.

He thought about Bodie, that night, alone in his flat standing by the window, sipping at a beer, looking out into the night. Hell’s Angel. As an alter ego, it would have suited Bodie, whose alabaster skin and dark good looks were set off by black leather, huge gauntlets, a great bike throbbing between his straddling thighs. Anyone’s dream man, Bodie would be. So much power: and a soul touched by shadows. Magic. The black kind.

And not only that: Bodie intrigued him, yes, because he had that dark vein of otherness somewhere in him: but at the same time he was funny, amusing, silly in a way which appealed to Doyle. And in bed, he had seemed to answer Doyle’s every want, not always in a dramatic kind of way, just naturally, as if it came easily to him. Bodie and himself: the ideal partnership, in bed and out of it.

Doyle’s lips twisted in a savage little smile. Pity Bodie hadn’t seen it that way.

And yet, today, he had made the offer not out of desire but of simple pity. Bodie had looked so—alone.

But even tonight, Bodie didn’t come.

For the first time, Doyle knew he had lost Bodie, lost him for good.

DOYLE felt numbed, slowed down too much for any but the most mechanical of tasks; his insides felt heavy and tense with some dread that dragged him down so that he was dangerously close to drowning. Having followed him home Bodie said, “Make us a cuppa, mate,” and obedient even to the falsely normal tone of Bodie’s voice he trailed into the kitchen, picked up the kettle, took it to the tap, filled it, returned it to the hob.

His eyes felt full and heavy: his vision kept blurring, he had to keep blinking to sweep the haze

away. He took down one mug, and then another, and then simply stood there, disbelieving. She had left him. She really had. He had loved her so much, and he had told her that over and over. And still she had left him.

"You look all in, mate. I'll do that." Bodie's voice came from behind him, rough with sympathy, and he took the mugs from Doyle and began to put together drinks with an efficiency Doyle could only detachedly admire. He kept breathing in, trying to ease the deep, sick feeling in his belly, but it stayed there like a lump of stone.

"Siddown," Bodie said to him. "Drink this." Some man on the radio was bemoaning in lugubrious tone—*somewhere, somehow, somebody must have kicked you around some...* and that was exactly how he felt, just as if he had been kicked. Kicked hard in the guts by some flying punch, kicked and left for dead or dying from some unstoppable internal bleeding.

He sat, mind numb, body in dread, hands wrapped around the hot mug of coffee Bodie had set in front of him.

"You look done in, Ray," Bodie said again. "I'd get an early night if I were you."

Yes, well. Certainly there was no point in going out on the town to celebrate.

His eye caught sight of a mark on the table. Tomato sauce. Not ketchup—the real thing. They had had pasta last night—he had made it himself, whistling as he put it together in dashing chef's style. In return Ann had offered to clear up. Looking round, however, he could see that not only could she not cook, cleaning didn't seem to be her forte either: he jumped to his feet, fetched a cloth, and wiped the table to remove the errant sauce stain, and then began on the cooker, which had either been done very sketchily or not at all. But then, they had had better things to do last night.

Bodie was watching him uneasily. "Look, Ray, don't bother with that. I'll have a bit of a cleanup for you if you like. You just go and get your head down."

"Comes to something, dunnit," he said, head down, still scrubbing. "When two bachelors make a better job of it than some bird."

"Yeh, well, struck me she was far too much of a lady to get her hands dirty."

Doyle absorbed that, heard the note in Bodie's voice and something slipped into place for him:

"*Look, I like Ann, okay.*"

Bodie had been lying. He didn't like Ann, not anything about her.

"Reckon you've put your finger right on it, Bodie. Yeah, that's it. An' if she'd have stayed with me, she'd have got her hands dirty all right, wouldn't she?"

CI5, killing people, blood on his shirts that she'd have to wash out.

"—And she wouldn't have liked that." Head hanging down, cloth stilled, he stared at the cooker.

Bodie said, looking past him, "Can't really blame her for that, Ray. How many of us find someone who sticks around for long? It's not a job you can leave behind when you come in the door."

"S true," Doyle agreed. He chucked the cloth into the sink. "And I obviously wasn't worth giving it much of a try."

Bodie said with an edge to his voice, "Not to her, no." And when Doyle turned hard on his heel to catch his gaze Bodie faced him out, bleak and determined. "Well, someone had to say it. Truth is, Doyle, anyone could see little Miss Prissy Knickers wasn't going to hang around longer than it took her to work out she wasn't going to be able to change you into the sort of bloke she really wanted—9-5, white collar, 20K a year and a membership to the golf club. She wasn't right for you, Ray. Writing was on the wall from the start."

"Oh yeah," Doyle said, and repeated it, anger, something, making him shiver violently again and again; "And what would you know about it? *Did you bug my bedroom?*"

Bodie met his eyes, unflinching. "I didn't need to to see she was a bitch. Just a bitch, Ray. Like that other frigid cow you hooked yourself up to—one who made out you were too low to touch her tits."

For a moment Doyle's mind flashed back to that night in Scotland: Susanna might have been frigid, he and Bodie had paid her back for that, rolling riotously in the muck till dawn. And had she guessed—? No; but she had sensed—something, and he hadn't cared, had flung that not-caring in her face: *you may not want me, darlin', but someone else, someone better, does.*

Until Bodie had dumped him too, of course.

A long line of failed affairs: Susanna. Shelley. Sophie. Annabel. Claire. All the way down to the only ones who had really mattered to him: Bodie. And Ann.

He turned away from Bodie deliberately, saw himself in the mirror, watching himself without mercy: pale face, marked at one cheek by violence, too-wide eyes huge and overbright; unless you liked the frog resemblance, nothing special, not in any way.

"Yeah, should be used to it by now, shouldn't I?"

Quite right, Bodie. No-one hangs around with me for long, christ, you'd think I'd have learned that by now. Should learn to keep me 'ands to meself, shouldn't I?"

He saw Bodie's sudden movement behind him, and Bodie said sharply, without pity, "We all go through it, mate. Listening to you, you'd think no-one else knew what it was like."

"Oh yeah?" Bodie, who only had to lift an eyebrow to bring the hordes running, any female you cared to name, Glad the tea lady, Mike the night porter, Cowley who loved him better than Scotland. Doyle looked at Bodie with a sort of envy, really looked at him, took in the classic beauty of his face and his eyes, the strength of his hands and his body—"Don't pretend *you* know what it's like, mate, because I'll just throw up on you. It never 'appens to you."

He had bid for Bodie, in the past. And lost.

"Of course it does," Bodie said, cold, distant. His eyes swept darkly over Doyle. "You think you're the only person who falls for someone who couldn't give a toss for you when it comes down to it?" He waved a hand in the air. "Ah, come off it, Doyle. Rough justice, I'd say myself."

For the life of him Doyle couldn't see why Bodie was taking this line with him. It really was almost funny. Still, better anger than sympathy, any day. In another moment they'd be fighting, and that was just what he felt like. Yeah: slug it out with Bodie, nice end to the day. He'd get to sleep anyway; one good punch to the jaw from Bodie's solid fist should do it.

"Thanks, Bodie. Ever thought of joinin' the Samaritans? You'd be a natural. I'm telling you." He went to the fridge. Wrenched it open. Knelt and looked inside. "Only trouble is, you're supposed to be talking us away from the the overdose, not recommending a good all-night chemist." Two cans of beer at the back. He reached in.

Bodie was right there behind him, voice unexpectedly low, almost gentle. Trying—"Look. I'm sorry Ann's gone. I know you're feeling terrible. I wish—"

"—what?" Doyle prompted. Carrying the cans he rose to his feet and turned to find himself pinioned in the circle of Bodie's arms. And at the last moment Bodie did not move away. *I wish—*

Instant reaction. Doyle struck him off with a force and a violence which threw them apart like 10,000 volts.

"Ah, Bodie—*don't start all that again.*"

It had cost him, after all, so many nights and days of struggle to come to terms with it, to realise that there was going to be no happy ending, that Bodie

was never going to walk back in the door, hang his hat on the hook and come back to him. One little touch...was all it took to remind him. Bitterness. Hurt. And loss.

Strangely it was those very things he saw mirrored in Bodie's eyes, before Bodie took a deep breath and struck at him—

"You little bastard. I wasn't coming on to you. I was just—trying to be nice to you, for godsake."

"Nice," he sneered, rocking on his feet. "Well, don't bother on my account. I'm not used to it. Shock might kill me."

He paced around the kitchen, so restless, simmering, dangerously close to the sort of outburst he knew he'd regret and didn't care, announcing to the room: "What a bloody perfect day. The girl I wanted to marry dumps me. And my ex-lover offers me a mercy fuck."

He was flirting with danger now, actually courting Bodie's fury, but Bodie had his own little spurt of violence well in hand now, answering him quietly, black eyes ranging over him, "Yeh, I know. Hell of a day for you. Have a drink, Ray. Get to bed."

Bodie took the cans from him and set them down, reaching instead for the whisky bottle on the shelf. He poured them both a tumbler-full, and Doyle watched him, feeling suddenly desperately, threateningly tired. Trouble was, anger kept him going, flying out on a high taut line; but Bodie's softness he knew he could not take, he was in danger of letting go, to fall. To throw himself into Bodie's arms for the sheer...comfort of it. He sensed it was there, his but for the asking. It would be so easy.

And then he would lose every last shred of pride he had and weep out loud.

Not possible. Not allowed.

The drink helped a bit; he wandered, glass in hand, into his little lounge, sat on the settee where he and Ann had looked at photographs together. Before he had positively registered that some of the shivers which racked him were due to cold, Bodie was there throwing a sweater at him.

"You're blue. Not a pretty sight. Put that on." And Bodie sat down, safely on the other side of the room.

"I really loved her, you know," he said, struggling into the sweater.

"Yeh, I know."

"Why didn't she love me? Wouldn't have hurt her to try, would it?"

"These things happen."

"What do I do now?" He laughed, bitter, empty.

Bodie got up and filled his glass without being asked. Doyle drank it down and realised after a moment that Bodie was talking to him, answering his question:

“Give it a bit of time, eh? You’ll find someone else. One day.”

“No point to it though, is there? I keep on tryin’. Can’t do any more. And it always ends up this way.”

The alcohol released all his tight control in a rush; when he shut his eyes this time it was to stem the flow of angry tears. He felt the settee dip beside him and Bodie’s arm go around him.

“Look, it might seem that way tonight. You’re getting maudlin, Ray, it’s the drink. Just because one tight little bitch dumped on you doesn’t mean you’re high and dry forever. Just means she wasn’t right for you. I keep telling you.” Bodie’s voice was very warm, very close.

He leaned against Bodie’s shoulder. Pressed his lips tightly together to stop the involuntary quiver of his mouth. “Look, I wanna tell you something. When I think about it—you want to know something, Bodie? No-one’s ever loved me. What do I do wrong?” Steeped in his own misery, a parade of people who had failed to love him stretching back as far as his mother and sisters, he took a while to realise that Bodie had left him. He opened his eyes to see Bodie standing in front of the window, back turned to Doyle, legs apart, hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Bodie—?”

Bodie said without turning: “You’re a selfish bloody bastard at times, aren’t you?”

“What?” Doyle said. His eyes and his nose and his throat were blocked with tears. He dragged his sleeve over his eyes and sniffed.

“Look, I’ve got feelings too, you know. Though sometimes I wondered if you ever knew that...”

“What are you on about?” The change of pace had left him utterly confused.

“Obviously I wasn’t in her class. But didn’t I count?”

“Count what?” He felt dizzy now, befuddled.

Bodie twisted around then and looked at him, darkly enigmatic. “Didn’t I count at all? I loved you.”

Doyle’s heart began to pound unexpectedly, turning over sickly in his chest. He gazed at Bodie without saying anything. Bodie continued, looking at him, through him, into the past, “May not have been what you wanted. I know that. But you can’t have it all ways. Can’t sit here moaning *no-one’s ever loved me* and expect me to nod my head and sweetly agree. Because I haven’t forgotten...though

maybe you have.”

A new shock: he felt number than ever. An arrowstrike right in his heart: he would not feel the pain of it till later.

“I never knew you—”

Bodie interrupted him harshly. “For chrissake, Doyle. Of course you *knew*.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Ah, come off it, Ray. Everyone knew. Cowley knew. Kate Ross knew. Wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a note on it in the Kremlin somewhere. The whole bloody world knew.”

“Well how the fuck was I supposed to know? You never said anything.”

Bodie was looking at him, eyebrow quirked, a little quizzical, as if not quite sure whether Doyle was having him on or not. “Look, Doyle, I didn’t need to stand singing under your window for you to get that I was hung up on you in a big way.”

“Look—I’m telling you—I *never knew*.”

Bodie tossed down the rest of his drink, harshly. “Well, now you do.”

Doyle looked at him, quite silent. Bodie met his eyes in a reckless, devil take it all sort of way. “Might as well spell it out for you, since your brain seems to have switched itself off. When I say, *loved you*, I’d have lain down and died for you. Come to that I still would.” He tipped up his glass again, found it empty, and looked into it, frowning as he said quietly, “Is that good enough for you? You didn’t win her, but you had me. Maybe you don’t reckon that counts for much, like I said. But there it is.”

Bodie’s voice was so quiet Doyle could hardly hear him. He couldn’t seem to think of anything to say. “I never guessed.”

Bodie cast him a look of irritation. “Don’t keep saying that.”

“Why did you ditch me then?” Doyle said thickly. He got to his feet and took the bottle from Bodie. Bodie didn’t let go of it. They stood there holding it between them.

“Get real, Doyle. Had to stop sometime. You were just leading me on, it was just a bit of fun to you.”

“I—” Doyle started, and shut his mouth on it, too fuddled to order his thoughts into coherent speech.

“So you’ll understand,” Bodie said smoothly, “not having managed to get over you entirely, I wasn’t too thrilled when you announced undying love for little Miss Prim, stars in your eyes, opening your big mouth and expecting me to give you a sympathetic ear. Knew *I* couldn’t have you, you didn’t want me,

but that didn't make it any easier for me watching her dangling you on a string."

Yet he had said nothing. Been expected to align himself on Doyle's side and fight George Cowley for the privilege of her hand. Even come round here tonight, because Doyle was miserable, because Doyle needed someone and had not had the grace to say so. And that must have been the bitterest thing of all: watching Doyle's distress because he loved Ann Holly and could not bear that she had left him.

But Bodie had had the courage to do it.

Was that love—?

He was so desperately tired. Tired and sad and drunk. He rubbed his eyes with his hands, fiercely, alone in the middle of the floor.

"Go to bed, Ray. I'll see if I can charm George into letting you have the day off tomorrow." Bodie's voice was getting fainter; he was leaving.

"And if you can't?" he yawned, swaying, asleep on his feet.

"Then it's business as usual, sunshine."

ALMOST usual, anyway. No day off granted, Doyle looked at Bodie sideways once or twice and wondered if he had imagined it.

Well, it made a perverse kind of sense, he could just about see it, how Bodie's longing had reversed itself and denied itself so that it would never show. Rejection hurt. Doyle could testify to that.

Too raw, too vulnerable. Too proud. Too many failures in the past, Marikka, Claire. Yes, you could see why Bodie hadn't exactly laid it on the line.

Doyle hefted the pint up from the bar counter and drank deeply, thoughtfully. The barman dropped change into his hand and Doyle muttered a syllable of thanks.

"*Everyone knew.*"

But he had not.

Had Kate Ross tried to tell him? All but written it down for him? He didn't think so. Highly unethical, that would be, and she was nothing if not relentlessly by-the-book. But she was, however, always telling him tartly that he was *missing the point*. Probably it had all been there for him, if his eyes had opened just a little wider.

"Penny for 'em."

Doyle started. Murphy, big and blue-eyed, swung himself onto the stool next to him and grinned. Dark and handsome. Like Bodie. Only unlike.

"Buy you a pint, Ray?"

"Thanks." Doyle rapidly lowered the level of beer in his glass, swallowing fast.

"You okay?" Murph asked, studiedly casual. Instantly Doyle's senses flipped onto alert. Murphy was here to check up on him. Make sure he wasn't drinking himself into oblivion.

"Oh yeah. Fine. Just another bird, wasn't she, when all's said and done? Plenty more on the tree."

"Good lad," Murphy said with satisfaction.

"Thanks, Barney." He handed over the money and lined up another pint next to Doyle's near-empty one.

"Yeah," Doyle said, "After all, they're all the same, aren't they, when the light's out?" He drained the first pint and closed his hand around the one Murphy had bought him, acknowledging it with a "Cheers."

"Cheers," Murphy said. "That's my boy. Go out and knock 'em dead."

"What, the way I always do?" Doyle agreed caustically. It was on his mind to ask Murphy—

"*Everyone knew*"

—but then again.

"Seen Bodie anywhere?" Murphy was asking, obviously psychic, head swivelling from side to side.

"We're not joined at the hip, y'know." Doyle heard his own voice snap out and catch Murph unawares. Well, so be it. The other man had done his duty: here Doyle was, on CI5 premises, ungassed, undrugged, undead. He fell into a silence, frowning as he stared at his glass.

"Well, better be off now," Murphy said kindly, uneasily, sensing the shutters closing. He finished his beer quickly. "Don't mind, do you? Promised Stuart a game of pool. Join us if you want."

"Thanks," Doyle said, not intending to.

And where was Bodie, then?

Still freezing him out, obviously.

Par for the course.

DOYLE awoke from a shattering dream in which Bodie's mouth, artificially reddened, surrounded his cock in a scarlet 'O'.

Or maybe it was his own mouth around Bodie's cock. Either way it had lit unholy fires in him; he finished the job with a few trembling strokes, his whole body tensed and hushed and thrilled as the easy come shot away from him into his own fist.

He lay with his heart thudding, hand flung up over his eyes. Wonderful. A bizarre erotic dream about Bodie wearing lipstick on the morning he was due his regular quarterly interrogation with Dr Kate

Ross. Word had it she was psychic—well, she was in for a treat then, wasn't she?

He yawned as he threw back the covers, every pulse in his body echoing still with a far-off sweet and sensual note. In the shower he washed the sweat and sex away.

Lipstick. He couldn't ever remember adorning himself with lipstick prior to blowing Bodie, though it was possible: they had done some pretty weird things when the fancy took them. He did remember Bodie finding some stuff under his couch—rolled there from some bird's handbag—and outlining Doyle's nipples in a shocking shade of crimson. He couldn't remember what, if anything, it had done for him, but Bodie had obviously found it a turn-on. And Bodie unleashed was always such a thrill to him, that little nagging sense that Bodie out of control was dangerous...

He shivered as he stepped, naked and dripping, out of the shower feeling defiantly reckless. Let Kate Ross sort it out. He was just in the mood for her today.

But as always, the cold reality of her presence imposed on him the usual sense of obligation: a duty to be honest, or the whole thing was a cheat and only himself to lose in the end. Maybe she *hypnotised him* or something. Whatever it was she did to him it obviously didn't work on Bodie. Bodie who had dodged every which way to avoid any embarrassing disclosures. In any case, she smiled at him this morning, pleased with him, nodding.

"Field scores—exceptional. Fitness rating—in the superior range. And—" she paused, letting the paper drop pointedly to the desk— "*partnership* scores, the highest of the division."

"Well, that's something." He could not repress a grin of pride.

"I'll be making a formal note that the reteaming of yourself with 3.7 has been a success."

"Right—"

"—that's if," she amended, "what I learn from you today doesn't conflict with those statistical findings."

"Right," he agreed, more faintly.

"Statistics maketh not the man," she sermonised gaily, drawing forth a scathing stare from Doyle: christ, but she was frisky today.

Her manner became at once more serious. Not unfriendly, just getting on with the job in hand.

"Perhaps you can tell me why you think there's been such an allround improvement? What's changed in

your life since I last saw you?"

What's changed. A confusing jumble of thoughts popped up into his head. He tried to sort them into some semblance of order and meaning.

"Things have settled down..." he said in the end, vaguely: "The job's—okay; doesn't get any easier, but maybe you learn to deal with it better..."

"Oh, 4.5. A man who reads Hegel? I'm sure you can do better than that."

She certainly seemed to be in a rare old humour today; even verging on the playful! Unbelievable. He ventured a smile at her: just a small one, and was a little disappointed when her expression cooled unmistakably.

"Well, 4.5. I have no worries at present regarding your mental health in respect of your ability to perform your job."

"That's all right, then." He made as if to go.

"So let's move on." And he sank back with a theatrical groan.

"For one minute I thought you were going to let me get away early. Would've been nice. Cowley doesn't allow lunch *and* therapy." His eyes fell on her small rosebud mouth, and lingered there. Lipstick a dark plum colour. Very different from the dream Bodie's. An erotic flash tingled in his nerves as the shadow of the dream touched him; for a moment, he was fully taken by the fanciful vision of Kate Ross going down on him, neat hair tousled, icy skin a little flushed as she mouthed the tip of him—gulped down greedy spurts of come—

Well, are you psychic, Madam Ross?

Evidently her powers in that direction had been overrated, because she remained quite unmoved by any visionary erotica, her composure exact as it ever was as she waited for him to speak.

He had completely forgotten the question, anyway.

...For Kate Ross' part, she was noticing that agent 4.5, name Raymond Doyle, was looking more relaxed today, more like the days of old before he had learned the rules, when he had tried to flirt with her: give her that smile of his which would set out guileless, then metamorphosise into pure or impure seduction: he couldn't help it, she didn't blame him, it was just his nature to try it on. That little, devastating smile which would crease his cheek, the droop of heavy lashes over those eyes—her mother would have called them *bedroom eyes*, and Kate Ross had long ago decided that nature had designed Ray Doyle as her surefire secret

weapon in case the human race ever looked in danger of extinction. It really wasn't his fault he was always out there spreading his sperm around: it was Nature's. Nature had formed Ray Doyle deliberately to be irresistible. It was hard to put your finger on exactly what it was. But, for example: whatever he wore he looked good in it, whether smart, or scruffy as today, in well-washed navy sweatshirt and faded pale denims: he smelt delicious, looked enticing from whatever angle, even when he was tired, even when he was angry, even when he wasn't trying. She would bet money that no-one could resist him for long. She would bet money that no-one could be in the same room with him for long and not have sex cross their mind. Whatever it was, Doyle had it. In spades.

"Sorry," he was saying. "What did you ask?"

She had forgotten, too. She looked down at her notes.

"What's changed, 4.5? What's good in your life at the moment? Tell me about it."

"I wouldn't say anything's *good*, particularly. But I suppose I've come to terms with things, that's all."

"What things?"

"Losing Ann. Losing Bodie..."

Now they were getting there. "Yes, you were engaged for a short while, weren't you?"

No attempt at commiseration, he noticed, and thank god for that. "Only to Ann," he said caustically. "Me an' Bodie, somehow we never got round to it. Couldn't decide on the ring, you see."

She took no notice at all of the sarcasm. "Do you see the two things in the same light?" When he didn't immediately reply she continued, quoting from her notes, "'*Losing Ann. Losing Bodie*'. Let's take Miss Holly for a start. What would you do, 4.5, if she came back tomorrow? Let's say, she'd had time to think—? Realised she'd made a mistake—?"

He opened his eyes wide at the unconscious cruelty of it. "I'd be over the moon," he said slowly, deliberately. *You stupid cow*.

"No second thoughts, then, on your part? The engagement would be on again—" she held up a hand— "Don't say anything for a moment. Just think about it for a little while."

Inwardly mutinous, Doyle shut his eyes, crossed his arms and sulked. But after a while of calm silence he grew bored of the inner view of his eyelids and summoned her up, after all.

There she was. Cool, pale, beautiful. Cool even in bed; it was half her fascination, engaging all of his

most aggressively male instincts in the battle to one day break through that moonlight cool and bring forth all her inner warmth and passion—

And what a typical male fantasy *that* was. He could see it now: she would be a Susanna. How long would it be before they got back from the opera or some cultural book-binding event, and he would turn to her, in love, to be met with '*don't let's spoil our beautiful evening, Ray*'—

Well yes, she was essentially cold. And would not hesitate to be cruel: he knew that already.

Would he really want to spend a lifetime with her?

And the damning answer came: no.

Three years, perhaps, before he was looking elsewhere for the warmth and passion denied him at home: she would not look outside, not she, she'd be too taken up with their two pale cool children, George and Olivia, and her part-time career, and her evening classes in interior design. So then there would be an amicable divorce, conducted with the same impeccable civility and restraint threaded throughout her entire life: they would lose touch almost straight away, write one another off as one of those mistakes, she still up there on her higher plane of art and culture, himself slipped back again, down into the underworld of his life that was not hers, death, blood, sweat, lust, *life*.

He opened his eyes wide as it all flashed before him like a dream, and it could have been true. Feeling Kate Ross' curious gaze on him did nothing for his temper: he felt disloyal, to Ann perhaps, but most of all to his own eager idealistic self which had begged Ann to marry him as if his one chance of happiness depended on it.

"What do you want me to say?" he snapped, and she deflected him calmly.

"I don't *want* you to say anything. I just asked you to think about it."

And then his temper broke as he slammed both hands down on the table in front of him. "All right. It would never have worked. So it's turned out for the best. Then why do I still feel so bloody lousy about it?"

Kate Ross regarded him unsmilingly. "Only you can answer that, 4.5."

He was ready for that one. "Five bloody years of training, and you can't give me an answer?"

"—because it wouldn't help you if I did."

"Try me." His eyes were bright with challenge.

"The only conclusions worth anything at all are the ones you draw for yourself. Of all the people I

work with in here, I'd say you were the closest to understanding that, 4.5."

"Doesn't say much for the rest of 'em, then," he jeered.

"But you know I'm right."

He took a deep breath. "All right. Write off Ann. So now you're going to tell me—no. Now you're going to *help* me *discover* just how much better off I am without Bodie?"

"Well, that depends, doesn't it? At the beginning of this conversation you seemed to equate the two circumstances: *losing Ann*. *Losing Bodie*. But are they in fact the same?"

Her calm manner, unchanged throughout his own fluctuating moods, was doing its job, bringing him down rapidly from the peak. He put his head in his hands, rested his eyes against his fingers for a brief moment.

"I can't think any more. Tell me."

She took pity on him: "What I'm suggesting, what I want you to think about, is the reasons for you throwing yourself so wholeheartedly into a relationship you can see now would never have worked."

Why had he?

The answer came clear and cold: because he had been burned by Bodie, that was why. On the rebound. What a cliché. But like all the best clichés, it had the merit of authenticity.

"I took the next best thing, after Bodie, that came along. Just to prove—"

"It's a very easy trap to fall into," she soothed. "Quite typical. And some people, of course, never recover from that. It becomes a downward spiral, and it repeats itself over and over again, falling from one failed relationship to the next without any real thought as to whether it might work or not: as if it's enough to be seen to be succeeding, for however brief a time; and, are you listening to me 4.5? We don't want that for you. You can do better than that for yourself."

He sighed. All the weight of the world on his soul.

"So, as in many things, it's time to look *backwards*. To sort out what went wrong there, before you can move on to the future. So let's go back, 4.5. To Bodie." It was so rare for her to use their names that he looked up at her, his face blurred with chagrin. "After you and 3.7 put an end to your sexual relationship, there was a marked decline in your psychological profiles."

"Oh, that's a surprise," he said sarcastically. "Bet you needed to look that one up." His gaze canted

upwards to the ranks of thickest tomes around the wall, detailing between them, no doubt, every smallest facet of human nature and its cause. Including the fact that a final, terminating row with your lover could send you into a temporary decline.

"Did you miss the physical side of your relationship?"

"Yeh," he drawled, offensive. "Never been to bed with Bodie, have you? Ah, shame." Bright, bold eyes sought out hers, attempted to engage her in provocation. But she simply looked at him calmly, dispassionately.

"But you made no effort to resume it."

"No."

"Why was that?"

His hands gripped tight, tighter, on the corner of the desk, a small gesture she did not miss, weighing his obvious tension in her mind against the benefits of continuing. But it was time, really. All this had gone on long enough.

He said at last: "In some ways, it seemed the best thing..."

"Yes?" Looking at her, he got no clues as to her thoughts. He went on: "It was goin' the wrong way—we didn't see eye to eye about a lot of things—And I didn't realise—"

"You didn't realise what?"

"Look, I didn't realise Bodie saw it as anything more than an easy lay nights he was too lazy to go out and pull some bird."

"Is that how *you* saw it?" she probed, gently.

He gave her a smile, flirtatious again, even. "Yeah, sometimes."

"And at other times?"

"—other times—" he shrugged. "I dunno... I had this feeling, stupid really, we'd be all right together. Just the two of us, you know? No-one else. But Bodie never seemed to want any more than what we had. I mean, he fancied me. Oh yeh, he *wanted* me all right. But somehow I never guessed it was any more than that for him."

She was careful not to let anything show, not by so much as a flicker of one eyebrow. "And was it more than that?"

He flicked a glance up at her. "Well, you should know. Can't see why he'd lie about it. According to Bodie everyone knew, including you." He didn't say it in an aggrieved sort of way: Doyle knew the rules. But it would have been only human of him to hold it against her.

So. When the breakthrough had come, it had been

that easy. Somehow, some time when she was not looking at them, not checking them, had her attention on some other problem from the many Cowley threw her way, Bodie had made that leap in the dark. Told Doyle what had been obvious to Kate Ross for many months. And found, she hoped, some peace.

"4.5." She recalled him from his thoughts. "We've made a lot of progress today: I think you'll find it useful. Just one more thing—"

She was looking at him quite nicely for her, not sympathetic exactly, but warmer than usual. Doyle suddenly had the impression that she liked him rather more than he had ever realised. It was enough to make him grin at her, leaning back and stretching in his chair, raking a hand through his hair. "Haven't I coughed up enough for you to get off on yet?"

"Just one more thing," she repeated. She had never, by word or implication, come close to this before. But it was time. Get him past this, and then he could move on by himself.

"Why did you and 3.7 decide to split up?"

He only looked at her, no grin now. She continued: "You had—not a perfect relationship, but a workable one. More workable, as we've seen, than the one you had with the woman you asked to marry you. You had regular sex together and very often you preferred that, both of you, to sex with your girlfriends. What went wrong, 4.5?"

He took a deep breath, but did not reply straight away.

"Can you tell me about it?" she asked, definitely gentle now.

"It's not easy..."

"Take your time."

He was frowning now, staring down at his own hand resting on the desk in front of him, tapping his fingers restlessly. "Bodie—couldn't handle it."

"Mm?" she said to encourage him after a moment.

"Well, you know he couldn't. You told me yourself he never could admit to you that he went to bed with me." He stared up at her, those strange green eyes narrow, focused. "He had a kind of thing about queers—poofers, call 'em what you like. My guess is, he couldn't stand to think of himself like that."

"Are you saying, you were 3.7's first male sexual partner—?"

A small, involuntary smile. "Oh no, very unlikely." The smile went out. "But you see, Bodie—and people like him, I've met 'em before—they think it's okay to—" Dr Ross smiled inwardly as she watched him scrolling down his vocabulary to find something

suitable for her—"to grab a bit of sex with another bloke. Quick and easy, no strings, no words if you don't want to bother with 'em. I expect Bodie was used to that. Army days, and all that. But—"

"But it wasn't like that?"

"Sometimes it was," he said directly. "And sometimes—"

She let the frowning reverie he had fallen into carry on for some time before she prompted him—"Sometimes?"

He roused himself, looked her unflinchingly in the eye. "I think Bodie was getting in too deep. And he couldn't take it. Ah, you know him. You know how he has to be alone. He has to be independent. Just that bit further out than everybody else. He was backing off, and I didn't want to let him. And then—" He looked at the window briefly, brought his gaze back to Kate Ross silently waiting, a little defiant, a little angry now. "We did a few—farout things. It worried Bodie. Disturbed him. He liked it—but then he didn't like it, if you know what I mean."

"Bondage?" she asked, perfectly cool. "The sexual politics of power?"

He was looking quite disconcerted. "Not really."

And she had it, just like that. "Or *gender*, perhaps?" Instantaneous. His eyes shot into narrowed slits, and she knew she had it. One nail, well and truly hit on the head.

The little silence that followed gave Kate Ross time for thought: *so, what was it then? I imagine—what do I imagine?* Raymond Doyle, tarted up a bit, would probably be irresistible to a man of 3.7's inclinations, and plenty more besides: he had that way, rare enough, of transmuting anything he wore into yet another elusive hint at his own ambiguous sexuality. And that was a thought in itself: possibly, probably, there had been some experimentation with female clothing, not an unusual fetish even in the quote, unquote '*normal*', and Doyle was not that. A line constantly drawn over and over in 4.5's psychosexual profile was of some gender ambiguity. Not that it worried 4.5 at all.

But it worried the hell out of Bodie. Oh yes, that must have been how it was. Bodie had liked the hint of thrilling perversity, Doyle dressing up for him, pretending to be a woman for him, or however it had been: he had liked it too much. Hated himself for it. Cut himself off from Doyle and kept away. It wasn't okay to love Doyle at all, and it certainly wasn't okay to love Doyle as some pseudo-woman.

All these things drew themselves in Kate Ross'

diamond-sharp mind like lightning flashing across the sky; and did not show in her face by so much as a flicker of her eye. She laid down her pen and allowed him a little smile. There he was, watching her, a little crease of worry between his eyes.

"I think we'll stop there."

Every taut nerve in Doyle slumped with relief, but he pulled himself up again quickly. "Unless there's anything else you want to tell me. Or ask me," she added.

The worry smoothed itself out, and the crease flashed instead to his cheek as a smile. "Plenty. But you wouldn't answer the questions I want to ask, would you?"

She ignored this and told him instead: "You're doing very well, 4.5. Really very well indeed."

"Yeah?" he said ironically. He was already on his feet, alert, fit, taut with energy. "Well, if you say so it must be true, mustn't it?"

Bodie was, if not exactly hanging around, not far away. He fell into step beside his partner on the white-pebbled drive between the ranks of cherry trees, still leafy green, as Doyle acknowledged him with a lift of the eyebrow.

"Get on okay?"

Doyle shrugged. "I dunno. How d'you tell?"

"Did you pass? is what I mean."

"It's not a test, Bodie, like you *pass* or *fail*."

"Oh, I think it is, Doyle," Bodie said, dark, enigmatic. "Whether you know it or not."

"In that case, I passed. In fact, she was panting over me today. So much, I was lucky to escape with all my clothes. Fancy coming for a run? Down the Brompton?"

"Yeah, later."

"We could go for a drink afterwards."

Bodie did not immediately reply. "Well?" Doyle prompted.

"Look, don't push it, Doyle. We'll do the run—okay?"

Evidently Kate Ross had wound him up more than he'd realised, because that made him snap, just like that, taut and fragile as a web of glass.

"I just asked you to go for a fucking *drink*, not any fucking thing else."

"And I said no, okay?" Bodie said coolly. "Don't make a big deal out of it, Doyle." And he lengthened his strides to pace on and away from Doyle, leaving him further behind with every step.

So that was how things were.

Doyle lingered behind, a lump of stone inside him, a chill around him in the pretty springtime air.

Kate Ross had misled him. There was no way back.

It was very late when Bodie rang the bell of Doyle's Tottenham Court Road apartment, certainly too late for any usual social call in any ordinary life, but then no such things applied to them. Doyle was barely awake, sliteyed, wearing a rumpled shirt and worn blue jeans, bare feet. He smelt of sweat and sleep and fading aftershave. Bodie followed him into the narrow hallway, turning to set the locks with automatic instinct, one which Doyle seemed to lack; he was forever forgetting to do it. He went through to the living room, pausing on the way outside Doyle's bathroom, where Doyle was standing flatfooted at the toilet, the torrential downpour evidence of more than a pint or two consumed earlier in the evening.

When Doyle came into the living room he threw himself into a chair and spread the fingers of his right hand over his eyes. Not in a dramatic sort of way; a tired, had-enough sort of gesture.

"You been drinking?" Bodie asked.

"Not really. Fell asleep. Come to call me on duty?" He didn't remove the hand from his eyes and his voice was blurry.

"Don't think you're fit for it, are you?" Bodie asked ironically. He slid himself to the back of his seat and picked up a magazine from Doyle's coffee table. He opened it at random. *Autocar*.

Doyle took the hand away. Ice in his eyes flaring across the room. "You really suggestin' I'm unfit for duty? That's a serious allegation, you know. Wanna take it any further?" Definitely contentious. Looking for a fight.

"All right, all right," Bodie returned mildly. "So I just broke into your beauty sleep, point taken."

Doyle glared. "Yeh. And if you've not come round here solicitin' my ninja skills, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me get back to it." Fully awake now, he looked over at his partner who had made himself very much at home, feet up on a footstool, deep inside the pages of *Autocar*.

"Just exactly what *are* you doing here?" he asked, and all the warning signs were on.

Bodie did not answer the question directly. "Had my session with the delightful Doctor Ross."

"Oh yeah. And you *passed*, of course." Steeped in irony.

Bodie laid the *Autocar* down, looked across at Doyle, all hard flippancy himself. “What did you expect? One of these days she’ll give up trying to find anything wrong with me.”

“Must be nice to be perfect. Only, of course, you don’t tell her everything, do you? Very selective with the truth, I’ve heard.”

Around the mouth Bodie was suddenly white. “That’s professional indiscretion, Doyle. You wanna be careful if you don’t want to lay her open to a nice malpractice charge.”

Doyle tilted his head, and the slow contempt of the look he gave Bodie froze him into silence. Doyle was very soft as he said, “Oh, you needn’t worry. She doesn’t mention you much these days. Hardly at all. After all, you don’t exactly figure large in my life any more.”

Bodie said nothing.

“Enjoyed the run, though,” Doyle added as if in afterthought, into the ugly silence.

Nobody said anything more for a while. Doyle, very tired, very depressed, tipped his head back on the settee. In the absence of the taunt of his gaze, Bodie’s eye ran quickly over him, taking in the hollows of his throat above the opened shirt, the faded jeans soft with wear, the bare feet. Doyle’s eyes opened then and trapped Bodie’s watching him. Bodie looked away.

“Ah, don’t worry, Bodie, I’m not about to make a pass at you.” Doyle said, cynical with contempt. “I’ve got the message, okay? From you and everyone else.”

Watching the sudden distance in his eyes Bodie said with a real anger, “Well, poor old Ray. I shouldn’t worry about it, though. Might do you good to give it a rest for a while.” Lately Doyle had been burning his way, at great speed, through an excessive number of women even for Doyle.

“Well, while we’re on the subject,” Doyle said, smiling still, eyes struck in steel, “there’s something I want from you, been bugging me a lot lately.”

“I don’t owe you anything, Doyle.” Bodie was on his feet now, angry.

Doyle was up there with him in one bound. “Oh no? Well, perhaps you don’t, Bodie, I’m not going to argue with you. But—” he took a deep breath, lowered his eyes beneath his lashes, “—you *love* me, don’t you. So you say. So you’ll do it anyway.”

Bodie turned away from him abruptly, hands stuffing into his pockets. “You’re sick, Doyle.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. No more than anyone else. No more than you, anyway. *Love*.” Doyle spat out the

innocent word. “Did I dream it? Did you say you loved me, for chrissake?” And when no answer came, “Did you, Bodie? *Did you say that?*”

Bodie turned to look him in the eye and his voice was low as he said:

“You know I did.”

He had pushed Bodie for that. Had needed to. Needed to back Bodie into a corner and make him get it out into the open. But now he had, he found that after all it did not help: just opened up a new area to joust in. Doyle laughed bitterly. “And he says *I’m* sick. Loved me, did you? Oh yeah. I remember. Loved me so much you told one of your bloody birds that queers should be horsewhipped for filthy practices.” Bodie had swung around, away from him: Doyle took one step nearer the broad hunched back. “Loved me so bloody much you denied for three years to Kate Ross that we’d ever gone to bed together. *Three fucking years*. Was it so horrible, Bodie? Eh? Was it? So disgusting you had to lie about it all the time?”

He shook his head into the resounding silence. “Loved me. Jesus.”

Bodie’s head was bowed: then he lifted it, chin up, to stare at the ceiling. He drew in a huge, shuddering breath before he said, “Ray, leave it. Please.”

“You loved me enough to fuck me. Oh yeah, I remember that. And it was so good for you, it meant such a lot to you, that afterwards you kicked me in the teeth and dumped me. Isn’t that right, Bodie?”

Bodie was very quiet, the timbre of his voice unrecognisable as he said, “You’re remembering it wrong. It didn’t happen like that.”

Doyle sniffed. Rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. Wandered around a bit. He gestured with his hand. “Well, all right. Let’s have your side of it. Amaze me, why not?”

Bodie looked at him very briefly, then turned away again. But not before the sadness, the bleakness of his expression hit Doyle like a stone in the face. “I came round to try and sort it out. Remember that? You were so angry. I didn’t really know why. I thought it was because I—”

Doyle could not speak, did not try, still recovering from the look on Bodie’s face. Bodie looked at him without seeing anything, and added quietly: “It doesn’t matter now, anyway.”

Bodie paced around restlessly, a hard, fit man, Paras-trained into a fighting, killing machine, body encased in black leather, heart encased in stone. Yet Doyle knew what he had seen in Bodie’s eyes. And

what he had heard in Bodie's voice. What could words do, beside things such as these?

He buried his face in his hands. "I'm sorry."

Bodie stopped, looked at him, steady now. A wry smile tugged at his lips and was gone. "Sorry for what? It's not your fault you didn't feel the way I did. I never expected you to."

Doyle swallowed. He felt sick. Bleeding with pain, both Bodie's and his own. Bodie was looking at him now with worry narrowing his eyes, trying to work out what was going on in his head. "I was angry—" Doyle said, and stopped, and tried again. "I thought you hated me."

"Just because I never poured my heart out to Kate Ross?" Bodie sounded amazed.

"You were always going on about queers. I thought you were ashamed of me." No, that wasn't it. "Ashamed of us. But especially me. I was the one with all the wild ideas."

"I got used to it," Bodie said, hard and fast.

Doyle wanted, needed, to touch Bodie. To get close to him, step in and rest his weary head against the solid warmth of Bodie's shoulder. And all that would follow: he yearned for it with every beat of his heart.

Instead he turned away. Said without looking back:

"What now?"

And Bodie answered him, "I don't know."

"Well?" Cowley enquired irascibly, but Kate Ross shook her head.

"There's no easy resolution to this, you know. I can't believe you were expecting them to walk off into the sunset and start doing the shopping together." She sounded tart.

Cowley made a face of distaste, his bright eyes sharp as knives in the sun.

"Indeed not."

They were sitting together in his office. Despite appearances his mood must be generally favourable; he had gone so far as to offer her a nip of whisky, which she had accepted, and poured himself a meticulously identical amount.

She took a sip before saying, "Their professional partnership seems to be on a very stable course, however. Which should please you. The immediate crisis is over for them. Which way their personal relationship goes from here, well—" she indicated with a gesture of her hand that it hung precariously, tilting this way and that.

"Have you ever discovered the reasons behind all this?"

She shook her head, then changed it to a nod. "Something sexual, obviously. Many dark hints about Bodie getting in too deep, and not being able to handle it—"

"—I don't want to hear any more," Cowley said with even more marked distaste, some anatomically correct vision obviously forming horribly in his mind. Ross shot him a faintly scornful look and continued,

"—some incompatibility of gender attitude. I didn't want to press 4.5 too hard for details; he was getting fragile at that point."

"And who can blame him?" Cowley said acidly. "It can't be easy for them, having some woman doctor poking her nose constantly into the minutiae of their bedroom habits."

Dr Ross was nettled by this. "I wouldn't have to probe their bedroom habits, as you call it, one whit so intensively if it wasn't such a preoccupation of *theirs*," she said, tarter than a spring gooseberry by now. "3.7 and 4.5 both have extremely high sexual profiles: Doyle in particular, and Bodie's not far behind him. They both have what you might call dramatic personalities, they frequently see themselves five seconds away from an early death. Combinations don't come much more explosive than that. But it doesn't take all of your operatives the same way. With some of your people—more stable, well-balanced individuals—it's hardly ever necessary to discuss their sex lives at all."

That would annoy him. He was allowed to have a kick at the 3.7/4.5 team: no-one else was.

"Which of my people might that be?" Cowley demanded, prickling.

She was ready for him. "Anson. Murphy. Jax. Lucas. All individuals with a perfectly uncomplicated sexual attitude. Sex occupies exactly the right place in their lives, neither too much nor too little. I mention *your sex life?* to Murphy and he spends two minutes describing his latest girl, trips to the cinema, and how important it is to him to satisfy her in bed. Mention it to Ray Doyle and I know I'm in for half an hour of increasingly bizarre revelations about his thought-provoking sexual preferences." She paused, to give her next phrase dramatic emphasis: "But even *that's* preferable to Bodie: mention sex to Bodie, and that's it, after a bit of macho posturing he's gone, and it's deep silences and heavy sighs for the rest of the session." She took another gulp of whisky. "I don't believe there's another pairing in the A-squad

capable of anything like the tangle your favourite team have got themselves into.”

“Och, I don’t have favourites.”

She ignored this as pure tokenism. Everyone knew about Cowley and his Bisto Kids. “Well, at the moment they’re back on women again. Though what hope there is for them in that direction I really wouldn’t like to say—” She drained her empty glass, set it down, shaking her head. “—Two men who can take two pretty girls away for the weekend and then spend every moment they can in bed with each *other*: well.” She stood up, smoothing down her skirt.

“Is that what they get up to?” Cowley shook his head, more in awe than disapproval. “Well, thank you, Dr Ross. It all makes me glad, aye, very glad, that I’m not young again.”

A moment ago, there had been Bodie, easily and cosily making a cup of tea.

Now here they were, fighting for their lives with little on their side except what they could do for themselves..

Shattering glass. Shouts. Bullets whining around. All dropping to the floor. The girl on one side, Bodie and Doyle crawling to fit up their guns, grimaced, conferring at a rapid pace:

“Tactical withdrawal?”

“Tactical or strategic.”

“Have you *got* a strategy?”

Doyle grimaced over his gun, slotting in clips. “Might delay ’em a bit.”

Bodie, very on edge, snapping, “Can’t delay ’em without reinforcements!”

He didn’t need to say it. Obviously they were hopelessly outnumbered, from the sounds outside there could be ten, fifteen well-armed men. And what the bloody hell for? One poor whitefaced girl, crying in the corner, not because she was not brave; bravery was meaningless in a context such as this. Doyle crouched in a corner, turning it over and over in his mind, a sort of pattern almost there, almost—

“They want her dead. They want all of them dead, and quick. Maybe that’s the question: *why the big hurry?*”

Bodie did not care, did not even want to think about it. “If I’m going to die for a meaningless cause I want to go with a clear head—” Grim, brutal, he bashed in the window with the heel of his gun and began to let loose a fast steady stream of fire. The response was immediate, and terrifying: volleys of

answering fire, echoing and ricocheting around.

“Save it,” Doyle told him, an ugly look on his face.

And Bodie exploded at him, “Look, we can’t get out of here, why drag it out?”

Adrenalin protected him from disabling dread, but he knew Bodie was right: their number was up. Well, plenty had gone before them. They were as brave as any whose names adorned the roll of honour. Didn’t take any special talent to die. He and Bodie would be okay. And, at least, together.

“We’ve ’ad it,” he said prosaically, sorting out ammo clips, pressing them in with fingers as fast and precise as ever. He hardly heard the girl’s reply, protesting, “No you haven’t,” but he replied to her automatically, harshly, “Keep still.”

“They only want me—”

“Keep down.”

Like a film he was watching something not happening to him: she rose, a pale despairing figure, she walked like Lady Macbeth past the window—

The response was immediate. And in a blaze of spontaneous, excited gunfire, she died.

“*DIANA...!*” His voice swooped and howled all around them, and the only thing he recognised in the chaos was Bodie’s arm, solid and tight around him, restraining him—

“You rotten—” Bodie’s grip was around his neck, keeping his firing arm down. He grabbed at Bodie’s arm, and hurled it viciously away from him. *Fucking bastards.*

Bodie said grimly, ironically, “Leave ’em, they’re withdrawing.” And as Doyle’s heart pounded and his arms shook with delayed shock his fingers were actually trembling: couldn’t get in much of a shot now if he tried.

“Look, they’re just acting under orders. They’ve probably got just as much idea of why she had to be killed as we ’ave.” Oh, typical Bodie, that: every sympathy for creatures who were paid to kill. Creatures like themselves.

And at the moment he felt sick with himself, sick with it all, because he was no better than they were, and Diana Molner lay dead and finished on the floor. Bodie was looking down at her too, without really seeing her, saying softly, “But at least she knew what she was fighting for. They were against her, and that’s all she had to know...”

Doyle slumped on trembling legs beside the girl’s body as Bodie went again to look out of the window, systematically checking. Her face was very peaceful, very lovely. He reached out with a thumb to remove

the droplet of blood at the corner of her mouth. Bodie came back, knelt beside him, looked at him then down at the body.

“She’s beautiful,” Doyle said, barely audible. “Isn’t she?”

“Yeah, well, beauty’s no magical shield. Though it seems to be working pretty well in your case,” Bodie said shortly. “If those guys had been called off thirty seconds later, you and I’d be lying there too. End of the line, Sundance.”

Bodie’s voice was low, dispassionate, whereas Doyle knew himself to be dangerously emotional, the adrenalin backlash emptying his head of blood, leaving him dizzy. His body was still on alert, pulse racing and uneven: he looked at the pale, beautiful skin of the dead girl, blood draining away from it inwards already, his pity and grief at such an intensity that that his body was at feverpoint, running all his emotions at a pitch he recognised, with shock, as sexual desire. Yet he had felt nothing so extreme for her while she was alive: a little liking, a little concern maybe, pale things compared to this sudden essential need—a wish, perhaps, to breathe his own vibrant life back into her crumpled pose of death, but whichever charitable way you tried to look at it, you could not escape the truth of it, that he was turned on like nothing else, as fierce a feeling as he had ever had.

Okay, so he knew what it was. Battlefield Syndrome, they called it. Soldiers got erections as their mates around them thrashed in blood and died. But to want what he was wanting—

This bloody job was getting to him. Turning him weird.

He remembered like a whipcrack in his mind a far-off conversation about necrophilia. With a sudden, convulsive movement he buried his palms into his eyes as he crouched on the floor, thighs cramping with fatigue.

“Jesus, Bodie. ”

He felt Bodie look his way. “What?”

“It’s a good job you’re here. Otherwise I’d be tempted to give her a poke, now that’s fucking sick, isn’t it?”

“It’s shock, Ray, that’s all it is.” Bodie’s voice was unemotional, but his attention had been thoroughly caught for all that; he was watching his partner closely.

“Mortuary attendants do it all the time, you know. Always on the lookout for a goodlooking stiff. And that’s all we are at the moment, innit—? Mortuary attendants? We were fucking useless at protecting

her. Couldn’t save her. All we’ve got to hand back is a body. Don’t you think she’d like one last fuck before they burn her up?”

“Stop it, Ray. You’re getting hysterical.”

“Well, you know me. Any excuse.”

“Let’s get out of here, go call Cowley. ”

Not paying him any attention Doyle picked up the girl’s hand and turned it over in his own, noting the well-shaped nails, unpolished. Although it felt cool already her body would retain its internal heat for some time. His guts churned sickly with horror, desire, despair.

“Get up.” Bodie, suddenly intense, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Get up, Ray.”

He shrugged off the hand angrily. “Leave me alone.”

But before he could stop it, Bodie had plucked him up to his feet and was manhandling him, struggling and swearing and fighting all the way into the next section of the carriage, out of sight of the poor, brave, pathetic body.

He wrenched his arm out of Bodie’s grip. “What the hell are you doing?”

Bodie’s teeth showed in a smile of no humour. “Unhealthy, Ray. Don’t let it get a hold on you.” And he stood there, blocking Doyle’s view and his way past.

Amazed and angered by Bodie’s arrogant behaviour to him, Doyle tossed up for one moment whether to fight or give way. After a moment he too smiled, relaxed all his resistance deliberately so that Bodie’s tight hold on his arm dug into soft skin, looked up into Bodie’s hard blue eyes.

“Okay. It’s up to you then, innit?”

Bodie’s eyes darkened as he surveyed Doyle, noted the malicious intent of his partner’s expression, the flinty green of his eyes as he gazed up into Bodie’s face, and his grip shifted on Doyle’s upper arms but did not cease.

“Serious, are you?”

“Just watch me.”

And as Bodie, trouble in his eyes, did not move, “Come on Bodie, time was we’d have been at it five minutes ago. Lost count of the times we did that. Best therapy of all, coming off, didn’t we always used to live by that?” He moved himself closer still, imposing his body on Bodie’s personal space, hustling him, eyes shining, lips parting, and the tables were turned now, Bodie the one deciding if to fight or if to run.

“Lie down,” he urged, softly. “Come on, Bodie, that’s all I’m asking you. Look, I’ll make it easy for

you. You don't have to touch me. Just be with me while I do it." And at that very moment he was unzipping his jeans. "C'mon, don't be shy," he said, viewing Bodie's averted gaze with some black amusement, "Nothing you 'aven't seen before, is it?"

Unspeaking, Bodie lay down with him on the dirty carriage floor. Doyle kicked over, astride him. Jeans undone just far enough, he straddled Bodie's belly, taking his own weight on his thighs, and cradled the familiar warm length of his cock in his hands, pulling himself slowly in the familiar hand over hand motion, head down and watching himself so that for a moment his attention was entirely absorbed by himself. And then although his hands did not cease his head snapped up, caught Bodie staring up at the ceiling, blankeyed, distant. "Watch me." And Bodie, obedient, brought his eyes to dwell on the flushed cockhead appearing in and out of Doyle's grip. Doyle crouched up a little, aiming it like a weapon for Bodie's face. "See, it took me a long time, Bodie," he whispered, losing his breath a little now, "but I worked it out now. What Kate Ross meant."

"What did she mean?" Bodie asked distantly; he propped one elbow behind his head the better to watch the blurring movements of Doyle's swift hands.

"You did this with that bloody water pistol. Remember?" And his look turned inward, now, onto some inner glory, chin tipped back, his face taut with rapture as he hit flashpoint. His hands stilled, fell forgotten away from himself as the white blizzard hurled itself away from his body to scatter like damp scuds of snow on Bodie's chest, and then he collapsed on top of Bodie, face hidden in Bodie's shoulder.

Bodie lay there, feeling Doyle's weight press the wetness through Bodie's shirt to his goosechilled skin. It had been a long time since he was so close to Doyle like this, close to the warm scent of his hair, of his skin, of his sex. And he felt, too, the tremors which racked Doyle from head to toe.

"It's all right, Ray. It doesn't matter."

"Well, you won't tell Kate Ross, anyway," came Doyle's voice, more robust than he had feared. Doyle pushed himself up then, looked down into Bodie's face for maybe ten seconds, then rolled away and onto his back with a sigh.

"Christ, Bodie—what can I say? 'Sorry?' That was sick."

"Nah," Bodie demurred. "Hell of a day. Something's got to give somewhere along the line."

Fighting for their lives out on their own, abandoned by Cowley to the wolves who had closed in, and killed.

The girl who lay dead in the other carriage, broken glass and bulletfire and blood spattered all around her.

Doyle's eyes opened. "Okay. But it was still sick." It came to him, not for the first or only time, that without Bodie he could not last in this job. There were times when Bodie alone was his lifeline. It was a crucial thought.

Bodie perched up on one elbow. "Sick, I don't mind." His hands went to the zip of his cords; with a little flutter of excitement Doyle watched him pull it down. "But you couldn't even get it right, could you Doyle?" And Doyle watched, eyes slitted in pleasure, as Bodie unbuttoned his shirt and pushed his clothing out of the way and knelt up over Doyle's sprawled body, his erection so close to Doyle's face he had to squint to keep it in focus.

"Didn't even come close, did you?" Bodie whispered raggedly, eyes hazing as his own expert fingers roughly pulled on himself in haste, and at the end, the very last moment, he pressed his cock downwards, aimed it with his fingertips so that come flew out softly, hitting Doyle's eye, his cheek, his throat.

Then he dropped his forehead, knelt on all fours over Doyle, panting rapidly, recovering his breath and his wits.

"That's style, Bodie," Doyle said from a long way away. He touched Bodie's hair, a brief caress, and then it lingered. No more words were necessary.

They cleaned up at the sink, looking out at the empty tracks, the abandoned carriages.

"Cowley'll be wondering where the hell we've got to."

"Let him fucking wonder," Doyle said viciously. "Cared so much he landed a fucking Susie on us, didn't he?"

Bodie was pondering on that abrupt withdrawal. "Yeh, but I just wonder if he wasn't the cavalry after all."

Doyle eyed him with ill temper. "For that, *you* can tell him the good news."

They left the body behind, no backwards look.

DOYLE'S eyes snapped wide open when the door did. All he could see was the tiny black eye of a gun, aimed at him.

“Ah, put it away,” he said, waving it off.

And there was Bodie coming round the door, shoving his gun underneath his jacket. “Thought it must be you.”

“Been looking in that crystal ball again?”

“No-one else uses that scent.” Bodie crossed the room and came to sit down near him, looking across. Too soon to judge his mood. “What do you want, Doyle?”

Doyle crossed his ankles in front of him, stretched his arms high up and yawned. “Thought it was time I paid a midnight call on you, instead of the other way round.”

“It’s late, Doyle.”

“I know what time it is.” There was a silence. “The other day. When Williams had that gun on me.”

Bodie didn’t say anything.

“Did it cross your mind, just for a minute, to see what happened? See if he ’ad the guts to shoot?”

Bodie was shaking his head. “Come *on*.”

“Just for a second?”

Bodie moved convulsively. “Of course it bloody well didn’t. I was just getting the timing right.”

“Seemed like a long wait.”

“Well, it would, wouldn’t it? Anyway, what you grumbling about? Here you still are.”

Doyle grinned, then. “Yeah. But I still think you were getting off on making me wait.” He got up, crossed the room, making straight for his partner. Bodie’s halfshut eyes tracked his approach.

Doyle knelt in one quick movement beside Bodie’s chair, leaning his arm on the rest, looking up into Bodie’s face. “Just reminded me, the other day.”

“What did? Seeing Williams wetting himself at the thought of killing you?”

“After the Molner girl died.” His eyes moved over Bodie, flinging everything of warmth and of passion he could summon into the look he brought to bear on him. “You’re always there for me, aren’t you, Bodie?”

“Yeah?” Bodie said, voice somehow hollow, and Doyle nodded, eyes never leaving him.

“I need you in my life, Bodie. I can’t do it without you.”

Bodie did not reply. Tense. Reined in. Waiting.
Sink or swim, Bodie.

He said what he knew Bodie was waiting for, spoke the words aloud: “I want us to be together.”

Bodie’s breath came out in a rush as if he had been holding it; he moved his head, and the words came out almost hoarse: “I dunno, Doyle.”

“Truth is...without you, I’m finished in this job.”

He laid his cheek on Bodie’s knee. Just rested it there, feeling the thud and pulse of blood from his heart. “Did you never know what I wanted, Bodie?” he whispered, so softly they could pretend he had never said it if they had to: “Did you really think I was just in it for the kicks?”

Bodie said nothing.

“Let me stay, Bodie. I’ll do better for you this time.”

He had counted on Bodie’s not being able to deny him anything when it came to it: but he realised now, at this moment, in the doubting, brooding silence, that it was a closer-run thing than he had ever dreamed.

But Bodie let him stay.

“LOOK AT this,” Doyle said with his mouth full of chips. He pointed out to Bodie a huge pair of newspaper tits nestling around the mound of junk food they were sharing, wrapped in *The Sun*.

“Mm.” Nostrils flaring, Bodie admired them.

“Tear it out, eh?”

“Nah, too greasy. Just feast your eyes, old son, and then say farewell.” Doyle wiped his hand down the front of his shirt and shoved the rest of the chips Bodie’s way. “You finish ’em.” He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes.

Stuffing, Bodie mumbled, “What you going to do, then?”

“Wait for you,” Doyle said cryptically. The bedroom had every comfort, a bathroom off, a TV perched on a shelf so they could watch it from the bed, which was kingsize and white. Bodie had struck lucky with his flat this time.

There was a scrumpling noise beside him as Bodie jettisoned, probably reluctantly, the rest of their supper. Doyle could hear his own stomach making gurgling sounds as it had a go at digesting the huge mound of carbohydrate he’d just shovelled down to it. Well, he needed it. Ten mile run, perfect end to a perfect day: Cowley had them in training for something big. Best not to think about it.

Live for today.

The bed bounced about a bit. He felt Bodie’s lips touch his, and twisted his face away with a grimace. “Don’t like the taste of fish?” Bodie’s voice said into his ear.

“Not these days,” Doyle said; and made a start, as Bodie undressed him, constructing an elegant and rude little fantasy in his head. “Bodie.” Off came his

shirt; he obligingly half sat up to assist his partner. “Remember that massage parlour we raided the other day?”

Bodie snickered. “Did you see Anson’s face? When the bloke begged him to hold off just five more seconds?”

“And Anson said, sarcastic, like a joke, ‘shall I go out and come in again?’”

“And Cowley said—!” Incoherent with laughter they finished it together, “—*I think that’s his line, don’t you?*”

Snorting, Bodie said, “And you always say the old man’s got no sense of humour.”

Doyle said, “Think he ever uses a massage parlour?”

Bodie grimaced. “I’d rather not know—!”

“You ever been to one?”

“As a customer?”

Doyle laid one hand, light, on Bodie’s where it was set to dip into the hollow between his belly and the waistband of his jeans. “Wonder what it’s like?”

“Tired old tarts thump your shoulderblades for ten seconds then they ask you if you require anything further,” Bodie’s voice swooped low. “Sir.”

“And then?”

Bodie’s breath touched his ear. “Then they get the gloves on and jack you off.”

Doyle shivered, thrilled, tense, as Bodie touched him, found him hard and wanting. “Got any rubber gloves anywhere?” Bodie murmured to him, exciting him beyond belief; he had hardly hoped—

“First Aid Kit.” He opened his eyes when he heard Bodie coming back into the room, pulling on a thin white pair of safety gloves. His heart gave a jolt and his cock leapt at the sight; Bodie, hands encased in rubber, his forearms bare above to the sleeves of his white T-shirt. It reminded Doyle of the way Bodie looked sometimes when they had a victim in the cells, and Cowley would threaten Sparks and his box of tricks, and Bodie would pull on the gloves slowly, and wait. Tough, silent, beautiful. Menace incarnate.

His cock wept silently, pulsing with urgent little expectations of its own. Something cool and sticky flooded over it, seeping down over his balls and into the crack of his arse. Probably the lotion he used himself sometimes for masturbating, especially when they watched each other. Now Bodie’s hands gave his desperate cock what it wanted, pulling on him, sweet and strong and slick, sensations so utterly delicious he wanted it to last. Forever, if possible. And when he felt himself dangerously close his hand

shot out and gripped Bodie’s wrist to stop him.

“Hang on a bit.” When he got his breath back enough he eyed Bodie, decided yes, Bodie could take it, said: “Do they offer anything—kinky?”

“Look, sweetheart, they’d paint you blue and stick a chicken up your arse if you’ve got the cash up front,” Bodie said, with the beginnings of a grin.

Doyle waved at his jeans on the floor. “Wallet’s in there. Take what you want.”

“Okay. Consider it done. Chicken is it, then? Or what?”

“Very wasteful with that stuff, weren’t you? Went everywhere, it did.” Bodie’s eyes flicked over him. “Even inside,” Doyle said to him, soft. “Want to see?” And he rolled onto his stomach, presenting himself, exposing himself utterly.

Bodie’s hand landed there a moment later. Parted his buttocks quickly, not particularly gentle, like a doctor examining him in a perfunctory way. Then stroking him. The glovetipped finger felt unnaturally smooth and silky against him. Bodie always knew exactly what he wanted; after a while playing with him one of the fingers tickled round the rim and probed the opening.

Brilliant sensation. It flashed through him, melting his insides completely; so good he was almost shitting himself with the pure excitement and tension and bliss of it. He moaned, and thrust his hips upwards. “All the way in.”

Something cool, more lotion, fell on his back and buttocks and anus; and the finger pressed it inside him. “Okay?” Bodie whispered to him, and the glove slipped slowly in and out.

Doyle pressed back involuntarily. Asking for what he really wanted seemed indelicate. He surprised himself sometimes; he heard himself say:

“Wider, okay?” and Bodie slipped another finger past the knot of muscle, all the way inside, and scissored his anus gently open and shut. Impossibly, instantaneously, Doyle felt himself beginning to come; he fought it for a little while but it wouldn’t stay away; he half-turned to one side in a desperate haste, grabbed Bodie’s free hand and pressed it to his cock. And with Bodie’s rubberclad hand squeezing him in front, the fingers opening him behind as orgasm swept through him, harder, intenser, sweeter than ever before, and also a sensation deliciously shameful and at the same time the most liberating he had ever had, he erupted back and front, everywhere, and he didn’t care at all.

Bodie got a towel afterwards and soap and

cleaned him up.

“God, that was incredible,” Doyle sighed.

“No need to call me that,” Bodie quipped modestly; and while Doyle cracked up he stared at him curiously. “Can’t imagine what you got out of that, Doyle.”

“I told you, it feels good. Don’t know what you’re missing, do you?” Bodie’s head came up at that, his eyes, Doyle would swear to it, the exact blue of a night sky pricked out with stars. “And you don’t have to, mate,” he avowed. “Each to his own.” Someone, some earthy grizzled marine ten years older than Bodie had probably tried to get up a younger Bodie’s prim little arse, even succeeded, perhaps, succeeded certainly at humiliating and hurting him, thereby landing Bodie forever with an anal hangup which Doyle was grateful not to share.

But then again, he could be wrong, because Bodie immediately picked him up on it: “Look, I didn’t say I wasn’t curious.”

Doyle stretched, an immense satisfaction stealing through body and soul, and grinned at him. “Are you telling me you’re going to let me do that to you?”

“If anyone could make it worth my while, you could.”

“Not tonight, though—okay?”

Bodie flicked a derisive glance over the slumped sprawl of his exhausted cock. “Not up to it, Raymond?”

“Got other plans,” Doyle told him succinctly. Enough rest: time to get moving. With a growl of appreciation he rolled over to kiss Bodie, thrusting his tongue arrogantly into Bodie’s mouth, down his throat as far as he could get; licked his nipples into peaks, gasped his cock and jerked it in the way Bodie liked, paused to admire it—

“Ever measure this? You could make a fortune in porn movies, sunshine.”

“Yeah, probably, but I’d lose my day job.” Bodie had his eyes shut.

“Nah, we’d find a way round it. They wouldn’t need your face, after all.”

“Get on with it Doyle, will you?”

Doyle grinned, very white teeth, one chipped in front. “Getting impatient?”

“Oh no,” Bodie told him impassively. “But just pretend I’ve got a Luger on the back of your neck for the hell of it, will you?”

“Nice idea,” Doyle said, straightfaced. “But, just for tonight—I want something from you, mate. Special treat, you might call it.”

He knew that Bodie understood him at once. But he knew nonetheless that this was deep water: something they had not really touched on before. Except once. And Bodie, remembering that once, might be shadowed by the past. And indeed, Bodie said slowly, “I dunno, Doyle.”

He brought all his will to bear on Bodie, would not let Bodie’s eyes escape the demands of his own. “You want to. C’mon, Bodie, I *know* you fancy this.”

Bodie’s lip curled, an unwilling smile coaxed out of him. “Know me too well, then.”

“I can feel your eyes up my arse every time I climb a flight of stairs.” Doyle leaned back, all supple willingness, and smiled a very special smile.

Bodie was leaning over him, stroking him in an absorbed kind of way, kissing him every so often, small, soft kisses beside his mouth. His eyes when he raised his head to reply were dark with trouble and desire. “Sure *you* fancy it? It hurt you last time, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, it hurts I suppose,” Doyle met his eyes. “Not the same sort of pain as being hit in the face with a lead duster, mind you. It’s—special—” He kissed Bodie again, long, lingering, savouring every taste he could discover in Bodie’s mouth. Then he settled back on the pillow, and held out his arms for Bodie to come into them. “C’mere a minute, Bodie, just lie down with me for a bit. Listen. I’ll tell you what I want.”

“Let’s hear it then,” Bodie said when he had settled his head on Doyle’s chest, and Doyle’s fingers wandered in his hair, playing with it.

“Okay.” He took a deep breath, shut his eyes, summoned it up. When he spoke his voice was low, soft, hypnotic. “You get here, to my flat. You don’t know me all that well, we’re just mates, that’s all. You can’t see me at first, can’t hear anything, lights out, and so on. Then you find me. On the floor, asleep. Face down, no clothes. You come over. Look at me. And then you—”

“Then I what?” Bodie’s voice speaking right into his ear was intimately deep and sensual.

Doyle smiled without opening his eyes. “—You know you shouldn’t. But you want to. So you open me up back there, and you have a really good look. Maybe you even—touch. You know?”

“Can’t help but think you’d wake up at that point,” Bodie said critically. “Most people wouldn’t sleep through it.”

“Not asleep then,” Doyle rectified. “How about—unconscious?” The idea made him shiver. “Oh *yeah*.”

That's even better. Yeh. I've passed out cold. You *know* I'm not going to wake up."

"Okay, passed out cold. Wouldn't I be going through the First Aid routine by now?"

Doyle rolled his eyes. "Look, Bodie, this is a sexual fantasy. We're not talking responsible citizen here. We're talking man who's always wanted to get a secret thrill looking up his mate's arsehole."

"Okay," Bodie murmured, amused. "I get it. No resuscitation procedures. Go on."

"Where did I get to?" He knew perfectly well.

"I was about to go where no man has gone before, I think."

"'ey, don't jump the gun. You don't want to stop, because you know you'll never get the chance again. You know I'd kick you in the teeth, make you eat my gun or something, if ever you tried to get your hand up my arse—"

"Like a sleeping tiger—" Bodie was getting into it now.

Doyle had his hand on Bodie's cock, just a friendly touch. It was hardening beautifully, waking up and stretching itself and doing little pressups, getting ready for action. "—So then you think, god, he's not going to wake up *whatever* I do—"

"And I—?"

"—you do whatever takes your fancy." Doyle opened his eyes, twisted around to look into Bodie's face. "Hit me about a bit. Stick something else inside me. Whatever. You decide." He stopped, to breathe, to snatch and savour a kiss. "—then— Whatever you do next, it's got to lead to the point of you making up your mind to go the whole way. There I am, dead to the world. You've had a look, and a feel. But it's not enough."

"I start thinking 'rape', do I?"

Doyle kissed him again. "You've got it. Let's get up for a bit, have a drink or two."

Mahler 6 on the tapedeck. Moody, tragic, demanding. Perhaps not ideal. But he loved the passion of it. And once into it he could not switch it off before it came to the end, those three masterly hammerblows of fate. Wearing only his jeans, undone, he read the newspaper and sipped at a Scotch and let the music swell his mood.

Bodie, fully dressed, watched TV and drank slowly from his glass. His fine, well-muscled forearms, downed with dark hair, rested on his thighs. He was a very attractive man. Doyle felt conscious, all the time, with every heartbeat, of the brooding,

powerful presence, the life and vigour of the man, reined in, ready to surge and overpower him. He was so deeply, intensely absorbed in their own little private world that when the doorbell rang, he jumped.

"Better answer it," Bodie said. They were on a case which required off-duty hours; but it turned out to be Murphy and Stuart, out for a free drink.

"It'll 'ave to be a quick one," Doyle said, consulting his watch as he held the door. "Bodie and I got reports to do." He was careful not to stand too close to Murphy as he passed; wearing only the jeans and nothing beneath he was conscious of his own body odour, not unpleasant, sweat and sex none the less. When Bodie joined him in the kitchen he handed Bodie a fresh bottle of Johnny Walker. "Look, they're your mates. Get rid of 'em soon, eh?"

"I'll do my best, Lord."

Bodie was looking particularly beautiful tonight. Irresistible. Doyle put the bottle down, took him by the hips and leaned in for a kiss. Wearing no underwear his cock pressed itself to Bodie's through soft denim. Bodie kissed him back, hands tangling in Doyle's hair to tilt his head so that Bodie's tongue could enter his mouth, the gentleness and the ardour of it taking Doyle by storm. He murmured some endearment, close to Bodie's cheek. Hearing a noise behind him he drew his mouth away, lingering, unhurried, and turned to see Murphy there. Doyle picked up the bottle off the side and extended it towards him.

"This what you came for?"

"Thanks."

"Help yourself."

As Murphy disappeared rather rapidly into the lounge, Bodie met Doyle's gaze, half amused. "Cool, Doyle. Very cool."

"Maybe now they'll get the message and go."

"I want to kiss you again," Bodie said, standing in close, breathing in the warm, lustful smell of him.

Doyle leaned back against the breakfast bar. "Go on then. It's not a sin." He moved his body languidly against Bodie as Bodie kissed the side of his mouth, whispering to him,

"Oh, it is, Doyle. Believe me."

Damned, then. But somehow he could not care: he would take his thrills here and now. There was no heaven, save what you could find on earth.

Murphy and Stuart did not seem to want to hang around for long. Doyle shut the door behind them, bolted it securely, and turned, his hands already

going to his jeans. "Were you thinking about this all the time they were here?" he said, head bent as he pushed them down and kicked them off.

"All the time," Bodie said, and his eyes were ablaze, no tenderness there now, only passion, and a hard, decisive energy: "All the time."

Doyle lay face down on the carpet in the hall, head turned to one side, cat-like senses alert—waiting—

When he heard the soft sounds of Bodie's approach his heart kicked off the blocks for a fast sprint; he bit his lip in the most exquisite anticipation, conscious of the pounding in his chest, the rough feel of the mat against his cheek, most of all his naked bottom thrillingly exposed to the air.

Footsteps halted behind him.

The longest, sweetest silence he had ever known.

And just when he could not bear it any longer, something even sweeter: a touch on his skin. A palm, rubbing. And himself being split slowly, the cool air rushing in to bathe his heated inner skin. Now his heart seemed to have stopped entirely. He could see it all so clearly in his head, the man crouched behind him, wanting to see, needing to, eyes feasting hungrily on the forbidden.

And then the moment came when seeing was no longer enough.

Something, a fingertip, tickled around the edge of his anus, sending little rills of pleasure and excitement zinging through his nerve endings. When the tip slipped inside him he couldn't help but press back against it.

A stinging slap on his rump sent sweet little aftershocks of pain along his skin. "Not allowed, Doyle," Bodie's low voice said to him. "You're dead, remember?"

Perhaps the first word which had come into Bodie's head: or, perhaps, hints at a very dark fantasy indeed? Interesting. Bodie's two hands pulled his cheeks wide apart then, no more teasing, he was as wide and open as Bodie could stretch him. He could feel the burn of Bodie's gaze against him and it struck a line of iron right down through his cock.

Anticipation. Fingers pinching his cheeks hard, still holding him wide open, Doyle was expecting the invasion of something cold and hard, he was tensed up for it: but instead something beautiful, soft and wet. Bodie's tongue. At the same time his insides went, just like that, a gutsweetness stealing all through him and melting him throughout. It felt—*so bloody wonderful*—he couldn't keep from letting out a

little whimper of pleasure, but Bodie didn't pick up on it this time, just settled there between his thighs and gave him the unholy kiss of all.

Oh christ... so good, so sweet.

Bodie's weight left him and Doyle shot his head up, lifting himself up on his palms like a man doing pressups. "Where the hell are you goin'?" His voice sounded hoarse, unused.

A tube of lubricant in Bodie's fingers appeared in front of his nose. "Ah, get rid of it," Doyle said roughly. "We don't need it, okay?"

"Yeah we do."

Strung out to the last degree, Doyle snatched it and hurled it across the room. "Look, I'm just in the mood to do it without, okay?" He wanted to feel Bodie's cock inside him with nothing between them. And he wanted Bodie to have to fight a little bit to get it in there. His eyelids slammed shut again when the weight of Bodie's hand slapped down on his cheeks for the second time, and Bodie wasn't being gentle. If he could only see himself he suspected there would be a red, sore mark raised by the blow.

"Shut up and keep quiet," Bodie's violent whisper came.

Brilliant.

He lay still and quiet as the dead and felt at last the head of Bodie's cock nudge between his buttocks, rub up and down the crack a bit, long and hard, slipping sweetly in Bodie's spit. That felt nothing but good, just the most beautiful, simple pleasure. If Bodie kept it up long enough, up and down and round and round like that, massaging his sensitive opening the way he was doing, he was going to come fast and that was that, already his cock was weeping its joy onto the rug below.

But then there was suddenly a change in the mood; he knew what was coming and screwed up his face, fingers clenching on the rough wool of the mat. And he winced as Bodie leaned in on him, cock straining for entry, no-one could help it, it felt impossibly large, hard, as if it would split him in two. Bodie stopped then, wound an arm beneath his chest and waited, giving him time he didn't want; so he shoved himself upwards, hard and Bodie took the hint. One quick violent poke from Bodie's cock and pain ripped through him; he kept still and bit his own forearm to distract himself, deadly afraid that Bodie would stop if he cried out. He heard Bodie draw in his breath: *yeah, bet that felt good for you, sunshine.*

"Come on, do it," he hissed aloud. "Hard as you like."

The shock of entry was over. He was widening, stretching all the time to accommodate Bodie inside him, it was getting easier with every stroke. Doyle picked up the rhythm of Bodie's thrusts and withdrawals and moved with him, but urging on the pace until Bodie was going at it fast, his hard quick breathing falling on Doyle's neck, one arm still beneath him, pulling him back against his belly; he could feel their bodies pressed so close together, Bodie going so deep inside him he kept touching the very heart of him, the pain a different note now, sweetening the pleasure. The tenderness and the violence of his own feelings astonished him, and he opened his eyes wide as orgasm ripped through the very centre of him, racing like starfire down tiny intricate passages to shoot out of him, and every thundering, trembling pulse of it squeezed Bodie tight, tighter, until the answering throbs of it hit him deep inside, soft, sweet, oh *yeah*...

Bodie was stroking his hair, rubbing his wet forehead in a gentle sort of way, just waiting for him to come around. Doyle locked eyes with him and nothing was spoken aloud. It had been rough, violent, nasty even. And yet that made the *afterwards* more tender, more close. For a while there was nothing secret between them, they understood everything.

Special. Magic.

While he was showering and washing his sweaty hair, Bodie popped his head around the door. "You staying the night?"

"Might as well. Half asleep—" yawn— "already."

He yawned again as he came through the bedroom door, vigorously towelling his hair. "Don't just drop it on the floor," Bodie said critically, watching from the bed.

"Would I," said Doyle, hanging it exactly and precisely over the back of a chair, fussing over it this way and that, until Bodie laughed at him, told him point taken, and get the hell into bed.

Bodie had obviously made the bed again with fresh crisp sheets and army corners. It felt wonderful. Doyle slid his weary stinging body in with a sensation of the purest bliss, and shuffled close to the warmth of Bodie. Felt Bodie's arms go round him. Turned his face up so that Bodie could kiss him, which he did, for a very long time, in a way unmistakably loving. Then he reached over and switched off the light.

"You always used to go home," Bodie's voice was

quiet in the darkness.

"You always used to want me to."

"No. I wanted you to stay."

Doyle smiled in the darkness, Bodie's possessive arm across his belly. "Yeah, well, you must have wished on the right star this time. Now shut up. I'm tired."

But sleep didn't come to him straight away.

"Bodie? You awake?"

"Mmm?"

"Got any thoughts about us moving in together?"

By some change in the quality of silence he knew that Bodie had opened his eyes. "How?" Bodie asked eventually.

"We could take up an option on a double flat next time one comes up. I was looking at the board today, there's one going in Kensington."

"Very handy for the palace, m'lud."

"Or—" he reached down for Bodie's hand and squeezed it tightly— "We could get a mortgage. Get on the property ladder."

"No-one's going to be queuing up to give us a mortgage, Doyle," Bodie said tightly, ironically. "Did you see the new insurance proposals the other day? Cowley 'ad 'em on his desk, I had a quick look. Want to know the average survival term for a CI5 agent?"

"No."

"2.7 years."

"So they repossess early," Doyle shrugged. "Our money's as good as anyone else's, while it lasts. Dunno about you, but it's coming in faster than I can spend it these days."

"We'll think about it," was all Bodie said; but as Doyle turned over and curled on his side preparatory to sleep Bodie's arm wound under his and over his chest to bring him in close and sleep came easily, bringing no nightmares, only dreams of the strangest kind.

37 was looking very handsome today, dark hair shining, shoes polished, dark suit and tie, which brought out the best of his looks, never inconsiderable. He was no friendlier, however: Bodie more than most resented this, had done from the very start, and made no secret of it. Hard work. Dodged every which way, by turns flippant, ironic, or uncommunicative; made her fight for every damned little thing.

In the end, though, she would get there.

"—all your scores are well up, as usual—"

"You're surprised?" Bodie gave her an immodest

grin. "I keep telling you I'm perfect. I was born that way. Big, brave and—beautiful—"

The funny thing being that of course he did not truly believe that. Had never really believed that. Was only just beginning now to trust the stroke of good fortune that had given him what he wanted.

"You're still working solo?"

"Yeah, shouldn't be for too much longer though. Doyle's gone for the final checkup today, the full works. If they pass him he can be A-lined again starting tomorrow." Bodie had a clipped, efficient way with him today. She had the feeling he wasn't giving her his attention at all. Scanning for body language, her quick eye found him a little on edge, fidgety, his gaze constantly flicking to the window, but whatever the cause of his anxiety it wasn't the simple fact of his being here for this interview; he was hardly listening to her, had no interest either in what she had to say nor in his own answers.

Which was, believe it or not, good news. Clearly he had nothing to hide from her today!

"How long is it since 4.5 was shot?"

"Eight weeks tomorrow," Bodie answered her, and his eyes were fine, direct, clear.

They had survived.

"And you answered the emergency call, didn't you? It was you who found him there. Have you found that hard to deal with?"

"No, absolute breeze," he returned ironically.

"It hasn't caused you nightmares, anything like that?"

He shook his head: no nightmares. Well, she could take a guess at why not: why should there be nightmares, when he could open his eyes any time he wanted, see the face next to his on the pillow, watch his chest rise and fall with life, feel the breathing soft on his own skin—

"I see from the *change of circumstance* forms that you've moved in with him."

"Yeh." No reaction.

Come on, Bodie. Give it to me. I need to hear it, just once.

"Why?" she asked bluntly.

"Just seemed easier that way. They let him out of hospital early on the understanding he had someone around to keep an eye on him. He's got no family, so—" Bodie shrugged.

Ah, what a saint you are. No family, so you got the job of looking after him. Not that you wanted to, of course. Not that you'd have fought anyone to the death who tried to get between you and Ray Doyle. Oh no.

There was a little rattling sound on the window pane. It got all Bodie's attention at once; he was prickling like a cat, stretched to the limits in the effort to see out.

One more try. Just one.

"You're in his company almost all the time now, aren't you, now that you—live together? How are you getting on? After all, it can be difficult living with anybody, even a close friend. Has it changed the way you feel about him at all?"

"Oh," Bodie said, attention all outside now on the vision he could just about glimpse in the drive, "about Ray? Love him to death. I want to marry him and have his babies, okay?"

He spoke it with the lightest of ironies, just a catchphrase, after all, doing the rounds. He meant by it absolutely nothing.

And yet—

Her heart pounded; she felt a little lightheaded. Slowly the taut silence was penetrating his attention; he turned his dark head to look at her, eyes narrowed in a black gleam as he tracked down the moment of change, ran his own voice again in his head—

She held her ground, despite an intuition that this must be exactly how this proven killer looked at the *coup de grace*. And today was her day. She won. At last, at long last, she watched his eyes unfreeze: the tiniest, most reluctant of smiles began to change the sculpted line of his lips and she asked him, smiling herself,

"Can I have that in writing?"

He inclined his head towards her, cool, defiant. "Yeah." It was out. The sky was still there, and the sun set in it. And Ray Doyle was out there waiting for him, on a day when summer began.

"Have any damn thing you want. In triplicate. Can I go now?"

And that was it.

Another file closed.

He even reached out, boldly, and shook her hand. Then the door slammed on him and she could hear his footsteps for a little while, down the staircase and away. She had the maddest urge to leap on her chair, to fling open the window, to take up precious piles of paper and hurl them into the air.

Instead she stood by the window watching; and there he was outside, Ray Doyle, looking good, trudging about in the drive, kicking around a bit on the white pebbles, hands in his pockets, waiting for his partner between the pink glory of the flowering cherry trees.

And Bodie, now, suddenly bursting out of the door beneath—

The door to her own office opened— “Dr Ross— thought you might like to know, 4.5 has been passed for duty, starting tomorrow—”

“Quick,” she said. “Quick. Come and look at this,” and so it was that George Cowley was there with her to witness it, Ray Doyle whipping around at the hurried approach, face alight, fist leaving his side and punching up high and hard into the air in a gesture of

triumph and joy and sheer physical release: And Bodie was there by now seizing Doyle and lifting him high into the air, laughing up at him as Doyle laughed down, in the most uninhibited exhibition of pure, boundless exhilaration she had ever seen.

Spoken or unspoken, it hissed through the air—

“YESSS...”

They were together. Whole. Alive.

The swallows were still flying in the sky. And the summer: about to begin.

—July 1995