WRONG END OF THE STICK GAFL X. II F

HE COULDN'T REMEMBER being so tired in his entire life before. His back ached, his head ached, his stomach was killing him and the only thing they'd give him—in a hospital, for Christ's sake-was bloody Alka-Seltzer. And when he'd complained, the Sister had offered him Disprin. Disprin! That was for kids, not hard-headed CI5 agents. And when he'd complained to her, then Matron had offered him the bus fare home.

So he had shut up. He'd face Cowley any day of the week, but Matrons were a different kettle of fish. His watch glinted, greenly luminous, 3:23 a.m. He sighed, shifting his backside to a slightly less uncomfortable position on the plastic chair. The figure in the bed shifted, marginal movement of the left foot and he was there, waiting, hovering over him, straining to hear anything that might be whispered. But-nothing. Only that movement of the foot, and then the same, deathly stillness as before.

He settled himself on the chair again and spent some of the time working out what the hell he was going to tell Cowley. 'Excuse me, sir, but I'm falling asleep on the job because I spent the night at the hospital watching my partner.' There wasn't much doubt about the kind of response that would get. If he was lucky, he'd get a dressing down, one of Cowley's military specials. If he was unlucky, then he'd be ordered to stay at home and get his rest.

And he wasn't sure what he'd say to that. All right, so he knew what he'd want to say to that, but it boiled down to whether or not he'd be willing to chuck his job in. He stretched again, easing some of the cramp, starting some of the pain going all over again. The flood of blood into knotted muscle needled painfully, but he kept stretching, knowing that it would be worse if he gave in now. Christ, he wouldn't be able to move in the morning if he stayed on that bloody chair.

His hand was inside his jacket before his mind had registered what his ears had heard. Creaking footsteps: the nurse on her rounds. Watchful, he stood aside as she came in, automatically checking the corridor quickly, relaxing only when she was doing pulses and catheters and soothing ointment into pressure points. Much though he tried, he couldn't keep entirely out of the way, and it wasn't until he realised that she was watching him with such sympathy that he noticed he was hovering like a pregnant father. He smiled at her, blissfully unaware of how he looked.

"It must be so hard on you," she whispered, brash Irish brogue softened down to a lullaby.

"Yeh," he whispered back, a conspiracy of quiet, something to ease the loneliness of his vigil without disturbing her patient. "Not getting any sleep like this..."

"Oh, aye, that an' all."

He flickered a sharp glance at her, not quite sure what that odd, underlying tone meant. "Well," he shrugged, "he's my partner. Been my partner for about three years now."

"Partner? Oh, that's a lovely way to put it! It's so much nicer than just 'friend', isn't it?"

He frowned at that, glimmering notion dawning on him. "We work together. For the Government." Revealing more than he usually would, protecting—he wasn't really sure what.

"You work together?" So surprised that she almost forget herself, voice tailoring down to a stifled squeak at the very last moment, then she recovered, and an grin of impish delight lit her face and her eyes twinkled at him, and it was as if he were looking in a mirror, his own green giggling back at him. "How'd you finagle a thing like that, you little devil you!"

"We didn't finagle anything. Our boss put us together..."

She giggled out loud then, a chuckle fully

as filthy as his own. "In service of the Queen, is it then? Jack the lad, you lucky boy you." Clinically polite, her hands did their job, while her wicked little smile invited him to share her humour. She nodded down at Bodie's exposed body and winked, saying, "Definitely a lucky man, aren't you?"

"It's not like that," blushing to hear him stutter, the rising red and the stumbling words convincing her that he was lying.

"You don't have to pretend, not to me. I've got a cousin who's the same. I've spent years, absolute years," she whispered confidingly, "trying to persuade him to let me have a gander at the sort of thing he gets up to, but he's too bloody shy by half. The great tragedy of my life, that is."

He looked at her askance, at the perfect prettiness of her, at her delicate bones and flawless skin, at her wide green eyes, canted like his own, her whole face alive with prurient and carnal curiosity. "You don't mean what I think you mean, do you?"

"Oh, now, and that would depend on what you were thinking I was meaning, wouldn't it?" Then she laughed again, that same filthy chuckle, and Doyle knew that she really did mean what he had been shocked to think she meant. Not the kind of thing you expect to come from the mouth of a tiny doll of a woman, especially one who fitted the image of a nun or a mother.

"You, eh," he grinned at her, the implications of such honesty hitting him like a ton of bricks and putting him into automatic chatup overdrive, "like that kind of thing, do you?"

"Like it? Holy Mary, I've got books and books on it, and every last one of them from the Continent." The laugh again, and Doyle couldn't help but chuckle in sympathy with that infectious sound. "Hear, you'll never believe what this lot," a toss of her head to indicate the hospital, "and my family think about all my little trips across the water to Holland and France and all those sorts of place."

"Go on, tell me. What *do* your family and all this lot think about all your little trips?" he whispered in his best music-hall joke-telling voice.

"They think I'm off on retreats and holy

visits!"

He laughed out loud at that, shushing himself almost as quickly as her hand clamped over his mouth. "SHHH!" she hissed, glancing quickly over her shoulder to make sure the door was still shut and then looking at her patient to make sure he was still out like the proverbial light. "Honest, it's the God's honest truth. It was the only excuse I could come up with to explain what a decent young girl would be doing going over to the Continent."

From what she had said, it was obvious that she was Catholic, and Doyle had more than a passing acquaintance with what some Catholic mothers and brothers thought of young, *unmarried* girls going off on their own to the sinful Continent. "How'd you manage to get them to let you travel on your own and not with one of the tour groups?"

"Oh, that's easy," she said, with a smile that was easier still. "I left them all behind in Antrim!" Bodie moved, again, the barest glimmer of motion, again, the left foot.

All thought of chatting her up evaporated, and Doyle was bent over Bodie, face very close, whispering his name, trying to make his partner wake up.

Nothing.

Across the bed, he heard a heavy sigh and looked up, startled, because he had forgotten there was anyone else there.

"What a lovely sight the two of you are. So much in love, it's a joy to see. I'm only sorry that it's him in that bed so ill that's been the needing to let me see this."

He didn't hear the last of it, stubbing his mental toe over something and stumbling. "In love?" he said, voice up an octave or two. "In love? Me and Bodie? That's a bloody stupid thing to say."

"It's all right, you don't have to get all defensive with me—?"

Ingrained habit of years had him supplying his name to fill the unvoiced blank. "Doyle. Ray Doyle."

"Well now, Ray, there's no need for you to be so upset, not with me. You can be honest, when it's just the two of us in here. An' your...partner won't mind, will he?"

He was as breathless as if he were under a million fathoms of water, chest compressed,

lungs flattened and useless, everything distorted, and then he recovered, shoving the shock behind himself, blinking once and coming back to being himself, a weary CI5 man standing in a hospital room, discussing his partner with a sympathetic nurse. Who had, somehow, got hold of the wrong end of the stick completely. "Actually, I think he would—more than I do, anyway. If you weren't so pretty, he'd probably clout you one for saying a thing like that."

"Don't be so daft! I've told you, you don't have to pretend with me. I'm not about to be telling your boss that the two of you are that way inclined, am I now? So don't be so—"

The alarm went off. Beeping and beeping and beeping, and he was thrust aside, doctor and nurses and machines pushing him away. They did things to Bodie, and he stood pressed against the wall, watching as they did those things to Bodie, and he thought of how terrible it was, that they should do all those things and not think twice about the man they were sticking and cutting and shocking. Bodie didn't mean anything to them: only his body was important. Only his heart, his lungs, blood pressure, pulse, those were the things that mattered to these angels of mercy, with their ugly machines and their cruelties. Cruel to be kind: he knew that, had heard it often enough when they'd fixed his face for him at the hospital. He hadn't mattered then, either; they would have been much happier if they could have taken his face off and worked on it and brought it back when they had mended it properly.

They had finished with Bodie, the little nurse left sitting with him. Doyle barely looked at her, but she looked at him then.

"We almost lost him that time," she whispered, and he felt ashamed of himself that he had been so uncharitable to her. "We caught him by the skin of our teeth. If I hadn't actually been in here checking him, mother of god, we'd have lost him."

We? he thought. We would have lost him? But he's just your patient, he wanted to shout, but he's my partner. You wouldn't've lost him, I would have. It's me who would've lost him. He considered that, for a second, what it would be like to have no Bodie in his life. But there was nothing to think about, because every flash of image, every activity he could imagine, was accompanied by the knowledge that he'd tell Bodie all about it at work the next morning, or over the phone, if he got home before two.

He almost crept over to the bedside, like a child with a new baby brother: wanting to see it, afraid to see it, hating it and loving it and altogether confused by it. At the bedside, there was nowhere for him to sit, the single chair in the room being filled by the starched rustle of the nurse. So he sat on the edge of the bed, on that incredible smoothness of blanket that only hospitals seemed capable of—or desirous of—achieving.

"Bodie?" he whispered it, the crinkle of the sheets almost louder than his voice. "Bodieyou in there, mate?"

Of course, there was no answer. Across the bed, the nurse sat impassive, effacing herself, bestowing a privacy he accepted without even knowing it was a gift. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to stroke the one unmarred arm, the one where there were no tubes or needles to be avoided, the one that was pale as china, but for that bruise—and his fingers found it, touched it gently-he'd given Bodie the day before he'd gone into hospital. Stupid, really: he'd stumbled, almost fallen, on one of those bloody ladders that clung to the sides of gasworks, and he'd grabbed Bodie—not the railing, Bodie—who'd steadied him, set him back on his feet with a quick grin and a pat to his bum. Only later, once the danger was over and the nervousness about going into hospital had started, had Bodie moaned at him, complaining on and on about the bruise as if it were a mortal wound. And god help him, he'd teased him, telling him that the bruise was nothing, just wait until they got Bodie into hospital, he'd know mortal wounds then. Teased him with bedpans and enemas, of waking up and finding that it was his cock they'd cut off instead of his grumbling appendix, and Sisters with moustaches and rubber hoses, keeping it going until they'd both ended up weak with laughter and faces running with tears.

Didn't seem so funny now, did it? Not with

Bodie lying there with peritonitis and a bloody great scar over where his appendix used to be.

Christ, to think what they went through in their jobs, and here was Bodie lying here in a hospital bed, in 'critical' condition, which was a nice way of saying that he was going to snuff it if the staff couldn't work a few miracles. Like tonight. He'd almost lost him, tonight. If he'd gone home to his bed, the way Cowley would've ordered him to, then the nurse would've come in, done her checks, been on her way, instead of hanging around chatting to him.

He almost smiled at that, wondering what Bodie would say when he told him what had been so bloody fascinating that the nurse was still fussing over him instead of doing her rounds! Oh, he could just see it now. Bodie sitting propped up in bed, those horrible hard white pillows up behind him, popping black grapes into his mouth, spitting the seeds out to see if he could make them ping! into the bedpan.

There was a clattering in the corridor, the usual unmelodic morning welcome of hospital, tepid tea swimming in the saucer under the thick china of the cup, the distasteful noises of a wardful of people awakening to the distasteful cuppa.

Time for him to go, get back to work, fill himself with enough tea to keep him going through the day until he could grab a few hours' sleep in the evening, and then back here, to keep his eye on Bodie.

"See you later, mate," he said, chucking Bodie lightly under the chin, not noticing that he had stolen one of Bodie's gestures of affection lightly veiled as camaraderie. A moment of embarrassment as he saw the nurse watching him with bright-eyed speculation, but then he shrugged that off and was on his way to his car.

It was a disgusting day outside. Rain sheeting down, forcing him to keep both hands on the wheel and his shaver in the glove compartment, making him take a few minutes in the loo when he got to work, so that he was at least clean-shaven when he appeared at the briefing, but four minutes late, a fact which was not unobserved by Cowley. The lecture didn't pause for so much as a second, but the glower from those blue eyes warned him that he was about to step over the line as far as Cowley was concerned. Oh, well, he sighed to himself, leaning back in a chair that was the same unforgiving torment as the one in the hospital, at least he knew that Bodie had made it through another night.

He went through his day in a daze, doing all the right things at all the right times, but noticing none of it, living none of it, merely reacting to whichever circumstances presented themselves. Cowley was watching him, but that only counted as something to be avoided, worth nothing more to him right now, worth nothing at all, like everything else, until he could get to the hospital, and Bodie.

"Well, how is he?" Cowley, asked him, which was really stupid, considering that Cowley would be the first one the hospital would tell anything to anyway.

"Unconscious," was the tersely accurate reply, car keys bouncing in the palm of his hand, the closest thing to an outright protest he could make. He'd been kept late by bloody Jax, and now he hardly had enough time to get home and into clean clothes before he was due at the hospital.

"Recovering unconscious or comatose?"

As if the wily old bastard needed to ask him that! Of course, this mini-interrogation wasn't to find out about Bodie, it was to find out about Doyle, and he knew that. "Not comatose, not quite recovering. He's not responding the way they think he should, the antibiotics aren't being as effective as they think they should be, but they think he should come out of it soon. With their record of what they think should happen, I'm not holding my breath." Cowley seemed to be waiting for something, and Doyle's tired mind provided it like a kick to the rear. "Sir."

"And how is your girlfriend—Deborah, is it still?—taking you spending every waking second with your partner?"

Oh, Christ, not another one! It didn't take a single second for him to see what Cowley was getting at: too much time at the hospital, neglecting everything else, getting too close to your partner, have the pair of you gone queer.

"Deborah dumped me after I stood her up once too often—because of the job, not Bodie. Sir. And it's not every waking second."

"No, it's most of what should be your sleeping seconds. You've got three days to pull yourself together, Doyle, and if you haven't, I'll do it for you. D'you understand me?"

"Perfectly." And this time, he didn't add the 'sir', turning on his heel and walking away from Cowley, too tired to much care what his boss thought. His job wasn't seriously on the line yet, and until it was, he was going to keep right on seeing Bodie. Three days. They had three days to get Bodie out of the woods and on the road to recovery.

It was still pissing down, huge great puddles pooling in the car-park, his feet getting unnoticedly wet on his way to his car. He knew he was being completely unreasonable, but he put his foot to the floor anyway, careening through streets faster than was safe, but with a sick feeling in his stomach that told him he had to get to Bodie before night fell. Every time he closed his eyes, even if he were simply resting for a second, the same picture filled his mind. Bodie, left alone, in the dark, night falling, Death coming to claim him.

He was sure that was what would happen. Knew it in his bones, knew that if he left Bodie to face the night alone, then his partner wouldn't see morning. And last night simply reinforced that, etching the certainty into him with ragged nails of corpses. Bodie would die without him. And he wasn't too sure that he would live without Bodie. They were too close, they both knew that—had talked about it, in a carefully off-handed kind of way—so close that he couldn't quite mesh with any other partner at work, and that was nothing short of suicide for their bunch.

In the hospital room again, and this time, there were no nurses making awkward comments that could come back to haunt him at odd hours of the day. There was Bodie, and as far as Doyle could see, not only were there fewer tubes going into and coming out of his body, but the skin seemed closer to his normal colour. Doyle grinned at him and parked himself on the plastic chair that

immediately found all the residual aches from the night before. God, he was exhausted, but it was worth it, just to see Bodie looking less dead, just to be able to stay with Bodie and make sure the stubborn bastard saw the light of day.

He dug into his pocket, pulling out the battered sandwich he had stuck in there at lunch-time, knowing that he would need it, cooking or eating hot food something that seemed to have gone by the wayside. Well, time enough for that later on, wouldn't there be? In fact, he'd twist Bodie's arm, get the bugger to take him out, a night on the town—

He chewed very slowly then, meditating, literally ruminative, as he considered how he had phrased that thought in his own mind. He'd made it sound like a date, the kind of special date that he always expected to end up in bed. Not the way one was supposed to think about one's partner, was it? But everyone else seemed to think he thought about Bodie that way anyway: everyone from Cowley to the nurse to the entire squad, always referring to Bodie as his 'better half'. The last of the sandwich was consumed with him sitting there, watching Bodie, thinking about him in an entirely new light. One thing for moments of passing fancy in the shower, something else entirely to think of having a 'better half'.

He must have dozed off, the click of the door waking him. It was her again, and she tossed him a wink and a grin, shooing him back into his seat.

"According to his chart, he's going to be fine. Woke up today, for all of ten seconds."

"Woke up? You mean, he woke up?"

"Well, that's what I usually mean when I say a patient woke up. Apparently, not long before you came in," and her cheek dimpled and her obvious delight was almost as great as his, "he opened his eyes long enough to say 'Ray', then shut them again. They left him to it, and here he is, Sleeping Beauty."

He knew what she was going to say before she said it, and he knew he should be offended, or at least pretend to be.

She said it: "So will you be waking him with a kiss, will you?"

"Oh, leave it out," but he was half laughing when he said it, too busy being delighted that Bodie had come round to much care about any ribbing he might get.

"Oh, you want me to leave it out," she said, and that's when he noticed what she was doing: rather intimate things in the region of Bodie's thoroughly exposed groin. "But if I left it out, would you be willing to let me see you put it away?"

That shocked him. He was used to bold women, but not one who'd say things like that to him—at least not without it being flirtation. "Listen, love," he said, "even if I was willing to let you see, I don't think old stick in the mud in there would let me."

Her face went very still. "You're serious, aren't you? You mean, you and him, you've

"Well, Ihave, but not with him." He couldn't believe he'd actually said that. That was one of those things you kept mum about, unless you were in the right kind of private club, or with someone you knew a hell of a lot more intimately than a nurse you'd met four times and spoken to the grand total of twice.

"You're not trying to tell me he's straight, are vou?'

He had to laugh at that. "Christ, don't let Bodie hear you sounding so shocked. Rotten bugger's straight as a die."

"Ah, well, if he's straight as a die, I suppose he would be a rotten bugger." She busied herself with a number of things, and Doyle ruefully noted that she made bloody sure that the blankets were left folded out of the way long after she had finished with all his various bits and pieces. The decent thing to do, of course, was keep his eyes front and centre, but Bodie was the military man, so that was out. Plus, he consoled himself, he'd gone to art school, so front and centre to him was literal, and you couldn't get much more front and centre than Bodie's groin. And very nice it was, too. Lax, of course, clean as a whistle after the nurse's attentions, pale pink flesh nestled in curling black hair. He wanted to touch, but that was hardly something new, and he resisted the temptation with the strictures of long practice. But still, it would be nice to touch Bodie like that. Lick him and suck him, feel him inside...

"Sorry, but I've got to cover him up now, be

more than my job's worth if I let him catch a cold on top of everything else."

He blushed at that, then blushed even brighter when she winked at him and said, "Course, I'm the only one who'll be coming in here tonight, and now that he's off the critical, I'll be knocking before I come in, won't I now?"

He knew he shouldn't ask, but knowing better had never stopped him before. "Have they given him stuff to make him sleep?"

"Oh, it'll be morning before he'll be rousing." That filthy chuckle again, the one that could be him, laughing at one of Bodie's filthier jokes. "Unless you decide to take matters into your own hand!"

Another wink, another giggle, and she was gone, leaving Doyle to Bodie, and temptation. He sat down. He stood up. He went to the window. He sat down again. He stood up again. "Bad as a bloody jack-in-the-box," he muttered to himself, sitting down and determined that he was going to stay put. His eyes were gritty with tiredness, reminding him that bed was the place he should be, at which, his cock jumped up and agreed. "Down, boy," he told it, adjusting himself in jeans that were too tight—unless you like the constant, comforting pressure at your groin. Almost as reassuring as thumb sucking, but a hell of a lot more pleasant.

Legs sprawled, leaning back staring at Bodie, he forgot that he was supposed to just be getting his cock free of that crinkle of cotton, and stroked at himself instead. Even through his jeans, he could feel the heat of his hand on his cock and the heat of his cock on his hand. Lovely. He sighed, eyes narrowing, gaze lingering on Bodie's beautiful mouth and what he'd like to do to it—and what he'd like to feed to it. Without conscious thought, he unzipped himself, tugging the denims open far enough to free his cock, smiling to himself in uncomplicated happiness as his cock nuzzled into his palm, a sweet slickness at the head, satin-smoothing down the length of him. He traced the veins, feeling the pulse from without through the tips of his fingers, feeling the pulse from within as blood gorged him, making him hard.

His V-neck shirt was shoved up out of the way, exposing his nipples to his own pinching

fingers, fingernails scraping, pleasure singing, arrows of delight shooting straight to his cock. He looked down at himself, up flat against his belly, the hairs on his groin tingling against the flange, wishing he could have Bodie's mouth around him. Now it was Bodie he looked at, tucked up in bed like Christopher Robin. All that was missing was Pooh-Bear cuddled up beside him. And a shave, now that he had moved a little and seen that the shadow was actually the beginnings of stubble, framing that beautiful, delectable mouth. Christ, but he wanted to fuck that! Yeh, and I can just imagine Bodie's reaction to that, he thought to himself.

But if he were drugged, there was nothing to say that Bodie would wake up if he were to pull the blankets down. Not to touch, of course, couldn't do a thing like that to a mate. But just to look. No harm in looking, was there?

Absolutely not, was his cock's opinion, tapping against his belly.

"Want to see him, do you?" he asked it, voice sibilant whisper. "All right, we'll have a look, eh?"

Very quietly, he folded the blankets down, pleased that the staff-he owed his Irish nurse a lovely bunch of roses for this—had left Bodie naked. The scar from the appendix operation was still ugly as sin, but that didn't bother him: it wasn't there he was looking. He'd promised himself he wouldn't touch, but he leant over Bodie, coming within an inch of Bodie's cock, getting a closer look than any chance glimpse in the loo or changing rooms had ever offered him. He promised himself he wasn't going to touch, even though he licked his lips in temptation. No, couldn't do a thing like that, not when it was his mate, and his mate was out of it and had no say in the matter. Completely out of it.

Which meant that there was no-one to know but him, didn't it?

But he'd promised he wouldn't touch.

Promised who? his cock wanted to know, rubbing against the edge of the bed, desperate for a bit of attention.

Promised Bodie.

Who was out of it. Who didn't know any-

thing about the promise.

Who wouldn't know anything about being touched either, would he?

Sleep till morning, that's what she'd said. No harm in touching him, surely? No harm at all, and so much pleasure. The tip of his tongue flickered out, touching briefly, so briefly, the warm dry skin. Then his eyes closed, and he swooped down, taking Bodie into his mouth, taking his own cock into his hand, and it was quick, so quick, sucking Bodie hard and hot and wonderful; pumping his own cock, equally hard and hot and wonderful. He indulged himself, using every skill long years of practice had taught him, taking his partner inside himself, intoxicating himself on the taste and feel and size of him. He felt Bodie come, felt the splash in his throat, and came, shuddering, over his own

Eyes closed, he lapped at Bodie, cleaning him of every last droplet of cum. And then his heart stopped, for a hand touched his hair, and as he looked up, looked up and up, along Bodie's torso, he met sleepy blue eyes that were overbrimming with affection. "Mmm," the slurred voice mumbled, "that was lovely..." Then the blueness was gone, and Bodie was sound asleep again.

Shaken, terrified, if truth be told, by what he had done, by almost getting caught—and there was a sudden, truly horrifying wondering, if that odd little noise he had heard but ignored had been the door, if the nurse had come back, and seen. And then the next wave hit him: shocked fear by how he had reacted to the simple taste and touch of Bodie. He zipped himself up, pulling his shirt down, in too much of a hurry to tuck it in, grabbing his jacket and what was left of his wits and then he was running, white-trainered feet flying down the corridor and out into his car.

And was it really so surprising that he threw himself into his work so severely that there was no time left to visit the recovering Bodie? At least that's what he told himself, and that's how he made it look, and that's what everyone else told Bodie. Everyone, that is, apart from Cowley, who kept his own

counsel and said not a word, but watched, oh. how he watched.

And how that made Doyle itch. He was in trouble, he knew he was. With Cowley, with Bodie (if Bodie remembered or if Bodie found out he'd been avoiding him), but mostly with

Pottering around his kitchen, making himself a cup of tea, he ran through it in his mind again, all of it made all the more pointed by the simple fact that Bodie was back on duty tomorrow. No more avoiding either Bodie, or the issue. He hadn't been prepared to fall in love. Perhaps that's why it had happened. Perhaps that's why it was able to creep up behind him and press-gang him, carrying him off before he'd had any notion what was going on. Christ, he'd been prepared for lust—was used to that, lived with it every day—but love? Being in love? Okay, so he'd always liked men, but he'd also always imagined himself, in the vaguest kind of way, falling in love and settling down with a woman. Not a man. Not his partner. Not Bodie. Definitely not Bodie, who wasn't his usual type at all. He liked his men blond, graceful, a bit on the artistic side, flexible when it came to sex. Big, butch men with militarily short black hair were not his usual cup of tea at all.

But then, falling in love wasn't his usual cup of tea either.

There was something else he had to think about. Working with Bodie. They were already too close, everyone knew that, just like everybody knew that it was only a matter of time before they were split up because of that. Couldn't continue as partners with someone when you couldn't do your job for protecting them, could you? They'd both seen that coming, although neither one of them wanted to split up. Something would happen on the job, and then they'd split up a bit off work: cutting out the double dates, hanging around with other blokes from the squad instead of each other, carefully rationing the number of phone calls they allowed themselves to each other. Then they'd be fine on the job again, the rapport intact, but the self-destructive desire to put the partner first would be under control again.

They were used to that particular tension,

dealt with it on a daily basis. But love? Love wasn't in the book, was probably against all those rules in the small print. Definitely wasn't in Bodie's book, he knew that from experience. Up to now, their partnership was what had saved him from Bodie's usual pattern: the minute Bodie started getting too attached to someone—or something, for that matter—then that person or thing simply disappeared, and woe to anyone who was stupid enough to ask Bodie about it. He'd only done it himself a handful of times, loving from the start watching Bodie get all worked up about something. That pulled him up short. Loved it from the start? Christ, he had, hadn't he? From the word go, he'd pushed and prodded and niggled, until he could get Bodie to let rip. Because after Bodie let rip, Bodie was always extra affectionate after, wasn't he?

"Fucking hell!" he said out loud. He hadn't even realised he'd been doing it, but it had been there all along. Have a fight, kiss and make up. Well, make up—there hadn't been any kissing, although Bodie was always quick with a pat on his arse or an arm around his shoulder, would even sit on the couch and let Doyle put his head in his lap if the fight had been loud enough and Bodie nasty enough.

He spent the rest of that night oscillating between squirming and dreading as he reviewed what he'd been up to with Bodie and what was coming his way tomorrow.

Tomorrow was almost over; the work part was definitely finished, he had actually made it home in one piece. He headed straight for his sideboard, taking an almost full bottle of blended Scotch out, settling himself down on the settee to drink and think and relax. He went through the day again, looking at it as objectively as he could. Doyle had half expected them to be tense with each other, he from a twisted mixture of guilt and newfangled emotions, Bodie from sullen resentment that Doyle hadn't come near him. Instead, he'd got sympathy for having to work 'so fucking hard' and great good humour because Bodie was so delighted to see him again.

Which, of course, only made him feel worse. He didn't know which was the worst of his guilty secrets: that he had lied to Bodie, that he was in love with Bodie, or that he couldn't keep the picture from his mind—Bodie, naked, beautiful, filling his mouth, filling him...

They'd been almost their usual selves, but it was like a car with the engine imprecisely tuned. Everything ticked over, but there was an off-note, something not quite right, something that would get worse and worse until the entire engine clapped out. Unless he fixed it first. Or got a new one.

That last was rejected without a second thought. He wasn't—couldn't—just get rid of Bodie, even if he had to leave CI5 to give himself enough safe distance so that he could keep it as a friendship and not bollocks everything up by trying to bring sex and love in. But in the meantime, he'd manage. By the time he slid sideways on the settee, drunk as a pug, he'd made up his mind and even found himself a mantra or two. Take it day by day, like an alcoholic. Today I will not grope Bodie. Today I will not go down on one knee and propose...

It lasted a week. Until—"Fancy coming out for a drink tonight? I could set you up with this luscious," hands making an exaggerated hourglass of extremely unlikely and topheavy proportions, "blonde who's desperate for some handsome young man to sweep her off her feet and make mad, passionate love to her. But as I said, she's desperate, so she'd settle for you."

"Oh, thanks very much," he responded to the sarcasm, for that was safe and easy and would keep Bodie from seeing that the temptation that leapt through him wasn't for the blonde, but for the prospect of a foursome, and maybe being able to get all four of them into the same bed together, where no-one would notice if he brushed against Bodie, or think twice if he were understandably fascinated by another bloke's technique, or if he'd worn his girl out and went to 'help' Bodie with his—he slammed the brakes on himself, backing off, furious with himself for letting his balls run away with his brain. "Actually, mate, got something on myself tonight already. Tell you what, you handle both of them, and then come in and tell me all about it in the

morning, all right?"

"You sure? She's really gorgeous. Do you the power of good—"

Christ, that was the last thing he needed! Bodie going all nurturing and thoughtful on him-enough to make a man's heart melt and his resolve right along with it. "Look, Bodie," he snapped, covering his temptation with bad temper, "I've already told you. I've got something else on tonight and I don't need you fixing me up with birds!"

"All right, all right, keep your shirt on. Just trying to do you a favour. Or get her to do you a favour, if you know what I mean. So I'll see you in the morning then, shall I? Pick you up?"

"Knowing you and the ladies, Bodie, it'll be me having to pick you up."

"Nah, no worry about that. She's a nurse, she'll take good care of me."

Bodie was walking away from him, waving an abstract good-bye over his shoulder. A sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, that morbid curiosity for which he was so rightly infamous, made him ask: "A nurse? The night nurse from the hospital?"

"Yeh," Bodie had turned round, walking backwards along the familiar corridor, voice rising as he got farther away. "All those catheters and sponge baths, she just couldn't resist my manly charms, could she?"

He didn't bother getting ready for bed, beyond brushing his teeth and shaving, in case Bodie got him in the face when they had their fight later on and his face was too sore to shave in the morning. Because the fight was coming, no doubt whatsoever about it. There was no chance at all that the nurse he was shocked to realise he didn't even know her name—would keep her mouth shut. None whatsoever. Even if he had heard something else entirely, and it hadn't been someone her—closing the room door, then she'd still let something slip about the way he was about Bodie. He was willing to bet she didn't have a single discreet bone in her body. And once she'd told Bodie...

Not quite eleven, far earlier than he'd actually expected, there it was: the usual signal at the door, announcing Bodie. Well, he thought to himself, getting up to let Bodie in, might as well get it over with.

Bodie, dark, frowning, Heathcliffe in smart suit and tie pulled off, hair gleaming, temper simmering.

"Come in," Doyle said, stepping aside, bracing himself for the attack that was looming.

"Nice to know you've got some manners left."

Doyle looked at him sharply, something in the voice not quite right.

"Had a very interesting chat with our Siobhan tonight, Doyle. In fact, it was so fucking interesting, I thought you'd want to hear all about it tonight and not have to wait until morning."

"Yeh, thought you might. Fancy a lager?" And winced, knowing that he shouldn't have left himself wide open like that.

"Fancy a lager? Not half as much as you fancy me, mate. Not from what I've just heard."

"Look, do you want one or not? I'm having—

"What? A good long pull?"

He stopped stock still. She'd told Bodie. It had been the door he'd heard, she'd seen him and told Bodie...

"D'you know what she told me, Doyle? You see, we were getting on like a house on fire," and he paused, just long enough to glare at Doyle, "getting on *really* well, romance, sweet music, candles. And in the spirit of the moment, I thanked her for what she did for me at the hospital."

Doyle looked at him in utter shock. It had never crossed his mind that Bodie would, that Bodie might think—

"And she told me she was just doing her job. Well, I'm sure *you* can imagine how taken aback by that I was. So I said to her, oh, we get blow-jobs on the NHS now do we? And she looked at me, Doyle, as if I'd grown an extra head, and not one that she'd sucked, either. Because she hadn't given me head, had she, Doyle?"

He could, of course, lie. But that was the one thing that Bodie hated above all else. While he might eventually be forgiven for a momentary aberration—he immediately

started running convincing excuses through his mind—he'd never be forgiven for a deliberate lie told out of cowardice. "No, she hadn't," he finally said.

"Who did?"

"What're you after, Bodie? Your pound of fucking flesh?"

"Why not? You already got yours."

"You're big, Bodie, but it doesn't weigh a pound," he said, and his own temper was rising now, and with it, the vicious tongue he depended upon for his defence. "Or is a pound what you usually charge for it?"

"To let poofters suck it? Oh, I'd charge them more than a pound for *that* privilege."

It was going to get ugly, really ugly, and that was when Doyle realised that he was prepared to take his lumps—literally—for what he'd done, but he was damned if he was going to let it get nasty and vicious and destroy all the good that they'd had. But he doubted that Bodie felt the same way, going by what his partner—ex-partner? Would there be a quiet conference with Cowley, then them split up, maybe him kicked out?—was saying to him. He turned away, not knowing how much his misery showed on his face. "Sorry," he muttered, going for the whisky instead of the lager. "Should never have done it, I know, but... Why don't you go ahead and thump me, get it over with?"

"You want me to hit you?"

"Course I don't want you to fucking hit me! But it'll still be better than having to hear what you've got to say."

"Can't face it? Can't face that you gave in to your curiosity and tried a walk on the wild side to see what it was like with someone safely unconscious?"

He should have grabbed the chance, but surprise got the better of him, and he'd spoken before he'd thought, the instinctive protest of the male. "Trying it out? Christ, Bodie, are you blind? I'm bi, and in case you hadn't noticed, that was no beginner sucking his first cock!"

Of course, the instant he'd said it, he wished he'd let himself be labelled as inexperienced, unskilled and rotten at sex. Better than alienating Bodie completely.

"So it's not the first cock you've sucked,

No point in denying it now, and at least Bodie hadn't hit him for it. "No."

"How many?"

"How the hell should I know? D'you know how many cunts you've eaten?"

"Actually," Bodie said, shocking Doyle by sitting down on the settee with every appearance of complete relaxation, "I do. All written down in my big black book. I could check for you, if you really want the actual number."

Doyle stared at him, waiting, just waiting. He knew Bodie, knew there was something else coming, probably something that was going to cut him off at the knees.

"Could also tell you how many cocks I've sucked."

There it was, the first of the quick one-two to flatten him. Oh, he knew his Bodie.

"Course, there's not as many of those, but you'd know all about having to be discreet and careful and acting like straight trade, wouldn't you?"

It seemed that maybe, just maybe, he didn't know his Bodie at all.

"What?" His mind was whirling, racing, but all his mouth was capable of was either hanging slack with shock or asking stupid questions. "You've sucked cock?"

"And been sucked—but I don't need to tell you that, do I? Done my share of sodomy and buggery as well."

"In the Army?"

"No, in the arse, stupid."

He couldn't believe it. Bodie, sitting here, making his usual puerile jokes, with that stupid grin on his face, canary got the cat and all puffed up with pride after the mindboggling feat. "You're having me on," was all he could say.

"Yeh, I am. Or maybe *taking* you on says it better, eh, mate?"

Wary, not quite sure what Bodie's game was, he snapped, "What the hell are you getting at, sunshine?"

"Oh, come on, you're not that thick, Doyle. You and me. Look, in the hospital, I couldn't really see who sucked me, right? So it was natural, wasn't it, when this night nurse comes in after her time off, and she's got big

slanted green eyes, and a filthy chuckle and gobs of curls, that I think that she's the one who did me. But when I find out she's a nice girl who doesn't go around blowing strange men, I put two and two together and say to myself, now, who else do I know who could get into the room of a CI5 agent at night, has weird green eyes, hair that you could lose a brush set in and a laugh as filthy as a clogged drain."

He kept his mouth shut, with some difficulty, because it was wanting to babble all sorts of crap, none of it anything he would want to admit to in the cold light of day.

"And d'you know who I came up with? Give you three guesses."

He hadn't expected a playful, gleeful Bodie. Not a bit of it. "Are you drunk?" he demanded.

"Stone cold sober. Same as you were that night. Got a good mouth, Doyle. Wouldn't mind letting you have a go at me again."

He swallowed, and watched in fascination as Bodie grew visibly hard at the thought, cock stretching against fine black wool trousers. Not the reaction he'd been expecting at all. But one he wanted. God, one he'd wanted so fucking much he hadn't dared think about it.

"Is that an offer?"

"I was hoping that you'd offer me."

"To suck you off?"

"And let me fuck you, if you're into that."

"Oh, yeh," he heard himself saying, feeling as if he were stumbling in a dream. This was the kind of conversation he had with someone he'd picked up at one of the clubs, not his partner, not Bodie. "I'm not into pain, though."

"Okay, so I won't do any of that to you. Bit of the rough all right though?"

"Yeh, I like that. As long as it doesn't go over the top. You?" He still couldn't quite believe he was having this conversation with Bodie jesuschrist, Bodie!—but his cock was listening avidly, and it was obviously having no problems at all.

"I like it rough sometimes. Like giving a bit of pain, if the other bloke's into it, but you're not, so I won't. Never do it that often anyway, so it's no great loss. I don't get fucked, though. Never."

Now that was intriguing, the way Bodie

said it. The way Bodie meant it... "And when've I ever fucked you, Bodie?" he asked, understanding that Bodie was talking about more than sex, more than the insertion of phallus into rectum. He was talking about being fucked over, betrayed, hurt, and although nothing had ever been said, Doyle knew Bodie had been fucked over more than once, and by experts. "Go on, tell me. When've I ever fucked you over?"

"I'm not going to let you start, Doyle, just you remember that, and we'll get on fine."

He'd never seen Bodie either so defensive or so scared. Which meant that big, tough, butch Bodie was vulnerable to him, emotionally. Which meant that there had to be feelings in there somewhere. Now this, this was the kind of conversation he expected to be having with Bodie: all blinds and parries and carefully concealed emotions. He went back to the language that Bodie always conversed in best: sex. "You fuck me over, Bodie, and I'll kill you, but I'll let you fuck me, when I'm in the mood."

Bodie's voice was almost a whisper and Doyle grinned in feral delight as his partner had to lick his lips and clear his throat before he could speak. It made him feel ten feet tall and lord of all he surveyed to have Bodie so succumbed to lust that he could barely speak. "So you like being fucked, do you?"

"Like it? If the bloke's not up to much, then yeah, I like it. But if he's good, oh, if he's good, Bodie," his own voice deep and husky, deliberately seductive, weaving a spell all around Bodie, "then I love it. I love a cock up my arse, Bodie, and I love it when he's big enough to split me in two."

And they both knew how big Bodie was, and how he would stretch Doyle.

"You big enough to fuck me, Bodie?"

"You know I am."

"Oh, no," and he started stripping, casually dropping his clothes as he went past Bodie on his way to the bedroom, talking over one naked shoulder, eyes glinting as he saw Bodie's reaction when he dropped his jeans and the tight globes of his arse were exposed to that devouring stare, "I know you're big enough for me to suck on, but so's a lolly. I want," and he turned at last, fully naked, fully

hard, eyes wide and pupils black, deep enough for him to drown Bodie in them, "you to fuck me into next week. And if you're a good boy," said he, making the final adjustment in their new balance of power, "I'll even let you do it again."

He walked on, pausing in the doorway to turn and say to the motionless Bodie, "You coming?"

"In your arse," was the hoarse response, and then Bodie was lunging at him, flinging him onto the bed, Bodie's clothes and shoes being tossed aside with fine disregard.

"C'mon, Bodie, I want you," Doyle said to him, spreading himself across the bed, legs so wide that the cleft of his arse could be seen behind the tautness of his balls. "Get the stuff from the drawer." He lay there in an agony of anticipation watching the glory of Bodie's body. Bodie was gorgeous, and huge, and a drop of pre-cum glistening at the tip caught the light and Doyle's breath, so that his mouth watered with the desire to take it in his mouth again and suck them both into oblivion, his own cock rammed down Bodie's throat, fucking in harmony with Bodie down his throat and—

He groaned, then lunged up far enough to grab Bodie, pulling him down, guttural noises in his throat as he slicked Bodie up, slathering him in cream, making him so wet, because he didn't want any other preparations. He wanted his hole to be tight when Bodie went into him for the first time, wanted to feel as if he were being split on that glorious cock. Wanted to be driven to the edge by that hardness. No, he didn't like pain of the serious sort, but it wasn't real pain, not to him, to be stretched to his limit. He'd been fucked more times than he could remember, loved fucking more than anything else, and he never tired of that spreading feeling, of taking someone else inside, of being man enough to always take the other man, no matter how big. And the bigger the man was, the more of a man Doyle felt himself to be, by proving that he could take it, and the man.

But Bodie, oh, with Bodie it was different. All that was still there, but this was Bodie, his partner and his love, and he was going to own him. He was going to make this so fucking spectacular that Bodie would come back again and again, until he stopped being scared of his own feelings and could let Doyle love him. And could love Doyle back.

Well worth waiting for, and the waiting would be such a pleasure. His hands were trembling so much, he could barely get the cap back on the tube, finally abandoning the effort as pointless and wasting time that would be better spent with Bodie inside him. He went onto his knees, judging that Bodie would be more comfortable, psychologically speaking, to be in such a dominant position at first—'I don't get fucked, Doyle', so give him the illusion of complete control. It didn't cost Doyle anything, completely secure in his own masculinity, so he knelt there, and let a lush groan escape him as Bodie pressed the head of his cock to Doyle's hole. He pushed outwards, the muscle dilating, then drew Bodie in, laughing in sheer exhilaration when he heard Bodie shout, knowing then that Bodie had never had it this good before, and that Bodie was going to be his.

His. That shot through him, even as Bodie's cock fucked his arse, stretching him, making him feel incredibly full. Then Bodie was moving in him, and he was pushing back to meet him, taking Bodie in completely, staking his claim, possessing him in the best way possible: from the passive position, allowing Bodie his pride, shoring up Bodie's insecurities, showing him what a real man he was. It wasn't often Doyle was willing to go with a butch man, for they were too much work, needing too much reassurance and too much game playing, but it was different with Bodie. This was no effort at all, this was heaven taking up residence in his arse. Every time Bodie fucked him, cock thrusting into him, he felt as if it touched his heart, as if it filled him to the tips of his toes and the top of his head, leaving no part of him untouched, unfucked, unloved.

Because he knew love when he felt it, and this was it, the genuine article, no two ways about it. It was there in the way Bodie was almost crying with the pleasure of it, it was there in the way Bodie was clutching him as if his life depended on it. It was there in the way Bodie was saying his name over and over and over again, and Doyle could hear the

words of love just behind it, held in by either self-delusion or fear. Whichever, it made no difference: he knew, and it was only a matter of time before Bodie would be able to say it out loud, over the breakfast table.

Or here, in bed, with Bodie in him. Or him in Bodie, fucking that delectable arse that begged to have a cock shoved into it, even if its owner didn't know it yet. But for now, it was more than enough to possess Bodie inside him, to have that plundering cock up him, Bodie's voice rough in his ear, teeth sharp on his nape, belly clinging to his back every time Bodie thrust deep into him, Bodie's hand on his own cock, squeezing him, giving him a fist to fuck, until he was fucking and fucked, all of it flowing together into a mindless rhythm of love and lust.

Bodie was juddering in him now, pistoning into him fast and hard, and then jolting his hips forward in orgasm, cum streaming from Bodie into him and out of his own cock, spilling over their joined hands as Bodie spilled inside their joined bodies. Abruptly, Bodie was heavy on top of him, weighing him down, so he shoved him, made him move, settled them together. He reached to kiss Bodie—and Bodie turned away.

"Oh no you don't," he snarled, grabbing Bodie's face between his own strong hands, forcing him to be still, to look at him. "Your rules: you don't get fucked over. My rules: the same thing, Bodie, and you're not going to play rough trade with me, got that? I like to kiss my lovers, Bodie, and you're my lover and you're mine, Bodie. So you kiss me, and if that makes you scared, tough, because you're just going to have to get used to it, aren't you?"

"I don't kiss, Doyle." Warning, voice hard, eyes harder.

But Doyle knew what he wanted, and a fuck-mate wasn't it. There were plenty of lesscomplicated men he could have for that, and even more with whom he didn't run the risk of being hurt. But he wanted Bodie, he had had Bodie, and by god, he was going to keep Bodie. And the sooner the stupid bastard gave in and enjoyed it, the better. "You said you don't get fucked. I gave you that, I let you fuck me. But you agreed not to fuck me over

in return, and now you're going to keep your word, aren't you, Bodie?"

And he leaned forward, long fingers threading into the feather of soft black hair at Bodie's temples, mouth caressing, so gently, so terribly gently, Bodie's tightly closed lips. Then tongue, the very tip, tracing the wellloved shape so tenderly, pressing, with such sweet passion, at the tensely guarded mouth. And Bodie, opening to him, tentative, with all the fear of a man who was terrified of being too vulnerable, of giving in and letting someone else take command. Doyle took over, took command, his tongue laving the silken insides of Bodie's mouth, showing him love, showing him how wonderful it could be to let someone else breach his body. To let someone else in. To let someone pass the barriers he had so carefully erected. Doyle kissed him for a long time, until Bodie started kissing him back, until he felt Bodie's arms come round him to hold him tight, until passion started its slow spiral upwards once more.

Morning. Bright shafting light, cutting his head open, alarm screeching, phone ringing, Bodie wrapped around him, octopus armed, the rank smell of spent semen and anal sex, the aching of his body telling him that he was far too old to spend an entire night on sex and not sleep. He flustered his way clear of Bodie's arms, and then the sheet, and the duvet, flailing hand knocking the lamp half off the bedside table before he could get the alarm switched off. Then the phone, Bodie groaning into the pillow, and Doyle was blinking, trying to convince himself that he could survive on—a glance at the clock and he was groaning like Bodie—an hour's sleep and seven hours of sex and talk.

"4.5, shipment has been brought forward, you and 3.7 are needed in the office in fifteen minutes. Sorry we're late notifying, you were last on the list and we thought you needed your beauty sleep."

"Oh, thanks, Control, just what I wanted to hear," he muttered as he hung the phone up. "Up, Bodie!"

'Give us a break, Ray, I don't think I'll be able to get it up for a month!"

"Not that bit, the rest of you. Shipment's on

early, Cowley wants us there as of now."

"What? Shit, here, toss me my clothes—" Doyle stared at him in total disbelief, before disappearing off towards the bathroom, shouting as he went, "If you want to go in to see Cowley looking and smelling like a brothel, that's your business, mate, but I intend him to see me before he smells me coming."

And then, of course, the filthy chuckle as the double entendre registered. He heard Bodie groan again, but all he could do was laugh, still buoyant after the night before. Right now, he didn't give a shit what was going to happen: last night had been incredible, and if they had that—the sex, Bodie willing to trust him, the kernel of love on Bodie's side that just needed a bit of time for Bodie to come to terms with—then he'd make bloody certain they never lost it. But he still had a job to do, so he was under the shower, racing through the morning routine, shoving Bodie in after him, the two of them in such a hurry that they were back to being partners before either one of them could slip into awkwardness. It wasn't until they went diving into the briefing room, a second before Cowley, that Bodie came over all odd, and Doyle looked at him, hissing, "What? Don't you go having regrets on me, Bodie."

Bodie uttered not a mutter, and it was only when Doyle had shifted uncomfortably for what felt like the millionth time, that it dawned on him what had made Bodie go peculiar. It was him, unable to sit comfortably because Bodie had fucked him so thoroughly and so well. He grinned to himself, an evil little imp, and started making a point of being uncomfortable, playing it up for all he was worth: peeking inside his shirt (Bodie's actually borrowed at some point and never returned) and then rubbing his chest with an expression of mingled discomfort and satisfaction, grinning knowingly when Bodie became as embarrassed as hell—and as pleased as punch with it.

It took an inordinate amount of time, but the briefing was finally finished, and the group of agents rose en masse, Bodie and Doyle getting shuffled apart in the goodnatured mêlée.

"Doyle!"

Oh, shit, he'd forgotten about Cowley, never a wise thing to do, and considering what he—Doyle—had been like this month past, it could be labelled as positively stupid. "Sir?"

"A word, if I may?"

Such courtesy: he was in serious, serious trouble. He winced as he did a quick action replay of his behaviour this morning: Outer Mongolia in winter began to look very attractive. Either that, or time to get used to the Outer Hebrides.

"You and Bodie have been in the A Squad for how long now? Three years, is it?"

"Yes, sir," going through the motions, confirming what Cowley already knew, wondering how he was going to get Bodie out of the very fine mess he'd got him into.

"And you've become very...close?"

"Best way to do the job, sir."

"Aye...aye, I can see that. But tell me, Doyle, when I partnered you with Bodie, did you think I was being literal when I said a good CI5 partnership was like a marriage?"

Christ, he hadn't expected the old bastard to be that blunt! "No, sir. I assumed you were being purely metaphorical in meaning, sir. Course, if you want us to take you literally, you'd have to give me someone better looking with—"

"That's enough, Doyle, I'm well aware of your preferences and tastes. Knew them before I employed you, but I assumed that I could trust you to be as discreet over certain...predilections of yours as you had been whilst in the police.'

This was serious. Properly serious, not piss-taking serious. "Yes, sir. You definitely can, sir. I promise."

"If this morning's little dumb-show was an indication of your idea of discretion, then I hardly think your promise is much reassurance. Now, you listen to me, and you listen carefully, Doyle. I want you and Bodie in my office tomorrow morning, nine sharp. And I want an answer from you."

"Well, can't do that, sir."

"Doyle!"

"Haven't told me the question. Sir."

"The question, Doyle, is whether or not you and Bodie remain with this department."

That shocked him. "Sir?"

"Och, don't come the deafie with me, Doyle. I need to know if I can trust the pair of you to be discreet, or if I'm going to have to toss the pair of you out on your ears as security risks."

"But we're not security risks, you know that! No-one could blackmail or buy us—"

"I'm not talking about that! I swear, Doyle, I sometimes wonder why I ever took you on. Think, man. Not blackmail to reveal what you know. But drawing attention, negative attention, to CI5. Are we a nest of homosexuals? Do we harbour security risks within one of Her Majesty's own security departments? I need to know if I can depend on you two to be suitably restrained and keep your noses clean."

"I don't see the problem, sir. Surely, if we slip—" he stumbled over the words, losing his train of thought, it having just hit him like a ton of bricks that he was standing in the briefing room, discussing his and Bodie's sex life—homosexual sex life, with each other, no less—with Cowley. Cowley, his boss.

"D'you think I give two hoots for you and Bodie's sake? It's the department, Doyle, the department. If we were investigated for homosexual security risks, just how many people do you think CI5 would have left?"

He did it again: he opened his mouth and let his belly rumble. "Why? Who else is queer?" He looked at Cowley. Added: "Sir."

It didn't help.

"Sorry, sir," he mumbled, hoping the hung head and drooping curls would get him off the hook, even as he frantically tried to work out who the hell else was gay.

"Tomorrow, Doyle," was what Cowley finally said, shaking his head ruefully. "Nine sharp."

Doyle lifted his head, watched his boss walk away.

"And don't forget your better half!"

And Doyle grinned as he watched Cowley realise what he'd just said.

Better half. Oh, he definitely liked that. He went off to find him, to discuss just how the hell they were going to manage to 'be discreet'.

Especially since he had a feeling—that if he was lucky—it was going to be several weeks before he'd be left alone long enough to sit down comfortably.