



Our final Pros piece comes from the fertile and fevered brain of the Glaswegian. But fear not you Pros fen who would turn from a gut-wrenching tale with a black and bleak ending: 'The High Road' is not such! The setting is Glasgow, the time is Christmas and New Year's, and the problem to be resolved is recognizing the gifts bestowed on one Mr. W. A. P. Bodie...

re we all sitting comfortably? No? Well, we'll wait for you. Come, and join us, there's plenty of room for all. Don't sit so far away, pull your chair up closer to the fire to keep the winter's chill from your back. Right, is everyone all settled now? Then let us begin...

Once upon a time, long ago in a country not so very far away, one year was drawing to an end, the new one yet to begin. Like a variation on the old jokes, there was this Englishmen, pseudo-Irishman and a

THE HIGH ROAD

M. FAE GLASGOW

Scotsman, all of them in the same car, all of them heading in the same direction, all of them going ostensibly to the same place. As *deus ex machina*, we of course know that this isn't true, that nothing entertaining is ever so simple.

Mind you, the Scotsman, George Cowley himself, was doing nothing more complicated than going home, to see in the New Year, to have himself a wee wallow in the tastes and smells and sounds of what would always be 'home', no matter how far away and for how long he lived somewhere else. As for Bodie and Doyle, ah, well, yes, they were there as minders, sent along to baby-sit a man neither one of them could imagine as anything less than a Sergeant complete with barking orders and cowering corporals. But even the powers that be are given to fussing over a usefully dangerous man when threats against him have been made, and so George Cowley was stuck with his pair of

baby-sitters. In a perfect world, Bodie and Doyle were the best agents a man could ever wish for. In the real world, Cowley looking at them askance, they could bear an unnerving resemblance to Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee. And then argue over which of them was which.

But the thing is, and the whole reason for telling this tale, is that while it was a simple enough journey for Cowley, there was an entire universe more to it for Bodie and Doyle—and for once, we're not the only ones aware of it, who know that something's coming, something bound for change. There was a tension singing in the air between Bodie and Doyle, not enough for it to be from a real danger, a real threat from outside, but—something. Neither one of them was given to airy-fairy notions, but still, there was a nagging, whining sense that there were things in this life that were going to change beyond recall. Sitting there in that car,

either one of them would be hard pressed to know just exactly what he thought might happen, or what the other would do. But there it was between them: the knowledge that everything had changed, for all it seemed to have stayed the same.

So, it was a journey then, of physical distance and emotional vastness. A journey, then, for us to watch.

And there they are, making their way along a motorway, their car a red blur on the tarmac, rigid steel cutting them off from the flow of the world around them. But this is a tale, a story, so unlike everyone else in their world, we can see inside that shiny shell of metal, we can see them, the softness inside the hardness. We can come in closer and closer and closer, circling them like hawks with a rabbit, until we are near enough to see their every detail, and nearer yet, until we are amongst them, until we are a part of them: until, at last, we can see through Bodie's bright blue eyes...

Outside, the road lay in front of him as if it had heard all those descriptions of roads winding away like grey ribbons amidst the green copses of trees and the gentle rolling of hills. Overhead, the sky was a wash-day blue, the sun an oblique glow of lemon brightness, the clouds scattered and few, punctuated by the dark specks of circling birds. All in all, it was a picture perfect scene, the sort of thing you would find lurking on postcards in the tourist shops of quaint, half-timbered villages. There were even, Bodie noted with considerable disgust, sheep grazing on those gently rolling bloody hills. Cows as well, although Bodie had more than enough of that sort of thing sitting comfortably in the back seat.

Bodie sneaked a peak in the rear-view mirror. Yes, sure enough, there was his own personal sacred cow, George Cowley, serenely flicking through the pages of yet another report, supremely oblivious of everything and everyone around him, for all the world as if he were alone and this car of his drove on automatic chauffeur. Cowley, sitting there as smug and sure as the vicar's wife at Sunday tea, as if all was well in the world, death threats not worthy of the slightest recognition. Just like the two men sent to guard him. So self-contained, so self-assured, so sure of Bodie and Doyle that Cowley, of all people, could relax into civil servant calm. Or into a well-fed cow chewing the cud.

It was enough to make Bodie break into a

scatologically rousing chorus of 'Old MacBodie had a farm'. Well, maybe not actually *enough*, but bloody close. And getting closer with every single pretty farm and hamlet they passed.

The road was still doing its poetic license bit, unwinding itself away into the distance, hiding itself round yet another rolling hill or picturesque stand of even more picturesque trees. To add insult to saccharine, there were even lonely clouds wandering aimlessly over all those vales and hills. All it needed, Bodie decided sourly, was a host of bloody golden daffodils and at least Wordsworth would be happy.

Now there was a poet Bodie had always hated. Writing poems to a bunch of flowers or a bit of sky—stupid, if you asked Bodie, not that many people thought he was the sort you could parse poetry with. I mean, if Bodie came bursting through your front door, all black polo-necks and aimed guns, would you take the opportunity to discuss the finer points of English poetry with him? Well, there weren't many who would.

Expression far more thunderous than those little nursery-white clouds could ever be, Bodie continued his visual evisceration of the oh-so-green and pleasant land, trying to see what the hell could inspire real poetry out of all this nicety. No, in Bodie's considered opinion, Wordsworth was a boring old fart who wrote infantile rhymes about bloody stupid topics—and what was more, Wordsworth never gave a word its worth. Waste of bloody time, making Bodie think of stultifying Wednesday afternoons in stuffy classrooms, bowdlerized books boring him to sleep. Stuff Wordsworth. Give him Donne, or Milton, or even Byron.

Go on, Bodie said to himself, admit it. Right now you'd even put up with warbling old Wordsworth if it'd give you a break from all this.

All this. Good euphemism, that, taking in the pleasantries of England's greenness, George Cowley's abstraction and Ray Doyle's presence. But we know, even if Bodie can't admit it yet, that 'all this' was really 'all Doyle', the other man the source of Bodie's unsettledness. Bodie snaked a poisonous glare at his partner who was sprawled there in his usual abandon, a tousled mess that looked as if it could do with a good wash.

Well aware of Ray Doyle's temper, and knowing that Doyle was in no mood for a joke, Bodie resisted the temptation to sniff.

Not that Doyle was anywhere near as unkempt as he appeared. Bodie knew that Doyle, the rotten sod, would be as sweet smelling as he was foul tempered. In fact, Bodie thought glumly, gazing out the window at the bucolic bliss surrounding him, Doyle probably smelt of all those outdoorsy things, the sort that came ready made, bottled to match the expanse they were driving through. Disgusting, if you asked him.

Of course, if we asked Bodie any such thing and that was the answer he gave us, we'd know he was lying, wouldn't we? As would anyone who ever caught the way Bodie looked at Doyle. As would Doyle himself, no fool he.

Drawing attention to himself, Doyle shifted then, as if anyone that sprawled could actually manage another atom of comfort or could honestly need to stretch like that.

Bodie, stuck behind both steering wheel and the granny in the car in front, was not amused. Typical, wasn't it? Here was Bodie, relegated to driving from one end of the country to the next, and did Doyle do anything to help him? Oh, no, not *that* sodding bastard. Doyle just sat there, dozing on and off, relaxing to within an inch of his life, while Bodie was the one who had to deal with learner drivers and grannies brought out for an airing.

Life, Bodie decided, just wasn't fair.

And the countryside was still about as interesting as a bowl of gruel. About as useful too. Africa, now there was a place with scenery, not to mention a bit more life to it than sheep and the occasional stray rabbit. God, the things he'd seen and done in Africa! Half of it enough to straighten Doyle's hair, and the other half was still enough to bring Bodie a blush of nostalgia. He could remember all of it: the enormous expanse of the sky, the vastness of the land, the magic and mystery of the people, the beauty of the women, the heart-stopping excitement of actually seeing a lion—

And behind him, Cowley closed another file with another tidy little snap, and with another controlled motion, put that file neatly into his conservative brown briefcase and took out yet another orderly file that looked exactly the same as all the other ones.

Bodie was going to scream.

When he hadn't laughed outright at the mere superstition of it all, Bodie had always thought hell would be a place of fire and brimstone, tortured souls and screaming.

Well, if something didn't happen soon, this car would be full of screaming, and Bodie certainly felt like a tortured soul. So that just left the fire and brimstone.

In the back seat, Cowley tut-tutted, so probably some poor bugger was going to really cop it for nothing worse than bad spelling. Bodie looked quickly at his boss, and grinned at the nasty expression frowning across Cowley's face: well, that took care of the brimstone.

And not two inches from Bodie, Doyle moved again, legs splaying a little wider, denims pulling a fraction tighter, Doyle's mouth a breath more inviting than life itself. That, Bodie conceded, took care of the fire. Fire hot enough to burn the fingers off anyone stupid enough to touch. Fire hot enough to make Bodie want to squirm, or make Doyle writhe under him, impaled, penetrated, made no longer an island, inviolate—

And if Bodie kept on thinking like that, he wouldn't last to the next service stop and God knows what he'd do to Doyle if a lay-by offered itself.

Stop it, Bodie told himself sternly. Just because Ray—

He broke that thought off too, with a nervous little peek at his boss. Thinking about what Doyle had done last night was begging trouble, even if Cowley weren't half as much a mindreader as the Squad was convinced. Time, Bodie decided, to concentrate on the driving, think about that, focus on that...

And we all know what happened the first time he had to change gear, hand on the smooth round hardness of the gear shift, fingers warmed by the too-close press of Doyle's denims.

The car swerved, a manoeuvre Bodie always swore blind was deliberate, nipping neatly between an articulated lorry and a tour coach on a day run. Just in time, slewing onto the off lane with not much to spare, the car docked in front of the service café before Cowley had chance to do much more than question Bodie's age, mental health and ancestry.

Doyle, you won't be surprised to hear, just sat there, and grinned. Like the cat about to get the cream.

Bodie swallowed, visibly, and muttered, inaudibly, fumbling in his haste to get out of the car. Or really, in his haste to get away from Doyle, and that smile, that mocking, knowing, wicked smile.

Doyle knew what he'd done last night.
What Doyle had done.
What Bodie had done.

Bodie's hands were trembling as he stood in front of the urinal, his need having nothing to do with the physical, or at least, not this particular call of nature. He couldn't think about last night. Didn't dare. Couldn't face Cowley or Doyle until he had that single, searing memory properly filed and locked away, until later, when he would be decently alone and could take it out and look at it.

Beside him, someone else had taken something out and was looking at it. And was looking at what Bodie had taken out. At the shaking of Bodie's hands. At the movement of his body. At the way Bodie was so stoically—or was it so nervously?—staring straight ahead.

Of course, we all know what was coming, don't we? Bodie, on the other hand—literally, in this case—nearly jumped out of his skin when the man touched him. For a second, it was a toss-up between murdering the sick bastard, or taking him into the nearest cubicle and fucking him into oblivion, giving this stranger what Doyle was taunting Bodie himself with.

Sanity, in the form of a complaining Cowley, came to Bodie's rescue.

"You're worse than a two-year-old, Bodie—it's not an hour since we stopped the last time."

"Sorry, sir," Bodie said calmly, tucking himself away and zipping up, making very sure that he did *not* look at the man who had been right beside him and was now several feet away, as innocent as the day was long. "Must've had too much tea while I was waiting for Doyle this morning." Waiting for Doyle, in his kitchen, pretending nothing had happened, nothing said, nothing done, keeping up the façade even while Doyle had wandered round his own kitchen in gaping dressing-gown, white terry parting to show what was on offer. Temptation personified, an incubus to haunt Bodie by night, a devil to tempt him by day, that was Doyle.

And that there behind him was Cowley, staring at him with frowning concern, the repetition of his question hanging in the air.

"No, I'm fine, sir."

"I'm not so sure—"

"No, listen, I'm fine, all right?" Bodie interrupted, sounding more annoyed than was wise with Cowley. "Really," he added, much more reasonably. "Just a bit of a headache." That didn't

seem to go down too well, and Bodie could kick himself for coming up with that old chestnut, especially since he wasn't a week from his last concussion. "I was over at Doyle's last night, had a bit more than I should've." And let the old man think he was talking about having a bit too much to drink.

"The night before a drive like this—and you were up to all hours boozing? Och, Bodie, after the amount of money I've spent on your training, you should know better—"

Quite comforting, really, to have Cowley droning in the background, a cross between a headmaster and an irritated uncle. "Yes, sir," Bodie muttered where appropriate, and with the appropriate mix of obedience and regret, interspersing his automatic responses with the occasional, "you're absolutely right, sir," just to make it sound as if he was listening.

Of course, the only thing he was really paying any attention to was what had happened last night, and what had not happened last night, and then there wasn't room in his head for even that, for there was Doyle right now, leaning against the car, jacket just long enough to make a statement of his arse.

Oh, god, Bodie thought, how the hell was he supposed to get through this? Bloody hours more in the car, and there'd still be no relief: just over eight more days with both Cowley and Doyle, and not a second to himself. Not devils with pitchforks then: his own personal hell was going to be all fire and brimstone. And judging by the smouldering gaze levelled at Bodie by Doyle, it was just going to get hotter.

"Since you seem to be in such a good mood, Doyle," Cowley said drily, making both his subordinates wonder just how clearly he could read them, "you can do the rest of the driving."

Doyle, needless to say, didn't bother commenting, simply walked round the car, brushing against Bodie with every appearance of pure happenstance, his casualness a work of art.

Even now, sitting in the car, the road stretching out in front of them again, Bodie could still feel the pressure of Doyle's body caressing him for that moment. He took the tactile memory out and played with it, reliving it, Doyle's every move, every look, that unmanaging, inflammatory knowingness lingering in green eyes. Bodie might want to call it purest seduction, but there was no

hint of purity to the way Doyle had looked at him, nor the way he had moved. Impure seduction, then, utter seduction, supreme seduction—

And all the litanies of all the words in the world weren't going to change the fact that Bodie was sitting there, his cock hard and aching, his heart far too soft and aching all the more. Bodie wanted, quite desperately, to look at Doyle, but from the passenger seat, he couldn't see Cowley in the rear view mirror, so God only knew what the old bastard was doing. Going over the way Cowley had looked at himself and Doyle, Bodie very nearly shivered, as if someone had walked over his grave and that would be more than just an old adage if Cowley ever found out what his two top agents had done last night.

Just thinking about it—well, judging by the way Bodie fidgeted in his seat, even just thinking about it wasn't a good idea. Just thinking about it made him want to stop the car and get out, to run and run and run. Like Wordsworth's bloody cloud wandering lonely over vale and hill, moving and moving and moving. Anywhere, as long as it was in the opposite direction from Doyle. A long way away from that luscious body, and a mouth that was an engraved invitation.

RSVP: as if poor Bodie had any choice, the way his body was tying itself in knots. Sitting there, too close to Doyle, too close to Doyle's heat, too close to the night before.

Bodie crossed his legs, and began running his mental checklist of all items required to maintain the weaponry and ensure the survival of an entire deployment of SAS men. It didn't help, much, but he kept his hands to himself, and his eyes firmly focussed on the bland road ahead. Best of all, he did nothing at all to feed any of Cowley's speculations and wonderings. The question is, though, if Bodie's fine act of evasion doesn't stop you and me from guessing what was going on, would it be enough to fool Doyle? We can watch and wonder, but Bodie wasn't going to risk so much as glancing at Ray Doyle.

Hours had passed, the motorway transitions made, the border crossed, the gentle hills giving way to more vigorous landmarks, mountains rising purple and grey in the ever diminishing distance. In the back seat, Cowley was sitting up that bit straighter, eyes brighter, the beginnings of a smile hovering round his lips, the entire effect changing

him from the blandly dangerous Whitehall civil servant into a man coming home.

"See that?" Cowley said suddenly, pointing ahead into the faded and discoloured distance. "See that mountain? That's the first mountain I ever climbed."

Bodie did finally look at Doyle then, secure that all he'd see was his own amusement and bemusement mirrored back at himself.

"Is it, sir?" Doyle said blandly, not one twitch betraying his humour as his boss' accent grew stronger. "Fond of mountain climbing, were you?"

"Hated it with a passion," Cowley replied. "It was when I was in the Boys' Brigade, and it didn't do to argue with Mr. Skilling about the climbing of mountains or anything else."

"So that's where he got it from," Bodie muttered almost soundlessly, barely audible to Doyle, decorously discreet enough for Cowley to ignore his insubordination. "Always knew he must've had a role model."

Not many people would have realised that Doyle was verging on outright laughter, but Cowley would have been one of them, if he'd been paying the slightest attention to Doyle as opposed to the verdant land around them. Keeping his face perfectly straight, Doyle asked: "Did you do a lot of outdoors activities in the—what did you call it?"

"The Boys' Brigade," Cowley replied. "Oh, aye, climbing mountains, gardening for old folk, helping on farms, going doon the watter, dances with the lassies from the Women's Institute."

Talk about being spoiled for choice?

Visions of kilts dancing in his head, Bodie said, "Dances, sir?" at the same moment Doyle said, "Doon the watterr?"

The accent had receded by some ten years, chipping the never perfect Home Counties veneer, but the laugh was as dry as ever. "One at a time, one at a time. Dances, Bodie, aye, and in full Highland dress, right down to our skean dhus. And doon the watter, Doyle—paddlesteamers down the Clyde, on summer afternoons with the wind in my face, and hot pokes of whelks on the shore afterwards."

"Pokes?" Doyle asked, while Bodie contemplated the mental image of Cowley in a kilt swinging round the dance floor.

"You're an ignorant lot, aren't you?" Cowley was saying, more or less rhetorically. "Pokes, as in paper bags."

It was more than Bodie could resist. With a sly look at the former policeman sitting beside him, he said: "As in a pig in a?"

"Aye," Cowley replied with just as sly a look. "As in a pig in a poke. Mind," he added almost absently, actually craning his neck to see if he could see any more memories from years long past, "the pair of you had better get used to a fair few new words if you want to understand what folk are saying to you." He looked at them sharply for a second, then added, only half joking: "Or maybe you'd be best left in ignorance of *that*."

"Not to worry, sir," Bodie said smugly enough to get right up Doyle's nose. "The natives'll be friendly to me. Unlike Doyle here, I'm not really a Sassennach."

"Don't you kid yourself, mate," Doyle said darkly. "They don't like us lot up here, and they'll eat you up for breakfast."

"And then spit you out again afterwards," Cowley added with equal measures cheerfulness and mendacity. Any second now, and he'd start telling them all about hunting the haggis.

"Nah, they'll be nice to me," Bodie was saying, then deliberately dropping the southern accent cultivated so painstakingly: "Up here, they don't mind a bloke being Liverpudlian, but. They won't have owt against me for coming from Liverpool."

Cowley replied drily, "It wasn't your home town I was thinking about."

"Yeh," Doyle added cheerfully, "it's your big head and big mouth he's worried about."

There were a million witty comebacks to that, a thousand things a man could say, and Bodie would've said all of them, but Doyle, sly and wily as always, chose that moment to scratch, indelicately.

Bodie could swear those bloody jeans actually got tighter after that rude little pretence at scratching, and he knew for a fact that his own trousers were tighter again, arousal stinging him.

Christ, but he was in a bad way! Determinedly, Bodie forced himself to concentrate on what was outside the car, not what was inside it. In the background, he could hear the cheerful sound of Doyle enjoying himself, and the warmth of Cowley's voice as each new landmarked memory revealed itself. Could almost feel the warmth of Doyle's body itself, reminding him of when they'd swapped the driving, harking back to last night, and what they'd done.

And of course, knowing Bodie as we do, none of us are going to be surprised by the way he avoided that particular thought like the plague.

The city itself was in sight now, spires and steeples and towering blocks of flats reaching skyward over the low mass of tenements, red and gold sandstone catching the light, black and dark grey tile roofs devouring every atom of brightness. Random patches of green interrupted the dourness of the roofs and played off the richness of the cleaned sandstone. In the back seat, George Cowley had shed half a century, peering out the window as excited as a seven year old.

"Would you credit it?" Cowley murmured, more awe in his voice than even the Queen herself could inspire. "Would you take a look at *thon*."

Even Bodie couldn't resist that. He turned, looking at Doyle, who met his stare longer than a driver ever should.

"Changed a bit, has it, sir?" Bodie asked casually, the better to hide the unnerving embers of warmth Doyle's eyes had woken in him.

"A bit? It's scarcely recognisable! Here, Doyle, get off here—"

Yes, well, Doyle could 'get off' anywhere, anytime, any place, but Bodie was willing to concede that Cowley was probably referring to getting the car off the M74, though that didn't stop Doyle from giving Bodie a sidelong, suggestive, glance.

"Here, sir?" Doyle said with enough innocence to make Cowley suspicious, always supposing Cowley hadn't been so enraptured with the rediscovery of his own city. They were in the city proper now, Doyle deliberately choosing main streets instead of cutting through on new roads that hid half the city. Cowley was drinking in the view like whisky, and the finest single malt at that.

"See that?" Cowley was demanding, pointing at an elegant curve of red sandstone buildings, their carvings ornate and their windows elegant. "Last time I was here, thae idiots in the Council were threatening to pull that down."

"Thank God they didn't, then," Doyle said fervently, half an inch from both blasphemy and outright cheek. "Would've been a tragedy."

"Ach, you young yins, no sense of history, that's your trouble."

It wasn't Bodie's trouble, not by a long chalk. His problem was a bit more basic than that, and he for one would quite happily have erased all past

history, his and Doyle's for choice.

Which leaves us wondering, yet again, just what had been going on between these two. Wondering what could have Doyle so mocking, and Bodie thrown so badly off balance. And going by the expression on Cowley's face, the lure of architecture might yet fade in favour of working out what the hell was going on with his two favourite agents.

Somewhat unexpectedly, it was Doyle who came to Bodie's rescue, making it obvious that this was indeed a rescue, an unsubtle notice that Cowley had nothing to worry about, that Doyle and Bodie were still a team, still partners. Of course, if Doyle thought that was going to put Cowley off the trail for good, then he was too damned stupid to be in CI5.

"Is it along this road, sir?" Doyle had asked with spurious naivety, glancing at Bodie as he did.

"Considering the pair of you were given a map, I should think either one of you could answer that, Doyle." Still, Cowley seemed content enough to let Bodie's abstraction pass, and to ignore the obvious tension between Bodie and Doyle. But he gave the pair of them another questioning glower before dismissing them from his gaze, his attention immediately flowing outwards, to where shops and tenements and churches were an ever-changing back drop to the people crowded on the pavements.

It didn't take long before Bodie had his recalcitrant body under control again, and it took even less time before the new one-way system had Doyle threatening to completely ballistic. Bodie could make out enough of his partner's mutterings to hope that George Cowley couldn't decipher a single word.

"No, no," Cowley said aggrievedly on their third by-pass of what had once been the fanciest Co-op in the city, "it's not along here. I thought you were supposed to have read the map, Doyle, not wasted your time just looking at the pretty pictures."

"Chance'd be a fine thing," Doyle murmured, echoing some of the pithier comments made about the so-called picturesque beauties of the city. "Yes, sir," he said more loudly, trying yet again to see if it was possible to get there from here, finally conceding defeat and taking the long way round, traffic more of a threat than foreigners after Cowley's blood.

"Up here, up here," Cowley suddenly said,

pointing, such uncommon animation enough to make even the most hardened agent snigger.

"Always supposing the stupid one-way system'll let us," Doyle said quietly to Bodie, ignoring the fact that gentrification hadn't finished strangling this particular area yet, the tenements here still blackened stumps standing monument to an industrial past clung to with something akin to nostalgia, and the streets then still a warren of people and cars following the natural path they'd taken since before Cowley was a child. "And always supposing Myer hasn't left any little presents for us."

Automatically checking the street for safety even as he took in the soothing symmetry of the buildings under their layer of murk, Bodie only nodded, absently.

Doyle almost missed a parking place, he was so busy doing a double-take at Bodie's quietness. Anyone else, confronted with a Bodie gone quiet—with anything other than temper, that is—would have at least enquired if Bodie was all right. But all Doyle did was leave Bodie to stew over whatever was troubling him, and then lean against the side of the car while Bodie gathered up all the luggage. Bodie distracted by both thought and deed, Doyle took a good, long look at his partner.

Sharper eyed than us, it would be impossible for Doyle not to notice the awkwardness crowding Bodie's limbs into atypical clumsiness. It would be impossible for anyone but the legally blind to mistake that look of careful control, and the way Bodie wouldn't, quite, look directly at Doyle. And it was very telling, the way Bodie would glance, quickly, oh, just for the scantest second, when Doyle moved, just so, and posed, just so.

Only those with something to hide would ignore the way Doyle was standing there, and Bodie's looking away told Doyle a good half of what he needed to know and that sharp mind of his was well up to the task of working out the rest.

"You're here to mind me," Cowley said sharply, giving Doyle an even sharper look, his glower excoriating Doyle's lissome pose propping up the car, "not pick up customers. Stand up straight and button your shirt before the local polis arrest you for soliciting."

Now that got a grin from Bodie, one commensurate with Doyle's frown.

"You heard him," Bodie said, sweetly sarcastic, even though he still wasn't looking any lower than

Doyle's chin, "you'd better clean yourself up, you little strumpet."

"Strumpet?" Doyle said, climbing the stairs behind Bodie. "That's a bit old fashioned."

"Tsk, tsk," Bodie tutted a bit breathless, struggling up the second flight of stairs like a sherpa up Everest, "you young yins, no sense of history, that's your trouble."

"Oh, that's brilliant, that is," Doyle replied, pausing on the half landing so that Bodie could catch up, "can you do a Scottish accent?"

"Not round here I can't. Not without having a lobotomy first to make me stupid enough to try it on the natives."

Whatever snappy reply Doyle came up with for that, we'll never know. George Cowley might have a bad knee, but he hadn't had to bother with luggage, or locking cars or anything but making his way up stairs he was willing to bet had steepened in the years since he'd been here last, so he had reached the top flat before poor Bodie could lug everything up the stairs and was shouting down at them before Doyle could unleash yet another witticism.

"Are you two planning on showing face up here, or are you just going to have yourselves a wee bit holiday for a week?"

"Coming," Doyle shouted upwards.

"Running," Bodie gasped, "all the way."

"Sir," Doyle finished for him, generously taking Cowley's briefcase to lighten Bodie's load by all of a couple of kilos.

Top flat, thin, cool sunlight streaming through the huge skylights, whitewashed walls brightening the stairwell, black door with brass handle, gleaming name plate, "Cowley" engraved on it in the stylised formality of Charles Rennie Macintosh, the letters softened by decades of polishing and wear.

Behind the double door, they could hear vague noises, and Doyle, both out of habit and because they were supposedly here to protect Cowley, slipped his gun into his hand, keeping the weapon discreetly out of sight but still ready for use.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," they heard, and a door opening, this flat retaining the old-fashioned solid outer door to guard the stained glass inlays of the front door itself. Heavy locks turning, and the heavy black door finally opened.

Well, of course you'll have guessed who it was Cowley was coming to see, won't you?

"If it's not George," old Mrs. Cowley said, "and

his two young men. Come away in, boys, come away in."

"Is that gingerbread I smell, Mum?" Cowley was saying as he went through the door.

"Mum?" Bodie mouthed at Doyle.

"Mum?" Doyle mouthed right back. "Suppose even the old bastard had to call her something," Doyle said quietly, dropping Cowley's briefcase on top of the suitcases.

"Yeh, I know," Bodie said, taking a good look round the square hall, gauging any vulnerable spots, marking areas of good defensibility, only then being pleasantly surprised by the robust plants and delicate lace covering the hall table, heavy winter coats hung on mahogany coatstand, black umbrella in burnished brass urn. "Just think, there was even someone he called Dad."

"Not him—" Doyle said, carefully quiet, "I told you he was an old bastard."

"Actually, laddie," a stern voice snapped at him like a whip, "he's neither, although if you use language the likes of that in my house, you'll be out that door so fast your head'll spin."

"Always said he was like something out of *The Exorcist*," Bodie said cheerfully, turning his charm on full for the benefit of the white-haired woman and for the annoyance of his partner.

"And that'll be enough of that an' all, laddie," Mrs. Cowley told him in no uncertain terms, voice only slightly undermined by age. "Away and wash your hands, and then come on ben the living room, and you can have yourselves a nice wee cup of tea."

"Yes, Mrs. Cowley," Bodie said, feeling just like the obedient schoolboy his teachers had wished he would be.

"Yes, Mrs. Cowley," Doyle repeated, sounding just as close to insubordination as he usually did.

As even the most minor of one-upmanship was too good a game to be avoided, Bodie slipped past Doyle, grinning at his partner as he claimed the bathroom first. Washing his hands with soap that smelled of lavender, Bodie cursed his treacherous mind that had so blithely 'forgotten' that Doyle would just come in behind him, the two of them crowding into the small room with its jumble of claw-foot tub, old-fashioned high cistern toilet, wash-handbasin, small table and upright wooden chair where the towels were piled, yet another source of lavender.

"Nice," Doyle said, innocuously, but in the

mahogany rimmed mirror Bodie could see Doyle, could see the lasciviousness in those eyes, could work out where those eyes were looking, and it wasn't at the muslin bag of lavender sitting on those towels.

"Give over," Bodie snapped. "Get your brains out of your balls and back in you head where they belong, Doyle, or I'll—"

"Or you'll what, Bodie?" Doyle asked silkily, pressing close enough that Bodie thought now would be just the perfect moment to escape to the other side of the room. "Come on, Bodie, what'll you do to me?"

And the answer to that was what Bodie was scared of. "Oh, just shut up," Bodie snapped unpleasantly, this taking his fear out on Doyle so much better than looking inside himself. "Come on, get a move on, Mrs. Cowley's waiting for us."

Silent now, Doyle leaned back against the sink and simply looked at Bodie, the knowingness in his eyes proof that when it came to Bodie, Raymond Doyle didn't need anything as clumsy as words. Gracefully, his body an epic of poetry in motion, Doyle straightened up, and came closer, step by step, to a Bodie frozen in place by the knowledge in Doyle's eyes and the fear in his own.

"Fair enough, Bodie," Doyle said quietly, his breath touching, tinglingly, on Bodie's cheek. "You just let me know when you're all grown up and ready to face the world, all right?"

Bodie didn't nod, wouldn't even concede that much to Doyle right now, refused to admit that much to himself. What they'd done last night was crowding him, cowing him, and all the certainty and truths in Doyle's eyes were like nails in his coffin. Bodie knew he should deny all this, make it into a figment of Doyle's twisted imagination and warped worldview, but he couldn't lie that much. Not to Doyle, who already knew the truth. Not to himself, who feared the worst.

"Weird, isn't it?" Doyle was saying, his breath smelling faintly of the After Eights they'd picked up on their last stop on the way up, and Bodie was waiting for Doyle to bring out all the sordid details of the night before. "Yeh, weird," Doyle said again, his voice a sigh. "We've got our boss sitting there waiting for us, and it's his mum who's got us doing what we're told."

"Probably just the shock of it," Bodie said, not really thinking about what they were saying, too concerned with what was remaining unsaid,

annoyed with himself for floundering like a teenager, "you know, discovering that even the old bastard has a mum like the rest of us."

Mrs. Cowley's less than dulcet tones ricocheted through the flat, something about were they in there washing their hands or using up Niagara Falls.

"At least now we *really* know where he gets it from," Doyle said, pushing past Bodie, sparing Bodie a sympathetic smile.

"Yeh, yes, I suppose we do," was all Bodie said as he followed Doyle, his attention consumed by the clench and flex of the most delectable arse he'd ever seen.

It was a thought and a knowledge he couldn't escape: he could have that arse if he wanted it. Not, perhaps, the best thing to be thinking when going in to have tea with the boss and the boss' mother, but Bodie could no more put all thought of Doyle from his mind than he could stop breathing.

Mrs. Cowley had already plied her son with tea, and apparently subscribed to the opinion of mothers throughout the world: her boy needed feeding up. Poor Cowley, sitting there with a cup in one hand, a slab of gingerbread and butter in the other, and a tea plate on his lap, the mountain of impressively thick sandwiches threatening to come down like an avalanche.

"And you, laddie," Mrs. Cowley was saying, to Bodie, looking at him as if she could see right through him to every dirty secret he'd ever had, making him squirm. Expecting the worst, hearing instead only an innocuous: "You'll be hungry yourself, won't you?"

Well, of course he was: fear and tension always made Bodie hungry. "I am a bit peckish," he told her, giving her the benefit of his most charming smile, hiding those self-same dirty secrets behind the sweetness of his smile.

"A bit peckish?" she said, a wealth of disbelief in her voice and in the way she looked at Bodie's solid frame. "I would've thought famished would be more like it for a growing lad like you."

And you could take that any way you want to, Bodie thought, sucking his stomach in, not quite checking to see if Doyle was looking at him.

"It's all that energy he uses up, Mrs. Cowley," Doyle said, passing Bodie the plate with the sandwiches. "He needs to keep his strength up."

Christ, but he wished Doyle would stop doing his 7th Cavalry bit, putting Bodie ever deeper in

debt and making him ever more uncomfortable. Why couldn't the bugger be pissed off with him like any other decent human being would? Or, Bodie reconsidered, why couldn't Doyle just take it out on him like any other decent human being, instead of coming over all nice and unnerving everyone. Especially Bodie, who had good cause not to trust Doyle when Doyle was doing his impersonation of the classic Barbara Cartland hero; Bodie, after all, had seen Doyle in action with everyone from birds in pubs to yobbos on the street.

And that, in a nutshell, Bodie thought morosely, still stirring his cup of too-strong tea, is the problem. He *had* seen Doyle in action too many times for either of their good—just look at the way Doyle had been with Anne Holly. Now there was an experience designed to instil confidence in anyone.

“Are you deaf?”

It dawned on Bodie that the question, as well as the stares, was aimed at him.

“Sorry,” he said, “I was a million miles away.”

“So I see,” Mrs. Cowley said tartly, rescuing his cup from the ravages of his stirring spoon. “Here, have one of thae sandwiches Raymond’s given you.”

Raymond? Already? God, Bodie must have been farther away than he thought if Doyle had weaseled himself in on first name terms already.

“And if you’re going to sit there like a doolally-dip, at least give the plate to those that want some.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cowley,” Bodie said, wishing the old woman didn’t have quite such a talent for making him feel like a five-year-old idiot. “I’ll have a couple of sandwiches myself,” he added, determined to gain the ground he’d lost to Doyle, “and that home-made gingerbread looks great. You must be a good cook.”

All that got him was a twinkle in amused blue eyes and a glimmer in eyes that were the same colour, only less faded by the years.

Who would think that tea could take so long? Who would have thought that sitting here on a sofa, not ten inches from Doyle, could be so uncomfortable? Or that it could ever be so difficult to think of a single harmless word to say with those green eyes ready to turn and look at him?

It would have been more entertaining watching paint dry, and a lot less awkward, but finally Mrs. Cowley was satisfied that not only had they all eaten and drunk their fill, but that no-one could

fault her hospitality. With a briskness almost equal to her son’s, she started on the table, piling dishes up, her hands shaking a little as she lifted too heavy a load.

“Mum, Mum,” Cowley said, “why for are you doing that when you’ve got me here and I’ve got two of my lads with me? Here, Bodie, you take them from my mother, and Doyle, you can check all the arrangements.”

Doyle was on his feet immediately, all lithe grace and reassuring smiles aimed at Mrs. Cowley, and beside him, Bodie felt like the proverbial bull in the china shop.

“I’ll be in through the kitchen in a minute, Bodie,” Cowley said, looking at him levelly, Bodie feeling ever more out of kilter. “I’ll have a word with you then.”

Carrying a stack of good china and crumbs into the kitchen, Bodie knew how Daniel had felt walking into the lion’s den. Maybe if he was quick enough, he’d get the washing up done before Cowley had finished settling his mum or doing whatever the hell he was doing. The kitchen, obviously, had been modernised far more recently than the bathroom, all mod cons here, so it looked to Bodie as if Mrs. Cowley had decided what she wanted done to her flat and public policy could just go whistle. The sink was made of all modern materials, but its design was old-fashioned, reminding him of his own Gran’s house, and that had had the same smells of lavender and baking, and the same strength of female voice ruling the roost, making this place both oddly like home and all the more alien in contrast to his own early abode. He rooted around, found the washing-up liquid, and set-to with a will: if he was quick enough, he would actually manage to get out of here before Cowley came in after him, could postpone whatever the hell it was Cowley was going to nail him with. He was on the very last tea plate, two minutes from being home free, when the kitchen door squeaked, and we all know who just had to walk in, don’t we?

Wrong. It was Doyle again, examining the window latch, leaning out the open glass to see if there was a convenient drainpipe or anything else that someone could climb up. “Small wonder Cowley wasn’t worried about staying up here,” Doyle remarked. “It’d be easier to get into the Tower of London than get in one of these windows.”

Ah, blessed relief: they could talk about the job.

“D’you think there’s much chance of that lot really coming after Cowley?”

“Hard to say, really,” Doyle replied, going through the kitchen drawers, noting where sharp knives, pepper and other possible weapons were. “I mean, Myer was a maniac—”

“No, really?” Bodie said, wide-eyed and breathless. “Who ever would’ve guessed!” he exclaimed, expression wry as he referred back to the German terrorist Bodie had captured, literally single-handedly.

“Yeh, amazin’, innit?” Doyle replied, doing a credible impersonation of the befuddled and impressed Man on the Street. “Turns out Myer’s brother is even more of a loony than Myer, and when someone like that says he’s out to get his revenge for Cowley getting his brother jailed for life...”

“You do what the Minister tells you, take along protection, and while you’re at it, you kill two birds with one stone by making sure that the protection is the bloke personally responsible for nabbing Myer in the first place.”

“Which is why we’re stuck here in the wilds of Glasgow for Christmas and New Year,” Doyle said, going through the cupboards with scant regard for privacy, training taking over where good manners should leave off. “Worst thing is,” he went on, voice muffled from being in the cupboard beside the fridge, emerging to fix Bodie with a pointed look, “baby-sitting Cowley’s really fucked up my plans.”

Scowling, Bodie picked up the nearest plate and started scrubbing at it, never mind that it was good willow-pattern china nor that he’d already washed it once.

“Come on, Bodie,” Doyle said, right beside him, pushing just hard enough, able to see as clearly as we that Bodie was close to erupting into honesty. “What’re you getting yourself so worked up over?”

“Oh, that’s great, that’s fan-fucking-tastic,” Bodie said, stung, temper getting the better of what little common sense he had where Doyle was concerned. “You turn the world upside down, and then you complain because I’m just the least bit bothered because my partner’s just announced he wants me to fuck him, and then he wants to fuck me after. Oh, no, nothing in that to make a man angry, is there?”

“Might be,” came the carefully moderate reply, Bodie’s temper enough to make even Doyle wary.

“Might make some other bloke angry, but that’s not your problem, is it?”

It was a wonder the tea plate didn’t crack, the way Bodie slammed it down. “No,” he all-but snarled, voice rising inexorably with every word, “my fucking problem is standing right here beside me trying to have a heart-to-fucking-heart with our boss in the next room with his *mother* for Christ’s sake!”

“There’ll be none of that language in this house,” Cowley said coldly.

Typical, Bodie thought. Bloody typical. Doyle starts it and I get the blame.

Of course, if he hadn’t had his voice raised, they might have heard the door creak, and then they wouldn’t be standing here worrying just how much and precisely what Cowley had heard.

“I could hear the pair of you through a closed door and two rooms away,” Cowley was saying, Bodie and Doyle eyeing each other nervously, both suddenly back on the same side in this dispute. “And if I could hear you, then so could my mother.”

Which still didn’t tell them how much Cowley had heard: just their voices, the occasional word, or every damning syllable?

“There’ll be no blaspheming or foul language in my mother’s house, d’you understand that, the pair of you?”

Cowley barely waited for their agreement, continuing on, lashing them with the sharp edge of his tongue. “And you, Doyle, I thought I had given you a job to do, or are you planning on becoming a gentleman of leisure?”

“Almost finished, sir.”

“Almost isn’t going to keep Herr Myer from coming through that window, is it?”

Now didn’t seem the propitious moment to point out that he had, in fact, already checked that window.

“All right, all right, you know as well as I do that Myer hasn’t even entered the country—at least as far as Customs are concerned. And aye, we know perfectly fine well his threat is probably nothing but a bag of hot air. But I’ll not have my mother put at risk because the pair of you are in here arguing like a matched set of hysterical fairies.”

Bodie and Doyle didn’t dare betray themselves by so much as glancing at each other, although they were both thinking the same thing, going through

the same nervous churning of their bellies. At best, this was a warning that Cowley was on to them and they had best be careful. At worst, this was a warning that as soon as they were safely back in London—or as soon as replacements were sent up from London—they'd be out on their ears, fired as security risks. They both stared straight ahead, giving nothing away.

"Right, you, Doyle, get on with earning your pay. And you, Bodie," Cowley said as the door swung shut behind the departing Doyle, "I want a word with you."

Oh, joy, Bodie thought, half expecting to be chucked out on the spot. He wants a word with me.

"Now, I don't know what the blue blaze's going on between you and Doyle, but you've been wandering around all day like a wet weekend in Largs. Either that, or you've been so quick to take offence, everybody else is walking on eggshells. Well, I'll not have it, Bodie. Sort yourself out, or the only woman you'll be seeing when we get back to London will be the lovely Dr. Ross."

"Yes, sir," Bodie replied, pacifying Cowley by standing at military ease, the pose offering Cowley respect and Bodie camouflage, neither of them commenting on the incongruousness of the tea towel draped round Bodie's waist like an apron.

"Then get on with it."

"Yes, sir," Bodie muttered, offering Cowley's exit a two fingered salute. "Right away, sir. On the double, sir."

But still, while he was putting the dishes away, he was running it through his mind again and again and again: just what had Cowley heard, and just what the hell was Doyle playing at?

And what the hell was Bodie going to do about it?

An hour later, the car left parked in front of the close, any semblance of warmth vanished with the watery sunlight, they were walking through the same streets that had once seen George Cowley still in short trousers.

"You young yins," Mrs. Cowley was saying to her son, her voice carrying clearly through the crisp, cold air, "no sense of history, that's your trouble."

"Oh, but come on, Mammie, you have to admit, that flat's ancient—"

"I've been decanted twice when they've

modernised it, my lad, and I'm not leaving it again until they come and take me out in a box to plant me."

"But all thae stairs—"

"What d'ye think keeps me young—sitting around on my backside all day?"

"But if you came down to London—"

That brought her to a complete halt, and Byres Road traffic would just have to go round her whether they liked it or not. "And what for would I ever go down to London? What is this, Geordie?"

Geordie? Bodie and Doyle thought, getting yet more practice in not bursting out laughing, efficiently manoeuvring Mrs. Cowley out of harm's way, car horns yelling all around. Looking suitably casual about the whole thing and not missing a single second of any of it, they managed to cling on to the disinterested air of the professional minder.

"All it is is me wanting you where I can keep an eye on you—"

"Keep an eye on me?" Such perfect incredulity and offence: Doyle was quite envious, especially seeing the effect it had on his normally despotic boss. "Since when did I need a keeper, George David Cowley? You—keep an eye on me?" She had come to a halt again, and now it was the thronging Saturday afternoon shoppers parting round her like the Red Sea, and she far more impressive than any Moses. "Are you forgetting who changed your nappies when you were a wean? And who was it who mended your clothes and blew your nose when big Billy MacWhirter gave you another doing?"

Billy MacWhirter beating Cowley up? Nigh near impossible to imagine, but just feasible enough to make keeping a straight face harder and harder, the refuge of professional minder more and more desperately clung to as they moved her on again, doing a perfect job even as mouths clenched shut over laughter and eyes widened in delighted disbelief.

"Aye, Mum, aye, I know. I'm not saying that, I'm just saying—"

"Ach, you're no' saying a thing, you're just havering. You've been down South too long, Geordie my boy, and you've gone soft. Thinking I need a child minder," Mrs. Cowley said, dripping contempt, speaking to the head of C15 as if he were naught but a wee boy with skint knees and runny nose. "You'll be putting me in an old folks' home next, leaving me there to sit in a chair until I turn

into a cabbage like the rest of the old yins.”

“But Mum—”

“Don’t you but me! I’m not moving, and that’s final.”

“Definitely where he gets it from,” Doyle murmured, nodding towards Cowley’s mother as she went storming off up the street as fast as her age would let her, her son at her side, their faces matching images of stormy tempers.

“Small wonder he ran off to join the army,” Bodie replied, grinning happily as Cowley’s mother started up again, regaling her unintended audience with tales of George Cowley in short trousers and scraped knees, dirty face with tear streaks showing white, miserable with measles, and suffering from mumps with his face swollen up like a camel’s humps.

“Only question now,” Bodie whispered to Doyle, sharing the gleeful pleasure, “is if we can get her started on him chasing the wee lassies.”

Doyle’s tone of voice was odd, almost inflectionless. “Unless it was laddies he chased.”

“Are you saying he—” Bodie broke off. Of course Doyle wasn’t saying that about Cowley, the bastard was just harking back to what was slithering between them.

“Come on, Bodie,” Doyle said, dunting Bodie in the side. “It’s not as if I suggested anything we haven’t done before.”

The two Cowleys had turned the corner, heading towards a red-brick school of truly startling ugliness, the younger Cowley retreading his old stomping ground with his mother’s nagging like the old fashioned reins of childhood.

Doyle followed his boss, close enough for Cowley’s security, but not anywhere near distant enough for Bodie’s sense of security. Doyle wasn’t letting up on this, not giving him an inch. “Bodie!”

Bodie barely resisted the urge to belt Doyle one. “Keep your voice down, for fuck’s sake!”

Mockingly now, whispering, Doyle playing the villain in a Victorian melodrama. “Bodie! You will confess all.”

“That’s right, make it a joke.” Which is what Bodie himself would normally do, but for once, just this once, he couldn’t find his sense of humour anywhere. This was too much like losing his woman to Krivas in Africa, too much like losing Marikka to Willis in England. Too much like Doyle, all set to marry Anne Holly and getting over her in a matter of days.

“Why not make it a joke?” Doyle demanded, stopping several feet behind his boss, Bodie and Doyle watching the windows and doorways of the buildings around them as Cowley stared at the looming darkness of his old school, his mother’s reminiscences reduced now to the uninteresting pride of a parent in her child’s perfectly respectable accomplishments. “It’s not as if it’s the end of the world, is it?”

Speak for yourself, mate, Bodie might have said, if he’d been willing to lay himself that bare. “But it’s not a walk in the park either. We could get chucked out for what you’re suggesting.”

“Yeh, and we could get chucked out for what we were already doing,” Doyle threw the gauntlet right back in Bodie’s face, “so it doesn’t matter a toss, does it?”

“It’s different,” Bodie muttered, defensiveness stealing all his eloquence.

“I had noticed,” Doyle replied sharply.

Bodie hushed him, a fervid nod reminding Doyle that their boss wasn’t five feet from them. They’d always said Cowley had eyes in the back of his head: now wasn’t the time to discover he had hearing like a bat.

“Later on, when we’re on our own,” Doyle said very, very quietly, “you and me are going to sort this out. Right?”

A lifebelt to a drowning man, the proffered respite snatched at greedily, Bodie desperate to avoid a scene. Voice easy and calm, betrayed by the tension round his mouth and the frown between his eyes, Bodie murmured: “Fair enough.”

And that was all that was said on the matter for what little was left of the day. Not a word was uttered on the topic while they had their dinner in a surprisingly nice restaurant round the back of Byres Road, and not a thing was said about it over coffee, nor even while they walked back to Mrs. Cowley’s flat.

But Doyle was a past master of body language, and his body spoke volumes. Every single move seemed calculated to turn Bodie on, every expression, every smile, even the way Doyle ate his food. All of it a symphony of suggestion, sexual delights orchestrated until Bodie was at fever pitch, uncomfortable, needing to either run a mile in the opposite direction or rape Doyle where he stood.

Probably not a good idea that, considering Cowley’s reaction to blasphemy in the kitchen. We can only guess what his reaction to buggery

on the stairs would be.

One hand trailing along the cold tile lining the lower half of the stair wall, Bodie climbed at a pace dictated by Mrs. Cowley, slow and steady, taking her time. Taking too much time, giving Bodie more than enough chance to watch Doyle preceding him. To think about Doyle, and that arse, and what Doyle had suggested. And what Doyle had done.

Into the flat at last, Mrs. Cowley more tired than she'd ever admit to her fussing son, George Cowley gone to bed in the spare bedroom that had been added during the last renovation, the walls between the old single-ends knocked down to turn what had once been the cramped space of near poverty into the roominess of middle-class indulgence. Bodie and Doyle were setting up camp in the living room, moving the coffee table as quietly as they could, shifting chairs out of the way, Bodie always careful to keep a couple of feet between him and the too inviting Doyle.

"Don't put your sleeping bag all the way over there," Doyle whispered, "put it beside mine." That chipped tooth grin, the hell-bent invitation, temptation personified. "We won't have as far to come then."

"Oh, ha, ha," Bodie replied. "If you think I'm going to have a wank with Cowley—"

"Have a wank with Cowley? Don't be disgusting, Bodie," Doyle whispered, coming up behind Bodie, wrapping his arms round Bodie before the other man could move away. "If you're going to have a wank, it'll be with me. Course, we don't have to stop at that, do we?" Doyle whispered, voice throaty and low, shivering through Bodie like arousal through his cock. "There are a lot of other things we can do, aren't there?" Doyle rubbed his groin against Bodie, his erection pressing so hard Bodie couldn't ignore the image it conjured: Doyle, pressing against his arse like that, but with no clothes to get in the way, nothing between them, just Doyle hard like he was now, pressing, pressing. It would be so easy, to let Doyle do it. To let Doyle penetrate his body. To let Doyle push them that last step of the way.

Doyle was plastered all down his back, Doyle's hands roving all over his front, unfastening shirt buttons, undoing zips, slipping inside to stroke his cock the way they had been for months now. And then Doyle did something else, did what he'd done the night before and scared the hell out of Bodie. Doyle came round in front of Bodie, and held him

tight, and kissed him.

Bodie was out of there like a bat out of hell, across the room, standing behind the chair, breath panting in what other people might call panic.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Doyle hissed, unable to raise his voice even for this, but his fury obvious for all that. Doyle was toweringly angry, and Bodie saw the price he was about to pay for all of Doyle's understanding last night and tolerance today. Doyle was still spitting with unleashed temper. "A fucking pricktease, Bodie, that's all you are. I already asked you—what the fuck are you playing at?"

"What d'you think, Doyle, eh? You're not talking about a matey wank between friends, are you? I mean, this isn't just something we do to ease the pressure of the job, or convince ourselves we're still alive."

"Oh, and is that all it ever was? And you really believe that? Christ," Doyle muttered, running a hand wearily through his hair, "what a fucking idiot."

Looking at him, Bodie wasn't sure which of them Doyle was calling the idiot, and right now, it didn't much matter. "I'm not stupid enough to—"

"Not stupid enough?" Doyle sneered. "You're not clever enough to tie your own shoes. You're not clever enough," his voice was rising, and he reined it in, but the anger and the contempt were still there, unharnessed, threatening everything with ruin, "you're not clever enough to pee straight."

"Just because I don't want to let someone shove his cock up my bum, you think I'm stupid?" The image flooded his mind, and all his hard-won male pride began to slink quietly away, threatening him with leaving him alone with the thought of Doyle inside him, up him, owning him— "Oh, for fuck's sake, why can't you just leave me alone? Just because you walk around begging every bloke in a mile's radius to fuck you up your wiggling arse doesn't mean I'm stupid enough to want the same thing."

Doyle's response to that particular piece of bravado was choice and earthy enough to turn the air blue. Under the brunt of Doyle's answer to Bodie's own attack, Bodie's temper uncoiled like a snake from hibernation, heat rising, self-righteous fury keeping him nice and warm, every word of Doyle's another weapon to be turned round and used against him. And then Doyle did it, that

unconscious gesture that always gave him away, hand running through his hair, a fraction of pain seeping through the concealing anger to change his face, just for a moment.

But it was enough, it was more than enough. It hit Bodie like a ten ton lorry, only all the damage was out of sight, but certainly not out of mind. Even we, knowing him as we do, would never be able to see it on his face. He had a lifetime's practice of hiding things, years where the only survival tool left him was the stiff upper lip. So nothing showed on his face, even as he guddled around for a moment, reeling, stumbling over things he should have seen, or had seen but ignored. Reluctantly, he pulled his head out of the sand.

Somehow, shocked perhaps, by the sight of feelings he had thought belonged only to him and not his too-sure of himself partner, Bodie had pulled himself together. Had stopped simply reacting, and started thinking. Bodie began by looking at Doyle, really looking at him, ignoring the explosion of intemperance the way he usually did. Other people were taken in by Doyle's fiery outrage, but Bodie had known him for too long to be fooled by that. Usually. Shameful, really, that he had come so close this time.

Standing there watching his friend, Bodie finally readmitted a horde of memories, things Doyle had said, things Doyle had done. Especially some of the things Doyle had said and done last night.

Looked anew at the stupidity of Doyle chancing his arm with Bodie, here, in Cowley's mother's house, with their boss within shouting distance. Thought about what must be driving Doyle to make him willing to take a chance like that. Tried, Doyle's pithy comments hissing across the room at him, to look at this through Doyle's eyes, to see it from Doyle's point of view.

Recognised something he wasn't sure he wanted to see.

Conceded the existence of something that could give them the only chance of real happiness they had.

Or destroy them both.

Even adrift in an emotional limbo that was all the protection left to him, Bodie had to admire the courage it must've taken Doyle to do all this. And what had Bodie himself done in answer to this insane courage? Thrown it back in Doyle's face, hurled Doyle's love back at him like a weapon. Now here was Bodie in his turn, watching his best

friend hurl hatred at him because he was prohibited from anything else.

It wasn't pleasant, it wasn't something Bodie wanted, this being the focus of all Doyle's wealth of fury. With Doyle still calling invective down on him, Bodie finally admitted it: he had fooled himself for god knew how long, because as long as he denied its existence, he'd thought himself safe from commitment and emotional scenes both. Oh, yes, and what a success that strategy had proved itself to be.

Doyle was still spitting fire, now prowling the room, cutting stares disemboweling Bodie, who sighed: life had been so much more pleasant when viewed through blinkers, or dark glasses that dimmed the sharp edges of reality. Much easier, to go through life dealing with the problems as if they always belonged to other people, as if they could simply be walked away from. Easier still to blind himself to the truth that had been staring from Doyle's eyes for how long now? Bodie had no idea, couldn't remember ever sitting down and saying, right, from now on, I'm going to pretend I can't see anything in Doyle.

But he must have done that. It was the only excuse—the only reason—he had for not seeing what was as plain as the nose on Doyle's face.

Of course, he was still hanging on to those blinkers, still pretending he hadn't noticed, not really. After all, if he gave it no name, then it might still only be a figment of his imagination, right?

Doyle was staring at him, as if defying Bodie to not see what was so imperfectly hidden. What had been so subtly revealed the night before.

Right. A deep breath, squaring of shoulders. Admitting it, giving it admittance. So his best friend loved him.

That was easy enough to deal with. Doyle loved with the same ease that he hated: dogs, his mum, spaghetti bolognese, Velázquez. Quite reasonable, really, for Doyle to love his best friend, if you looked at it like that.

Of course, if Bodie looked at it like that, then he was never going to get anywhere was he? He'd just blithely go off into merry delusion again, putting the sex down to all mates together, lumping Doyle's loving him in there with Doyle's affection for his younger brother. And if he did that, then the next time Doyle kissed him, Bodie would run like a scared virgin again.

"Okay, okay," Doyle was saying, flopping down

onto the sofa. "If you're going to do your Sphinx, I'll admit defeat." Mechanically, he kicked off his shoes, clothes being dropped without care onto the floor. One last look at Bodie, the incomprehension in Doyle's eyes like nails dragging down the bones of Bodie's spine. "You're a sad bastard, aren't you?" Doyle asked rhetorically, fitting himself into his sleeping bag, pulling the edges right up over his head. "Wake me when it's morning," he said, "or when you find your tongue, whichever happens first."

"Ray," Bodie began, uneasy about this, Doyle going to sleep like this too much like them parting on an argument.

"What?"

"I..." He paused, just not sure of what to say next, there being no training course to teach a man what he could say when he found out his best friend was in love with him. "I..."

Doyle turning to look at him, his visible disappointment more painful than if he'd hauled off and hit Bodie. "And that's it? Oh, for fuck's sake—" Breaking off again, running his hand through his hair again. "Look, if that's all you've got to say, you can just shut up and let me sleep."

"Ray—"

"I said shut up, Bodie."

Clipped, curtailed, Doyle sounding as if he were unwilling to spend even half a breath on Bodie. Not that Bodie could really blame him: wasn't every day a man put his neck on the chopping block only to find that Madame Guillotine had a helper in the form of his best friend. Must be a lovely feeling, that, Bodie thought cynically, his belated self-honesty a painful thing. Quietly, he undressed, relieved that the threat from Myer was vague and distant enough that they didn't have to stand night watch. After the last couple of nights, Bodie wasn't up to keeping himself awake. Nor of sitting there, with nothing to do but wait for possible assassins and watch Doyle sleep.

There was nothing to be said. Not until he knew what Doyle really wanted. Not until he knew what he wanted himself.

It was a long time coming, but finally Bodie fell asleep, which left only Doyle to lie awake in the dark, thinking.

Of course, when the noise awoke him, it was still pitch black outside, which meant it could be any time before 8.30. Bodie did brief battle with the

folds and furrows of his sleeping bag, finally managing to extricate his wrist. Half past fucking five? he thought incredulously. He was going to annihilate Doyle.

"What possessed you to get up at this time in the morning?" he demanded *sotto voce* as his partner carefully stepped over Bodie's sleeping bag on his way to his own.

Doyle shrugged, not quite so elegant in the dishevelled cold of morning. "Couldn't sleep."

Which could mean only one thing. Bodie suppressed a groan, and accepted the proffered cup of tea, making a face because it was, of course, made to Doyle's preference. "All right," Bodie said, half relieved that Doyle was willing to talk to him again, half terrified of the very same thing. Knowing from past experience and despite the current lure of total cowardice that it was best to just get these things over and done with, he asked: "What were you thinking about?"

Doyle shrugged again, reached out, took his tea back from Bodie. "This and that," he said.

"This and that," Bodie repeated drily. "Nothing much, just this and that."

"I thought you wanted to ease up on all of this?" Doyle asked him, settling himself back into the warmth of the sleeping bag, risking drowning by having a good slurp of tea. "Anyway, I had a bit of a think, and it's all right. You've nothing to worry about."

"Apart from Myer's brother getting past Customs, that is," Bodie replied. A pause, a cautious glance, then Bodie continued: "What don't I have to worry about?"

Another of those artistically casual shrugs that were fooling Bodie not at all. "You don't have to worry about me coming on strong to you again. I've got the message loud and clear, and I'll leave you alone."

"And pigs'll fly backwards."

When Doyle turned to look at Bodie, his eyes were strange, an odd expression in them that Bodie decided he probably didn't want to decipher. "I've just told you, Bodie, I'll leave you alone."

Several heartbeats, and then Bodie shrugged in his turn. "Fair enough," he said, sounding more as if he meant 'I'll believe it when I see it.'

But believe it he did, and see it he did.

"Right then," Doyle said far too brightly for such an ungodly hour of the morning, "that's that settled then. Back to normal, the old daily grind. Want to

finish the tea?" Passing the mug to Bodie, sliding down into the dark womb of his sleeping bag, putting an end to something that hadn't quite begun.

For a long time, Bodie sat there and watched him, this apparently sleeping bundle of contentment that could have fooled the world. The mug between his hands went cold, and still Bodie sat there, listening as the street outside came to life, hearing the first stirrings of Mrs. Cowley getting up, water running, toilet flushing, even the quiet click of the electric kettle being switched on. And all Bodie would allow himself was the blunted edge of curiosity, waiting to see what would finally force Doyle to admit that he was awake.

Not that he should have bothered. Tousled, unshaven, the stubble unexpectedly sexy, Doyle finally surfaced, and it would have been so wonderfully easy to pretend that the last two nights—the last several months—had never happened. But there was the darkness under Doyle's eyes, and the shadows lurking within.

Mrs. Cowley bustling in unannounced, Cowley not five minutes behind her, neat and tidy as a new pin—or a well-behaved son. Then breakfast, a huge, traditional Sunday breakfast that should have been manna from Heaven, and would have been, if only Bodie had been able to put aside what they'd done. What he knew. And if he could only stop worrying about the demands Doyle was sure to make on him, despite all promises to the contrary.

But for the next three days, Doyle was as good as his word, leaving Bodie well alone. Doyle never touched him, made not a single *double entendre*, dropped no hints, didn't even prop up walls in his usual interesting manner. Made only friendly jokes, avoided all personal comments and all innuendo. Doyle became, in fact, the model colleague, professional, distant and polite.

And it was like living in hell with the fire gone out. Bodie hated it, far more than he could have ever imagined—if he'd ever allowed himself to think about it.

Which we, of course, assume was precisely Doyle's intent, but Bodie had no way of being sure. He couldn't see inside Doyle's head, had no idea what was going through Doyle's convoluted mind—and found out just how much it hurt to not know if Doyle did love him. Or if Doyle had severed that love the way he had severed himself

from Anne Holly.

And so it was, in the cold darkness of winter nights, with Doyle cocooned in sleeping bag, it was Bodie who lay awake, thinking.

Christmas, and what a day that turned out to be. For Bodie, Christmas Day was an exercise in not screaming out of boredom—and of not screaming out of frustration.

Clouds scudding across the sky stole what little warmth the watery sun could offer and even the richness of the sandstone was battered into dreariness.

"Christ, this wind cuts like a knife," Bodie muttered.

Doyle looked at him, almost as cool as the weather and twice as cutting as the wind.

"Oh, yes, Bodie," Bodie went on, still under his breath, but he knew that Doyle could hear him as clear as a bell, "cuts like a knife. Yeh, you're right, with a jacket as short as this, I'll be lucky not to end up singing soprano, the way this wind's cutting through me."

Doyle smiled, politely, as at a stranger, didn't rise to the jibe about his short sheepskin-lined jacket. He just scanned the winter-scoured streets, as if skeleton trees held far more interest than the bone-head walking at his side.

Mood darkening to match the sky, Bodie dug his hands deeper into his pockets, searching for a hint of warmth.

They had passed few enough people on the street, but the church was fairly full, the pews filled by some tacit social register, with families given pride of place and the solitary, the old and the nondescript keeping to the back. The Cowleys sat amidst Mrs. Cowley's cronies, navy blue hats nodding greeting, sharp old eyes taking note of the prodigal son returning and the odd young men he had brought with him.

Under normal circumstances, Bodie would've turned to Doyle, sharing the amusement of the gossip they were causing, of the aspersions that would be cast on Cowley's—*Cowley*, of all people!—character. But he'd lost all that, somehow, in trying not to fuck everything up. So this morning, Bodie kept his eyes front and centre on the great brass pipes of the organ, the gleaming wood of the walls, the simple elegance of leaded windows, the careful embroidery of the cloth. He could make out a word or two of the murmurings going

on so discreetly around them, even managed half a smile at the thought of the stories and speculations that were going to grow and prosper over steaming cups of over-strong tea.

He glanced, then, at Doyle, and as quickly looked away, refusing to admit that it just might be pain, plain and simple, that he felt when Doyle wouldn't look at him like that. That he wasn't just angry at Doyle cutting him out like a cancer.

No. Two could play at that game, and anything Doyle could dish out, Bodie could take—and return, with accumulated interest. Oh, yes, Doyle had obviously loved him. Just about as much as the unfeeling bastard had loved Ann Holly.

And there wasn't a snowball's chance that Bodie was going to admit that the emotion this new-found pity for Ann Holly was replacing was simple, ugly jealousy.

Songs of praise, a sermon of surprising simplicity and eloquence, more hymns and psalms, and then it was the worst gauntlet Bodie had ever faced: the blue-rinsed set of Mrs. Cowley's friends.

"Millie," a hawk-faced woman chirruped, "and who's your young man?"

"Och, are you going senile on us, Mrs. Cruikshank?" Mrs. Cowley said with all the vitriolic smoothness her son had learned so well. "Surely you'll not have forgotten my boy George, him that went away down to England to—"

"—be a civil servant," her 'boy' interrupted smoothly. "A happy Christmas to you, Mrs. Cruikshank. How's your daughter—it's Australia she's in, isn't it?"

"Aye, aye, Melbourne, in fact. But your job in London—"

"Isnae any of your business," a blunt voice put in, the fecund accent making a mockery of Mrs. Cruikshank's pretensions of grandeur. "Are you coming round the bingo Tuesday night, Millie?"

"Not this week, hen, not with my son up visiting," Mrs. Cowley linked arms with her venerable and vital friend, the two of them flowing smoothly past the obviously despised Mrs. Cruikshank, the entire operation showing a well-practised and frequent ease. Barely out of earshot, and nowhere near out of hearing-aid range, Mrs. Cowley started up again. "See that woman, she's awful—I can't stand her, not a bit of her."

"Aye, noseyn't the word for that yin," the rotund crone took up, the head of CI5 and his two top agents following like ducklings behind the

waddle of her black coat. "See her, she makes me sick, so she does, with all her talk of her daughter in Australia, making her out to be some sort of big-wig with the government there and we all know fine well she's nothing but a glorified secretary with big aspirations—"

"Oh, is that what they cry them these days?"

Behind them, Bodie rolled his eyes, bored to tears by the old biddies' particular brand of humour. Not, it turned out, a wise thing to do to the boss' mother when the boss was looking right at you.

From one sermon straight into the jaws of the next, and this one entirely more concerned with the meting out of punishment. Getting back to the flat took at least twice as long as it ought, or at least Cowley's lecture made it seem nigh near beyond endurance. Still, listening to Cowley going on and on and on was better than listening to Doyle, who wasn't saying anything. Wasn't doing anything. Wasn't even taking malicious pleasure in Bodie's dressing down. Wasn't being, well—Doyle. Between nodding fervently and obediently at his quietly thunderous boss, the yakking of Mrs. Cowley and whichever old biddy she was traipsing along beside, Doyle's quietness was...disquieting.

Mrs. Cowley's friend left them at the corner, which meant, at long last, that Cowley left Bodie to rejoin his mother. Vengeance was, as they say, sweet: no sooner had Cowley caught up to his mother than she started in on him, a tongue-lashing acid enough to strip paint.

"Where are your manners?" she demanded, grabbing him by the elbow, tugging at him as if he were still a lad in short trousers. "Ignoring Jeanie MacIlvain like that! Is that what living in London's taught you? How to look down at other people just because they don't have your fancy camel hair coats and posh shoes?"

"Mum, I wasn't ignoring her, there was something I had to say to Bodie—"

"See, there you go again. What *you* had to say was too important to put off just so you could be nice to Jeanie MacIlvain—and her the woman you stayed with when I was sick with your baby brother!"

Baby brother? So they had a brother to look forward to meeting as well? Better and better, Bodie thought, glancing at Doyle.

Worse and worse, Bodie conceded, his glance sliding off Doyle's impassivity like a lance off a

shield. Oh, this was turning out to be just a wonderful day.

And to make it perfect, the sky opened and the clouds emptied, with most of the rain going straight down the back of Bodie's neck. Perfect, he thought, turning his collar up in vain attempt at comfort. Absolutely fucking perfect.

And one more look at Doyle confirmed that beyond his bleakest nightmares.

If you'd asked Bodie on the drive up if it could get worse, he'd have said no. Ditto for last night, this morning, on the way to the church, inside the church, on the way back—but lo and behold, it could get worse, and it did. The afternoon was a case in point. Traditional food, of the sort made traditional by thin purses and midwinter lack of choices, a gourmand reminder of Bodie's own past, of a childhood as chilly and unloving as Doyle's unyielding eyes. The only sweetness was the trifle, and that lacking the barest hint of even sherry. Then tea, of course, with biscuits and madeira cake—but no madeira in that either. *The Sound of Music* on television, and over and under it all, the incessant rise and fall of George Cowley and his mother, reliving the past, rehashing old arguments about the future, and reweaving a family bond that was warming to see. In and out of the music their voices went, the accent rich and ripe, staccato bursts punctuating soft liltings, rising and falling, in and out...

It was the kick that woke him. On his feet, hand reaching for gun before his eyes were clear of sleep, to be presented with the seriously unnerving picture of Ray Doyle staring at him.

"What'd you go and do that for?" he snapped, anger so much easier to show than the hollow fear that was killing him inside.

"Cowley's phoning London to check on Myer."

"And you just couldn't wait to share such exciting news with me, could you?"

The look Doyle gave him was very level, and only someone who knew him very, very well would recognise the reproach in it. "Funnily enough, I thought you might not want the boss to think you were in the habit of sleeping right through being on duty."

The bastard definitely had a talent for making a man feel as guilty as sin itself, which wasn't bad, considering Bodie was an avowed atheist.

"Thanks," he muttered, metaphorically kicking himself as Doyle turned away and Cowley came in.

"Have yourself a nice postprandial sleep, did you?"

Oh, if only the weather were so dry! "Yes, sir. Means I'll be able to stay awake all the better to guard you tonight, sir."

Well, flattery had at least been worth a try. And judging by that expression, the lecture on the way back from church was going to seem mellow and positively roseate in retrospect.

Saved, but by nothing so dulcet as a bell.

"George!"

There were no two ways about it, Cowley had learned that bellow at his mother's knee.

With a last glower at Bodie, Cowley turned towards his mother's voice. "What is it, Mum?"

"Send one of your boys ben here—they might as well make themselves useful."

Bodie didn't even bother waiting to be asked.

"Yes, sir," he said, not realising just how listless he sounded. "Running all the way."

She was in the bedroom, balanced on a chair her doctor would probably kill her for climbing up on to. "Here, take this book from me and put it on the bed."

"Where is it you want it? Over here, is it?" Bodie asked, choir-boy innocent, the book poised to land, dustily, on the highly polished chest of drawers with its crocheted topper of roses and vines.

"If you're trying to stop an old lady from killing herself getting things down from the top of the wardrobe, then why don't you just say so?"

He grinned at her, put the dusty book down on the floor where it wouldn't do any damage. Then he bowed, deeply, before offering her his hand. "Mrs. Cowley, there's nothing I would like more than stopping this lady from killing herself."

"If only because her son'll kill you if I hurt myself when there's a great strapping lad like you around to do the donkey work."

"Got it in one." Still, as he helped her down, neither one of them could pretend that her bones didn't seem brittle, that she wasn't the age she felt inside the agelessness of her own head, but the age where it didn't take much to break something.

Bodie decided not to rub salt in her wounds, took his time climbing up onto the chair instead of just jumping up the way he normally would.

"Now, what is it you wanted down from here?"

He was sneezing by the time she had her fill of photo albums and report cards, diplomas and plaques, the floor and half the bed covered in the

flotsam and jetsam of George Cowley's discarded pride.

"If you'll just give me a hand through the living room with these—"

At the doorway, she stopped, for a moment, and looked at Bodie as if there were some answer there in his face for her to read. He squirmed, feeling even more like a naughty schoolboy caught cheating instead of a full grown man tactfully helping an elderly woman—god help him if she ever found out some of the things he *had* done!

"Aye, well," she finally said, "it's not something you can ask, is it?"

So that was where Cowley had learned the fine art of leaving people dangling.

What the hell was it she couldn't ask?

But at least she still had some doubts—the way Bodie was feeling, he wouldn't have been surprised if there had been a tattoo on his forehead, complete with tacky art, declaring his feelings for Doyle and listing the things they'd done.

Of course, if all that had been tattooed there, Bodie would've been glued to the mirror. He wouldn't half mind knowing how he felt about Doyle. And seeing if what *he* thought he'd done with Doyle matched what Doyle seemed to think they'd done. Or not done. Or perhaps just thought about doing...

The chaos of confusion on his face was enough to make even Doyle's resolve weaken. But not for long, and not enough. Bodie followed Mrs. Cowley into the living room, his eyes automatically seeking out his partner, his stomach automatically tightening at the lack of response Doyle gave him.

Wonderful, Bodie repeated to himself. Absolutely fucking wonderful.

"Aw, Mum, you never! Not the photos—"

"Photos?" Doyle asked quickly, and Bodie couldn't tell if the alacrity was due to the simple but great joy of poring over old pictures of their boss or if Doyle needed distraction himself. If Doyle was finding this...nothing between them as difficult as Bodie.

"Aye, Raymond, all the old family photos," Mrs. Cowley was saying, unloading the memories cradled in Bodie's arms, laying the dusty books on the coffee table. "We've everybody in here from Geordie's grandda—d'you mind him, Geordie, you were still gey young when he passed away—to George himself when he went into uniform."

Uniform? Bodie could see the wheels turning as

Doyle ran that one word through his mind and relished the connotations. "Which regiment was that, sir?" Doyle asked ever so politely.

"The HLI, of course," Mrs. Cowley butted in before her son could so much as open his mouth. "Did he not tell you? Oh, aye, the HLI, and he was so grand in his uniform. Not that the war uniforms were all that good, mind you, but still, in his kilt..."

Definitely something Bodie wanted to see. He also wanted to look at Doyle, share the whole situation with him, taking in everything from the expression on Cowley's face to the glee of being able to tell the rest of the squad all about it when they made it back down to London. But he didn't bother: even Pavlov's dog had learned eventually, and Bodie had got the hint, the loneliness ambushing him suddenly.

"Here," Mrs. Cowley was saying, opening the first book, "here's Geordie when he was still in his pram."

Sure enough, there was a picture of a chubby baby in an ancient black pram, the infant's face screwed up against the sunlight, one fat curl escaping his knitted bonnet. And then, on the next page, a toddler clutching the hand of a man he now so closely resembled, the same fair hair, the same chin, the same build.

The album was angled across the coffee table so that they could all see, and Cowley's expression softened as the past came back to cradle him.

Head to head, Bodie and Doyle bent over the pictures, Doyle seeming for all the world interested in nothing else bar the photos, commenting and joking and appreciating every one, asking all the right questions at all the right times, while all Bodie could do was stare at the snapshots and try to keep his hands off Doyle, try to keep from turning his head that fraction so that he could see Doyle, could kiss him—

Ingratiating little bastard, Bodie thought, frowning fiercely as he stared hard at the group of children romping naked on the sand, the sea a moat threatening their castle.

"Mum, you can't show them that!"

"Why not? D'you think they don't realise you have a wee willie under that expensive grey suit of yours? How much did that cost you anyway?"

Wry, tolerant, affection unexpectedly blatant as Cowley half-smiled at his mother. "Not half as much as that picture's going to cost me."

"If you can't trust them with this, then how can

you trust them to keep you safe?”

“It’s not the same thing, Mum—”

“No,” she said, very gently, her stern façade crumbled away to nothing, “there’s no-one you can go round trusting with your vulnerabilities, is there, my boy? And it’ll be many a long year before you can take sic a chance.”

“It’s all right—”

“When has it ever been all right, eh, Geordie?”

They fell silent then, the two similar faces staring at each other, until Mrs. Cowley reached out a hand knotted with arthritis and blued with veins under the pale, thin skin, and cupped her son’s cheek as she must have done a thousand times when he was but a tiny bundle of helplessness.

Doyle looked at Bodie then, and Bodie wished he hadn’t, that cold accusation cutting him to the quick.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” Bodie said, doing the right thing and leaving the Cowleys alone with whatever this unspoken truth was between them. Almost at the door, and he did the right thing again, above and beyond the call of duty, coming back to glower over Doyle. “And you’ll help me, won’t you, mate?”

But what had been intended as a politely nasty reminder to Doyle about manners and sensitivity came out as something unmanfully close to a plea.

“Will I?” Doyle asked him, quite pleasantly over the rusted steel of his glare. “Of course I will—mate. It’s one of the things I’m here for, innit?”

And at that, Bodie beat an unabashedly hasty retreat, unwilling to untangle that particular bed of snakes. He almost preferred the polite and distant Doyle.

Until honesty kicked in again.

In the kitchen, taking an inordinate amount of time to make a pot of tea, giving their boss and his mother some sort of privacy, Bodie and Doyle circling each other like tomcats round the same bit of ground. No outright fighting yet, not even a snarl, but careful body language, warning, warding off, Doyle back to his patent unconcern that didn’t even fool Bodie now.

Which made it even worse, somehow.

“Look, Ray,” Bodie started, “do we have to be like this?”

“Like what?” Doyle asked with all the innocence of a professional virgin charging extra per deflowering.

“Like this! All polite and careful, minding our p’s and q’s—”

A frown of quite exquisite confusion, enough to make Bodie’s fists twitch hungrily. “But we’ve always got on well with each other. Why on earth should we start to argue now?”

“Because—”

Was that a flicker of hope in Doyle’s eyes? Or was it triumph?

Bodie’s good intentions flew the coop leaving only the wolf behind. “Because all these good manners from you is as suspicious as hell and Cowley’s startin’ to sniff around you. And if he susses what the problem is—”

It was supposed to be a dramatic pause, a meaningful trailing off, but Doyle looked at him then, with an acuity Bodie was surprised to find he’d almost forgotten.

“If he susses the problem,” Doyle said very, very quietly, making Bodie strain to hear, “then he’s a better man than you or I.”

“Speak for yourself!” Bodie said automatically, even as unhappiness knotted his stomach into a tighter mess. Christ, Doyle was the one who worried things to death, who picked them apart until he could put them back together again. Doyle was the one who could and would decipher people and emotions and situations, leaving Bodie to his own forte, strategy, going in there and dealing with problems, acting on what needed to be done. But it was Doyle who was willing to think about the inner motives, to unveil the truths. To sort out where they stood.

And Doyle didn’t know what the fuck was going on either.

Christ, it just couldn’t get any better than this, could it?

Misery settling into the marrow of his bones, Bodie made the tea, saying not a word, filled the plate with chocolate biscuits and didn’t steal a single one.

If Cowley had seen it, he’d have been worried sick and packed Bodie off to Dr. Ross immediately. But Doyle was the one who saw. And Doyle just smiled.

For what felt like a lifetime, Doyle had kept his word: he was leaving Bodie alone. Totally, imperceptibly, coldly.

And Bodie had never been so miserable in years. He even took to making digs at Doyle, slugging

him off, winding him up, doing all the things that would normally get Doyle from simmer to raging boil in a matter of seconds. What did he get now? Polite requests to stop it, unanimated, polite responses, and not so much as a flirtatious eyebrow, not a smile, not a sway of the hips, not a surreptitious touch under the Christmas table. Nothing at all. For all Doyle interacted with him, Bodie might as well be on his own. The job, what little of it there was, got done, and with their usual competence. But there weren't even any jokes to fall flat, Bodie unwilling to offer even that small opportunity for Doyle to cut him dead. Nothing made any difference, and the minutes and the hours and the days passed, and still Doyle kept his word, giving Bodie what he had so insanely asked for.

Bodie was getting to the stage where hara-kiri was beginning to look quite nice. Doyle was, without doubt, contrary. Or perhaps it was simply that Bodie hadn't realised how important Doyle was until his toy had been taken away from him.

There had been one disaster that had come close to making hara-kiri unnecessary due to Bodie's sudden demise at the hands of his ever-so impersonal partner: going up the stairs again, this time the endless flights leading up from Knightsbridge subway, Doyle once again right in front of Bodie, and Bodie didn't want to resist temptation for another long day. It was as close to an admission of defeat that Bodie could bring himself to make, and he reached out to palm Doyle's denim covered buttocks. For a bleakly short time, he had Doyle's living warmth in his hand, and then it was gone, Doyle striding ahead, looking over his shoulder to draw Bodie an inimical glower. Even the most amateur of Doyle-watchers could have read that stare for what it was: hands off, don't touch, no trespassing.

They came up out of the subway station to the massing hordes thronging Great Western Road, university students too short of cash to go home for the holidays and old age pensioners down from Partick to do a bit of special shopping for Hogmonay, a brace of soldiers in uniform, some boys coming home from pipe-band practice, a group of girls laughing over the stupid clothes in the shop windows, a family with twins screaming in their double pram. The cacophony of sound was familiar, welcoming to those who had always lived in cities, some shield against the sudden breathless-

ness of bitter cold air. Cowley was walking ahead of them again, this time with a man from his old regiment, a man he'd known off and on since primary school. Doyle was ranging alongside, stormy eyes restless, mouth set and angry.

For the first time since Marikka, Bodie began to realise that turning away from love could be as painful as falling in love and then losing someone.

As painful as losing Doyle was proving to be.

It would have been easier to cut his hands off, or to pluck his eye out because it offended him, seeing things too late, and understanding too little.

Miserable, shoulders hunched against the cold, the amorphous threat of the absent Myer no longer enough to keep his attention on the job, Bodie trudged on in their wake.

What a pity it is that Bodie couldn't see what we could see, that moment on the stairs when he touched Doyle again for the first time in days. Had he but seen the expression that flooded Doyle's face, then perhaps Bodie would have had the courage to try again.

More time passing, in no hurry, slithering by like a snail across salt. In the living room, surrounded by dark wood tables and white lace doilies, seated carefully on the good, solid three piece sofa, Bodie and Doyle had nothing to do but stare at each other. Cowley was in bed, nursing a cold, or so he claimed, but his two agents knew that it was likely the aftereffects of a truly prodigious pub crawl the night before. Mrs. Cowley was out at the hospital, doing her weekly round of visiting the lonely in the long, sterile wards. Which left Bodie and Doyle, face to face, with nothing to say, and not enough said.

Face giving nothing away, Doyle picked up yesterday's *Daily Record*, flicked through it page by page. Discarded it in favour of *The Scotsman*, and went through that, page, by page, by page. Bodie was fit to scream.

"Why don't you say something?" Bodie asked, the words driven from him by inchoate need.

Doyle looked up at him briefly, blandly, using the face he had perfected years ago as an objective policeman listening to both sides. "Not much left for me to say, is there?"

The answer erupted in Bodie's brain with all the force of knowledge long suppressed: You could say you love me. For an awful moment, he thought he'd actually spoken out loud, said the damning

words right here amidst the potted geraniums and crocheted antimacassars. But Doyle was sitting there, staring at the crossword in last week's *Sunday Post* as if he had every intention of filling in the blanks.

As you can well imagine, there were a few blanks Bodie wouldn't mind having filled in. Such as how he felt, why he felt that way, why the fuck it hurt so much to have Ray withdraw from him. After all, it wasn't as if he was in love with the bastard, was it? Oh, all right, he would concede that he was fond of Doyle, but given their line of work, that was to be expected, wasn't it? It didn't make him queer, didn't mean he was in love with Ray the way he had been with Marikka. Didn't mean anything at all really.

But Doyle had wanted them to do more than just share a wank like good mates. Doyle had offered him too much more. And Doyle had kissed him. As if he were a girl.

Didn't mean anything, he told himself a bit more desperately. Just because Doyle kissed him—

Yes, but what about that one detail Bodie hadn't yet faced? What about the fact that Bodie had enjoyed the kissing? Was that nothing? That he enjoyed being kissed like a girl? That he had felt a surge of heat that was only partly lust?

Bodie leaned back against the seat, closed his eyes. He could remember how he'd felt when Doyle had kissed him. Could remember, too, the first time he'd kissed Marikka.

Oh, god, he was in trouble, in right over his head.

Unwillingly, Bodie compared the two, thinking about Marikka, thinking about Doyle. Putting himself back in time, up on that gas tank again, and wondering, if he'd had to choose between Doyle and Marikka, which one of them would he have saved?

Bodie opened his eyes again, staring at Doyle. Cool, calm, collected Doyle, who could be ice one second and conflagration the next. Doyle, who could burn with passion while his heart was as cold as a witch's tit, the way he had been with Anne Holly. Madly in love, so he'd said, looking at rings and houses, and how long had it taken Doyle to put Holly behind him?

That was the crux of it, that, right there. It was the way Doyle could love, and still walk away, if his conscience or need dictated it, or if the love should prove false. And what the hell would Bodie

do if he took this chance, only to have Doyle walk away from him one malicious summer's day?

What would Doyle do if Bodie took this chance? Tacit it might be, but Doyle had issued an ultimatum nonetheless, leaving Bodie to choose between a distant, efficient stranger or a no-holds-barred lover.

Lover.

The very word was enough to send shivers up and down Bodie's spine. The problem was, not all of the shivers were from desire. Or was the problem that not all of them came from fear?

Could he? Take that leap of faith and trust Doyle to be there to catch him as he fell in love? Could he gamble his life on faith, faith in Doyle not walking away from him one day?

Could he?

Should he?

Well?

Well?

What do *you* think?

Cowley's cold had passed with a speed that would have had the medical profession regarding him as a miracle, that speed reinforcing his agents' conviction that it had been the result of too many fine single malts downed with too much enthusiasm rather than some virus making itself at home.

The metaphor was Bodie's, home a thing very much on his mind. He was no farther forward than he'd been this morning, his head swirling with all the sickening dizziness of a Ferris wheel, Doyle the hub of this confusion. Should he take the chance and let himself love Doyle?

He heard his partner in the kitchen, helping Mrs. Cowley, couldn't stop himself from smiling, a pang of pure affection impaling him as he listened to Doyle laugh at an old lady's rambling jokes. Not many people would ever believe Ray Doyle capable of such kindnesses, not unless they'd had our privilege of seeing him when he thought himself away from public eye. Bodie had seen him like that many a time. And again, that was the nature of Bodie's problem, knowing Doyle both too well and not well enough, knowing his good and his bad, all his faults, all his virtues, and not knowing which scared him most.

He wanted to take that chance, to love Doyle.

Heard again the laughter from the kitchen.

All right, and the weight lifted from his soul, his

surrendering finally to the truth a relief in and of itself. All right, he told himself again. Admit it. It's not taking the chance and falling in love with Doyle. It's telling Doyle what you've already done.

Himself, in love.

It seemed strange, an unnatural thing, some creature living within him, like a parasite or a baby growing inside him. Love. From him, for Doyle.

Totally bizarre.

And he was no more convinced by these posturings than we are. It wasn't bizarre, it wasn't even strange, or new. It was something that had been there a long, long time, quietly, making no fuss, just taking root, slowly, gently, without him even noticing it was happening.

But Doyle would have noticed.

Cowley, for certain.

Which brought to mind the strange conversation Cowley had had with his mother over the photo albums, and the odd way Mrs. Cowley had looked at himself and Doyle. Odder still, the way Cowley had said nothing, even though it was obvious something was going on. Something very particular, very singular, not to mention unmistakable. Well, at least to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear, and Cowley was as far from the three monkeys as a man could get.

It's tempting to go up to Bodie and slap him, tell him to stop distracting himself, to stop going round in circles, but all we can do is observe, watch and listen as the story unfolds, and keep to ourselves our fervent wish that Doyle would do the sensible thing, come into the living room, kiss Bodie hard and then fuck him into next year.

But of course, Doyle does no such thing, staying in the kitchen with Cowley's mother, getting the food and drink ready for midnight, when the church bells would ring in the New Year and mourn the passing of the old.

Bodie wasn't about to mourn the death of 1978. Roll on '79, that's what he'd say if we asked him. But why ask, when we know he's only going to lie to us, with cheerful grin and bright eyes?

Roll on '79, a blank slate to write on, if only Bodie could come up with a single word.

"First footing?" Doyle asked, only half joking.

"Don't you come the ijit with me, young fella-me-lad," Mrs. Cowley said, pallid cheeks ruddy with the warmth of a good sherry. "We want someone tall, dark and handsome to be the first

foot to cross the threshold, and carrying a bottle of whisky—"

"To warm the cockles of your heart," Bodie said, quoting the next door neighbour in Liverpool who'd kept up her family's old traditions.

"And black bun—"

"So you'll never be hungry." Doyle looked at him, and Bodie's heart skipped a beat, before his jaw tightened: pathetic fool, to be so thrilled because Doyle had deigned to look at him! No, keep cool, stay cool, don't let it show—

"And coal—"

"So that your home will never lack for warmth."

How the hell did Doyle manage to sound so sexy saying that? And sound so much like the promise of Heaven on Earth?

And then look so cold, as if he'd never said a word, never given Bodie what Bodie bitterly regretted asking for, never, ever kissed Bodie with lips that had been perfect—

He was not—not—going to start the year with an erection just because Doyle had spoken to him. Not a chance. He wasn't going to fawn over Doyle, or pant over him, or anything else incredibly bloody stupid.

He simply was not.

Never mind that he was in love with Doyle and Doyle in love with him, and with both of them refusing to admit it to the other. Oh, no, they weren't going to do anything stupid, not them. Aye, and pigs'll fly backwards.

"A quarter to twelve," Cowley was saying, switching on the radio, making a long-suffering face as his mother switched it right back off again, turning the television on instead.

"Living in the past, Geordie?" she said, smiling at an old joke that ran between them like a lifeline.

"And would I ever do a thing like that, Mum? But it's still nigh near twelve, so Bodie—"

"On my way, sir."

"Oh, I think for the occasion we can get onto first names, don't you?" Mrs. Cowley again, looking keenly at the three men in her living room, and none of them was willing to venture a guess as to what was going through her mind. "George, you stay here with me, and Bodie, you go out the front door."

Bodie started taking the various symbols from Doyle's arms, doing his best not to touch the warm flesh, skin bared in the central heating of the flat, soft hair lying over the faint rem-

nants of summer's deep tan.

"And you, Ray," Mrs. Cowley was saying, "you can go with him. To make sure he doesn't come in before the bells."

He was being paranoid, he was sure of it. But there, in the way she was looking at them... Bodie dismissed the thought from his head. The woman was Cowley's mother, in her eighties, a different generation, born in a different century for god's sake—the Gay Nineties, wasn't it?

He refused to think about it.

One thing at a time. Himself, alone, with Doyle. Here on the stair landing, with skylights open to the night overhead, frost sparkling on the windows like stars come home to roost. Almost completely dark, the overhead bulb burned out, something they'd have to take care of for security's sake.

But it was sort of nice, here, in the dark, with Doyle standing beside him. Bodie could smell Doyle's aftershave, faintly; either that, or memory served him well enough for him to imagine the smell of Doyle's skin in the morning, fresh shaven, coming back to bed for them to lie close together, skin on skin, hands on cocks, Doyle's mouth open against his shoulder, tongue laving—and all the times Bodie himself had done that to Doyle, his mouth tasting Doyle's skin, leaving lovebites to darken the flesh.

Fucking hell, small wonder Doyle had kissed him. And smaller wonder Doyle hadn't exactly been expecting Bodie to run away.

It was easier, somehow, in the dark, with the diamond glitter of the stars looking down on them. "Ray," Bodie said, quietly, "what the fuck are we going to do?"

No pause, not even a hint of hesitation. "Wait till we hear the church bells, then we knock on the door."

Shame rose in Bodie, threatening to strangle him like the lump in his throat. He was a hard man, a real tough nut, he wasn't supposed to get a lump in his throat and tears in his eyes. Didn't, normally. Amazing what depression and rejection could do for a man, really.

"Is that it, then?" he asked, defeat showing, shoulders slumping.

"Don't see why not."

"No second chances?"

"Oh, you've already had a few of those, Bodie."

"Yeh, but..."

"But what?"

"But I didn't realise then, did I?"

Even in the dark, Doyle's eyes gleamed, catching the faint glimmer of the stars, a ghostly echo in the night. "Didn't you?"

"No."

"And you do now?"

"I wish to hell I knew."

"That makes two of us."

"You mean we agree on something?"

"We always do. Only problem is that sometimes we can't admit it."

And could he ever? Admit it, say it out loud? Letting those words out would mean letting other words in, and if he granted those words admittance, then where would his life be?

Where it had always been.

In Doyle's hands.

Doyle's hands.

Those hands, splayed against his chest, playing with his nipples, sliding down lower, and lower, fingers going through the hair on his belly, down to there, grabbing him, just right, not too rough, not too gentle, the way he liked it, perfect touch, perfect—

Christ, but he couldn't go back inside like this! His cock was pressing against his trousers, so hot, the rest of him so cold, his jacket no proof against a Scottish winter's night. And there, right beside him, silent as the tomb, just as still, waiting like eternity, was Doyle.

Whom he loved.

"Oh, fuck, Ray—" he breathed, dropping tradition's burdens, coal and cake falling unnoticed along with Bodie's barriers, the bastions finally breached.

"Ray, come here, I need you—"

And then his arms were full of Ray Doyle, and his hands were cold against the heat of Ray's shirt, the peaks of Ray's nipples so hard under his palms, and his own cock was pressing against Doyle, feeling the sudden springing hardness rising up to meet it. His mouth was open, devouring, consuming, tasting Doyle, invading his mouth, their tongues touching, moving, smooth and wet. Deeply, he kissed Ray Doyle, and felt his heart break for having denied them both this, and felt himself suddenly cut adrift, all the ties of the past gone, ruptured and sundered.

The freedom was enough to make him giddy, but the real cause was the surging rush of lust, of need, driving him against Ray Doyle, his hands

everywhere, cupping ripe buttocks, running through the coarse curly hair, fumbling at leather belt.

Being pushed away, shoved, the bottle of whisky a cold, smooth weapon against him.

“For fuck’s sake, Bodie, are you mad? We can’t, not on the landing, with Cowley just inside! What the fuck would you’ve done if he’d come out?”

Honestly? Probably not noticed, but Bodie said nothing, forehead fevered against the coldness of plaster over stone. He was struggling for breath, passion still ruling his body, need burning him up from the inside out.

It didn’t matter that Doyle was being sensible. Didn’t matter that George Cowley and his mother were waiting inside for them, that this was one time when they couldn’t be a minute late.

In the background, Bodie heard the death knell of the old year. Ask not for whom the bell tolls, he said to himself, half-hysterical with unreleased lust and unrequited love. He was glad of the dark, for the dark hid both his weakness and his temptation: in other words, he couldn’t see Ray Doyle.

Doyle, for what it’s worth, was having troubles of his own, not least of which being jeans that were now several sizes too small, gelding a distinct possibility.

One to each side of the door, the pair of them propping their heads against the high-gloss paint like bookends with encyclopædias, their breathing two distinct, and too distinctly, ravaged rhythms.

It was Doyle who pulled himself together first, stepping forward reluctantly, knocking on the door as if it were the gates of hell.

Satan opened the door, glower and glare intact.

“Happy New Year,” Doyle said, and if Cowley noticed the edginess, then he ignored it in favour of flaying Bodie with the most cutting of looks.

“Happy New Year,” Bodie muttered, coming forward, embarrassed as hell because he knew he was flushed, knew he was flustered—knew that Cowley would notice, and once noticed, would comment.

“The same to yourself,” was all George Cowley said, abstractedly, automatically reaching out for the various gifts, his mother coming into the picture, her eyes sharper yet than her son’s, missing nothing.

“Come away in, boys,” she said, beginning a running dialogue that left no pauses for anyone to fill, and no gaps to make Doyle and Bodie’s

silence blatant.

Glasses charged, the toast spoken, and Bodie for one downed his drink in a single draught, the rudeness of shoving his glass forward for a refill paling to nothing against his embarrassment and his turmoil.

Chairs were taken, and if the television were to be believed, there was quite a party going on everywhere in this city bar the Cowley home. George Cowley took a well-savoured sip of his whisky, and then sat there, staring at his agents. Storm clouds couldn’t be more blatant harbingers than that expression on Cowley’s face.

But before the first Intifada could be lit with Bodie as its fuel, Mrs. Cowley spoke up, her face alight and aglow with a fire of enthusiasm that made Bodie tired just looking at it. “Right,” she said, “are we away then?”

Bodie actually dared glance at Doyle, was met with an equal measure of ignorance.

“Away where?” Doyle asked, looking now at his boss, none of this being part of the plan.

“There’s aye a big do at the HLI Club,” Mrs. Cowley said, getting carefully to her feet, her voice trailing behind her as she went out into the lobby to get her coat and hat. “Not that I’ve been much one for going to it these days, but I thought, with George,” her voice louder now, back in the living room, wrapping a hand-knitted scarf of good lambswool round her crêpe-de-chine neck, “back for a wee bit, it’d be awfy nice to go and see all his old cronies.”

“And I said it was gey cold for you to be going out gallivanting at this time of the night—this time of the morning, Mum. You shouldn’t be—”

“I shouldn’t be, should I not? I’ll tell you what I shouldn’t be, Geordie my boy, I shouldn’t be spoken to in that tone of voice by my ain son. Don’t you take that attitude to me, young man, you can save that for your agents and your subordinates, but you’ll watch your mouth around me, young fella-me-lad.”

And it was almost worth all the pain, hurt and sexual discomfort just to see George Cowley standing there, fuming impotently, as his mother put him in his place, a place he’d outgrown half a century or more before. “Mum—”

“I’ve already tellt you—don’t you ‘Mum’ me! Now, get your coat on, and don’t forget a scarf. I’ll not have you coming down with something nasty while you’re back under my roof.”

Cowley's face was a picture, Bodie and Doyle the appreciative gallery audience, as expressions and emotions flittered across it mutinously. But finally, there was a wry humour there, the acknowledgement that the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. "Aye, Mum," he conceded, with a smile that must have come from his father, "we'll go. But only for a bit, mind."

"Gettin' auld, are you, Geordie?"

"Compared to you, Mum, I feel like Methuselah."

"You look like him an' all. You need feeding up, George, and you need a holiday. An' before you say it, no I do not mean a fortnight in Glasgow. I'm talking about the Canary Isles or—"

With the invocation of sunnier climes falling on them like rain, they set off for the club, Bodie driving, the two generations of Cowleys in the back seat still bickering back and forth with underlying warmth, and beside him, hot as sin and twice as tempting, sat Ray Doyle.

Shifting gear was a torture, and an exercise in self restraint that would have made the saints proud. All it did for Bodie was make matters worse, the deflating of passion a receding hope, as Doyle fidgeted, his leg brushing Bodie's hand as they took a corner, his legs spreading a little wider to accommodate the arousal Bodie could both see and feel.

"Now I know how the people of Pompeii felt," he whispered.

The eyes that were turned on him were heavy, the pupils large, reflecting Bodie back in the intermittent street lights. "Question is, d'you want to hang around for the eruption, or are you going to bugger off where it's safe?"

Bodie concentrated on his driving, stealing a few seconds to think, to try to impose rationality on the hungers of his body. And of his heart, he admitted, stung to honesty by the sudden remembrance of how Doyle had looked in Mrs. Cowley's living room the night before, and the pain in his eyes the night he had dared kiss Bodie.

They were at the club before he realised he was out of time, and by the time he'd eased the car into a parking space, Doyle's face was shuttered and cold.

Not a good sign, and Bodie sighed. Bloody typical, he thought, I never could keep up with the moody sod.

They were enveloped in light and music, their

coats whisked away by someone laughing at a remembered past shared with Cowley. Drinks pressed into their hands, hands slapping them on the back in welcome and approval, their boss enfolded by people he hadn't seen in years, and every single one of them had a joke to tell or a story to relate.

The threat of Myer was more distant than ever, amorphous at best, absurd now, ensconced in a horde of old colleagues and older friends. Over it all was the music, old and new mixed indiscriminately, a joyous rill of music that incited dancing. Under it all, was Doyle's deathly silence.

If Bodie had thought Doyle cold and distant a couple of days ago, he was going to have to develop an entirely new vocabulary to describe this stoniness.

Surrounded by merriment, Doyle at his side like a black hole, Bodie sifted his options.

He could let Doyle be convinced that those few minutes on the stairs had just been him suffering from testosterone poisoning, that he wasn't willing to risk his job after all.

Or he could close his eyes, take a deep breath, and plunge in head first.

Think about it, he told himself. Loving and being loved. Commitment. All the old words of the ancient ceremony, cleaving only one to the other, crashed around him like so many driverless cars, smashing into him. Is that what he wanted?

Simply, helplessly: yes.

Was it what Doyle wanted?

A quick glance at the tight-lipped spectre at his side, banshee wail scarce contained.

Yes. Doyle was like that.

But for how long? Ann Holly whispered, her manicured nails and polished hair reflecting Doyle back at him.

Simpler still, more helpless than he had ever feared himself to be: for however long Doyle stayed.

He looked again at Doyle, and caught his boss staring at him in his turn.

Oh, shit, was all he could think. Cowley knew. The old bastard knew.

Which left him—where?

Cowley knew they were lovers, even though they weren't—really. So it couldn't be any worse, could it?

Cowley came towards him.

Oh, yes, it could indeed be a lot worse.

Bodie edged closer to Doyle, and began rehearsing his resignation speech.

And as his boss' mouth opened, so did the boss' mother's, her voice cutting through everything like a hot knife through butter. "George! Leave thon lads alone, let them have a wee bit fun—they've no had so much as a night off since you brought them up here. Away and don't annoy them, you can come here with me and see Mr. Skilling—d'you mind him from school?"

Another respite before Cowley began the Scottish Inquisition, another bit of time for him to get a grip on himself—he almost groaned as his own mind sabotaged him with a graphic image of what else he wanted to get a grip on, and who else, the way Doyle's face twisted as orgasm took him—

He supposed that it showed just how good the training was; afterwards, he could recite the names and positions of those present, the councillors, the Provost's assistant, the police big wigs, the ordinary old soldier. But at the time, all he was aware of was Cowley disappearing off into the distance, the crowd closing round him like the sea, and Bodie was standing there with Ray Doyle. A silently thunderous Ray Doyle who was making a point of looking at everyone but Bodie.

He could, he supposed, leave it until they were back at the flat. That would, after all, be the sensible thing to do. But look at the droop of Doyle's mouth, the sagging of his shoulders, the misery that darkened his eyes under the surface temper. How could common sense be proof against that?

Bodie had no idea; all he knew was that he had to tell Doyle, and tell him now, before Doyle locked him out and threw away the key.

"In here," he hissed, doing his best dramatic under-cover voice. 'Here' was a half-blocked stairwell, far better lit than the other one they'd been on already tonight, and nowhere near as private.

As if his hand burned him where it touched his partner, Bodie let go of Doyle as soon as they were out of sight of the celebrants.

Doyle put his empty glass down on the windowsill, leaned against the wall, crossed his arms, his deliberation a taunt, and then he just stood there, waiting.

"Look," Bodie began, sickeningly aware of just how difficult—or impossible—this might be, "in the car..."

"What about in the car?" Doyle asked, sounding

bored as he examined his fingernails.

"When you asked me if I wanted to hang about for the eruption..."

"Yeh?"

"I'd like to hang about a lot longer than that."

"Would you? That's interesting." He didn't sound interested, though, still not looking at Bodie, restless hands fiddling with picking nonexistent lint off his trousers.

"Look at me, Ray."

Doyle looked, once, impassively, and went back to the lint.

"C'mon, Ray, there's no need to go in a huff about—"

"No need? No fucking need? And what am I supposed to do, eh? You've been jerking me around like your own personal fucking Pinocchio, and you think all you have to do is condescend to hang about for a while and what am I supposed to do, eh? Lie back and think of England? Get down on my knees for you? Or am I supposed to just bend over and touch my toes?"

"For fuck's sake, Ray—you're not the virgin martyr in this! We've both fucked up—"

"Have we?"

"Yes we fucking have and don't you even think about denying it. You're so busy flying off the handle, you're not giving us a chance to even try."

"I gave you chances."

"And I want one more."

"Greedy bastard, aren't you?"

Bodie stepped forward then, rested his hand, palm down, on the rising and falling heat of Doyle's chest, crisp cotton a barrier between them. Doyle met his eyes, and Bodie refused to look away, took the final plunge and let his own feelings show. Nearly lost it when the feelings leapt up and demanded his attention, did lose it when Doyle grinned at him, and reached for him, and then Bodie was wrapped in Ray Doyle, mouth open, Doyle's tongue in his mouth, Doyle's hands on his arse, Doyle's cock hard against his own.

Pausing to catch his breath which was busy running away with his passion, Bodie rested his chin on Doyle's shoulder, his tongue unable to resist the temptation of Doyle's neck so sweetly within reach. "We're a right pair of sad bastards," he murmured, showing his talent for romantic chit-chat now that the feelings were sincere and not a means to getting his end away.

"Sad? If this is misery, then they can keep

heaven," Doyle said between the kisses he was peppering Bodie's face with.

"I just mean," Bodie thrust his hips forward, Doyle groaning in pleasure, "that we're sad bastards, if we're this turned on by a few kisses."

"So just think what it'll be like when I can get you between the sheets, naked—I'll show your prick what a few kisses can do for it then."

Much more of that, and Bodie would end up with a very embarrassing stain all down the front of his crotch. "Give over," he muttered, resisting the urge to get down on his knees here and now and show Doyle himself what a bit of sucking could do. "If we don't pack it in now, we're going to end up doing it right here, in a public place, with Cowley and his mum not a million miles away."

"Don't suppose that's too brilliant an idea, is it?"

"Wish you'd tell my cock that."

There was a wicked glint in Doyle's eyes as he started to slowly slide cock-wards, until common sense and the sound of drunken feet stumbling on the stairs overhead stopped him. By the time the boozy bluster had stumbled down to their landing, there was nothing to indicate that the two of them had been that close to having sex. Nothing, that is, as long as you were drunk, half blind, and with your glasses hanging uselessly from one ear.

"Hullo there, lads! How's it going? You havin' a grand time, are you? I am, amn't I, hen?" the over imbiber asked, his questions wandering as queasily as his eyes, taking in Bodie and Doyle and the bottle cradled so lovingly in the crook of his arm. 'Hen', being just a dimpled bottle, didn't reply, a fact which bothered the man no more than did Bodie and Doyle not replying. He reeled on to a tune considerably different from the one currently heuching away in the main hall, a blast of laughter and conversation coming through the door as he went out.

Not silence, far from it, but diffidence had set in, awkwardness the aftermath of reality's intrusion.

"We're mad, doing that here," Bodie said.

"Asking for it," Doyle said, hand involuntarily going to rub at the zip of his jeans as the double meaning caressed him. "I mean, asking for trouble."

"Christ, Doyle, stop touching yourself like that! You'll have me on my knees next if you keep that up."

"Don't know how not to keep it up," Doyle replied, wry humour inset into the huskiness of

lust. "You really pick your moments, you know that, don't you?"

"Natural rhythm," Bodie said, turning discreetly away to rearrange himself in his trousers.

"You haven't gone modest on me, have you, you great prat?"

"Listen, what chance do we have of getting out of here without being arrested, if I stand right there where you can see, and stick my hands down the front of my trousers?"

"Good point," Doyle conceded quickly, deciding that the paint on the wall really was fascinating and well worth studying for the next few moments. "You know what I want to know? How the fuck did we get ourselves into this state?"

"Because you kissed me and—"

"That's right, blame it all on me."

"And I was too fucking scared to admit what I wanted."

It was Bodie's turn to be studied now.

"And what is it you want?"

Bodie could, he supposed, get away with saying all he wanted was his best mate, and a good fuck. But that had been love in Doyle's eyes, before, and that had been love Doyle had had the balls to show, before. And no-one, least of all William Andrew Philip Bodie was going to say that Ray Doyle had more guts than him.

He shrugged, wishing he was better with words, wishing that he had the brass neck to actually do something as pathetically soppy as quote poetry that could actually say what he wanted to say. "Everything, I suppose," he finally said. "Everything, for as long as you want it, too."

Doyle's eyes narrowed in a way Bodie knew all too well, and he almost looked over his shoulder to see where the rest of the interrogation team was. "You think I'm going to walk out on you, don't you? You think I just want to add you to my scalp collection, fuck you, satisfy my curiosity and move on, don't you?"

"Well, yeh, if you're going to put it like that..."

"You, Bodie," Doyle jabbed Bodie in the chest for added emphasis, the tone quite wonderfully gentle in contrast, "are the biggest wally I've ever met. D'you think I'd take chances like this for the sake of a fuck? Even with a bloke—have you any idea how many blokes have offered, over the years?"

No, he hadn't—but he did have a sudden, overwhelming urge to track every single one of the

bastards down and beat them to a pulp.

"If it was just sex, d'you honestly think I'd risk the job, everything, for a bit of sex? D'you think I'm as stupid as you?"

"So does this mean you love me?"

"Oh, no, it's just that I'd worked my way through all the other blokes in the squad and you were next on the list. What the fuck d'you think?"

He thought the sun was shining, the birds were singing, and the rivers were flowing chocolate.

"And you can wipe that silly grin off your face as well—Cowley'll take one look at that and he'll know."

That was enough to wipe the grin off anyone's face, but Bodie's smile lingered, breaking through like sunshine in rain. "I hate to tell you this, but I think Cowley already knows. In fact, I think he knew before we did."

"You noticed as well, did you? Shit, I was hoping it was just my imagination."

"No such luck. So what d'you think we should do?"

"Same thing we do with our expenses chits."

"Lie through our teeth?"

"Any better ideas?"

Retire to the countryside, move to France, Italy, Greece, even. Anywhere they could get away with it, just the two of them. "Not really, no."

"So we'll lie to him. He'll know we're lying, and we'll know he knows, and we'll all pretend it's the truth, and officially, he won't have to do a blind thing."

"Apart from pretend he's blind, of course."

They stood there for a minute, and Bodie was very low-voiced when he finally broke the silence. "All that talk and practicality hasn't helped, has it?"

Doyle grinned, the same smile that could get him into trouble in a convent. "I still want to fuck you where you stand," he said, softened, added, "or kiss you for a month."

"Don't," Bodie groaned, turning away. Twice, tonight, they'd courted each other and disaster. Third time the charm, so the adage went. Third time and they'd be up to their...necks in trouble.

"We should go out there and mingle."

"Myer?"

"Safety in numbers. People would notice if I tore the trousers off you."

"Our timing's lousy, abso-fucking-lutely lousy. Why'd we have to choose being stuck up here right

under Cowley's nose to realise—"

"To realise what?"

But neither was quite willing to put it into words. Not quite yet, when they'd had so many near misses getting here in the first place.

"You know what," Bodie said gently.

"We both do," Doyle replied. Took one look at the open feelings on Bodie's face, and went for the door, and safety in numbers.

Almost back into the crowd, and Doyle suddenly grabbed him, pushed Bodie back into the dangerous privacy of the stair well, and had him up against the wall, sandwiched between the coldness of the wall and the heat of Doyle's body. Doyle kissed him once, hard, a kiss overflowing with promise, and lust, and love. And then he was gone, swallowed up by the revellers and the music and the light.

More slowly, Bodie followed, one finger straying to his lips, to where Doyle had kissed him.

It dawned on him, the words coming full-blown into his mind. He was in love, he thought, half dazed, half expecting it to show on his face for all the world to see. He was in love, and Doyle loved him back.

Maybe the world wasn't such a bad old place after all.

He spent the next hour dividing his time between watching his boss and his partner, the latter far more pleasant a task. Almost two A.M., and people were beginning to trickle out, the party only showing the very first signs of winding down. He caught Cowley's signal, rounded up coats and scarves and hats, bundled everyone up and out into the car, unable to stop himself from grinning happily, not quite daring to allow himself the luxury of looking at Doyle. Try and keep quiet about it then, he thought: one look at Doyle, and it'd be so obvious Cowley couldn't pretend ignorance, and then where would they be?

And he grinned all the more broadly when he realised that he didn't give a toss. Tomorrow, maybe, he'd care, but not tonight, when the words sang through his blood like a hymn through a cathedral, echoing and soaring and filling in all the empty spaces. Doyle loved him. Ray Doyle loved him, Bodie. Loved him enough to want everything with him. Everything.

Everything.

His trousers were too damned tight again.

Back at Mrs. Cowley's flat, Mr. Cowley giving

him funny looks, and all Bodie could think about was how they were going to be able to find an hour or two alone, he and Ray, so that they could, so that they could...

Make love.

Not the sort of euphemism he normally would be caught dead using, but for once, it wasn't just a euphemism. He and Ray, alone, even if it were just for an hour.

They'd be going back to London tomorrow—this afternoon, he corrected, the hall clock striking two. They could be alone then, as soon as they'd dropped Cowley off. As soon, he amended, as they'd sat through Cowley's lecture and/or interrogation, and made good their escape. Then it would be back to his flat, or better still, Doyle's, with its lovely big bed and thick duvet, central heating going full blast so they could be naked without freezing their balls off. Yeh, Doyle's flat, stop off for food on the way home so they wouldn't have to go out again...

"I said," Cowley repeated himself pointedly, "we'll be leaving at about three this afternoon, so make sure everything's ready."

"Oh—yes, sir, absolutely, sir. Three o'clock, on the dot. We'll be ready." Walking funny, if he didn't get to take the pressure off, but ready nonetheless. Leave at three, get back to London, get rid of Cowley—oh, god, why couldn't they just leave now? Who really cared about breathalyser tests anyway?

Mrs. Cowley was looking at him, patiently, and he wondered how long he'd been lost in his own pleasant fog.

"I'll make you a proper breakfast before you start off, and maybe we'll even have time for a late dinner as well. And I'll make up a wee bit picnic for your tea later."

"That'll be great," Bodie said, wondering why the hell she'd chosen two o'clock in the morning to discuss meals with him. Tensed, as she looked pointedly over at Doyle.

"I'll chap on the door," she said, "afore I bring you your tea in in the morning."

Floored would be too mild a term to describe how Bodie felt. She couldn't mean what he thought she meant.

"C'mon, Mum," Cowley was saying, "it's past time you were in your bed."

"What have I tellt you about telling me what to do? In one ear and out the other, that's what it is,

ayeways was, wasn't it? Never—"

Their voices faded, the closing door cutting them off.

"She didn't—" Doyle said.

"Couldn't've," Bodie agreed with more hope than certainty.

"Yeh, not a woman of her age."

"Wouldn't even cross her mind."

"Course not."

And then they had run out of words. In Mrs. Cowley's sitting room, surrounded by the smell of furniture polish, lavender and old age, they just stood there for a minute, and stared at each other.

"Well."

"Right."

Both words at the same time, both men looking away together.

Neither spoke, neither dared give voice to the need tangling the ground between them.

"Best get to—best get some sleep," Bodie said, being practical.

"Sooner we're asleep, sooner it'll be time to get ready to leave."

"We'll be in London before we know it."

And the look Doyle slanted at him acknowledged how little comfort that was.

Efficiently, they cleared a space on the floor, spread the sleeping bags out, not too close together for virtue.

"Not long before we're back in London," Doyle said, one foot kicking miserably at a hapless sleeping bag.

"Not long at all."

But it felt like a lifetime.

Ablutions and necessities completed, they lay in the dark, each in his condom of a sleeping bag.

It was always easier to say things in the dark.

It was Doyle who spoke first.

"We could always say that we want to get petrol for the car, get it a quick once-over before we drive back."

"Where's going to be opened, in Scotland, on New Year's Day?"

Silence.

Bodie's turn. "We could always say we'd had a tip off, or wanted to check a possible source—someone we'd met at that party tonight."

"And I can just imagine the report we'd file. 'We proceeded to the site named by our source on the night of the 31st, whereupon we proceeded to fuck like rabbits.' Oh, yeh, that'll go down a treat."

Silence.

Doyle again. "It's stupid—us lying here like Cowley's maiden aunts!"

"Better than us bonking and Cowley coming in to hear what all the racket is."

Pause, rustling of nylon sleeping bag on skin, Doyle raising himself up on one elbow, his hair a tousled halo in the dim light slipping in through the window. "We didn't make any noise that time we did it on that obbo over Smithfield's, did we?"

"Yeh, but that was only a wank, really."

"And who says we have to do anything else this time?"

Me, thought Bodie, half amused that he wanted so much for this to mean something, to be different enough that he could always point to this point in his memory and say, see, that's the date, never forget it, been forty years to the day...

"Me," he said out loud. "If we're going to do anything with Cowley and his mum just couple of rooms away, it's going to be worth it."

"D'you want to?"

"Christ, Doyle, want? Want? I 'want' a cup of tea, I 'want' a pint—you I fucking need."

A whirlwind of muffled sound and stifled movement, and then Doyle was on top of him, struggling to pull the zip down, the noise quite disgustingly loud for surreptitious sex. The nylon was shoved aside, heat replaced by numbing cold, that replaced immediately by the clamber of limbs over his own, warm skin, tense muscles, strong hands holding his head still for Doyle's kisses, Doyle heavy on him, hard too, muscle and bone and cock pressing down on him, digging into him, Doyle holding him tightly now, arms wrapped around him, Bodie hugging back, grabbing him too hard, murmur of complaint, slight easing of pressure, and then Bodie rubbing up against him, hips moving, Doyle pressing down.

Deep kisses, every moan and murmur swallowed by the other, taken deep inside, substitute for what they knew would happen soon, each inside the other as best they could, trying so desperately to be quiet, more desperate still to be part of the other. Bodie felt Doyle's hand on his cock, groaned into Doyle's mouth, palmed Doyle's buttocks, his finger finding the tight knot of muscle that would, soon, oh, soon, open to him, the small hole that he would push his cock into, making Doyle his own, marking him, on the inside, where only the two of them would know.

To think he'd been scared of this—small fucking wonder, he thought, his hands and arms and heart filled with Ray Doyle. It was all consuming, everything in his world concentrated into this experience, into this man he was holding onto so tightly. Bodie spread his legs, wanting Doyle to touch him there, the way he had Doyle, and was rewarded not by the dry press of finger, but by the wet slickness of cock, Doyle's cock rubbing him there, threat, promise, pleasure, pain, but most of all, commitment, and confession.

He wanted to say it, actually speak the words aloud, but didn't dare: if he said it at all, he'd scream it from the rooftops, loud enough to wake the dead and make the angels jealous. He made do with bringing his legs up so that he had Doyle scissored, their cocks pressing together now, rubbing, and rubbing, the hardness a joy, Doyle's strength a delight. His breath was shorter now, great heaving gasps that he breathed into Doyle's open mouth, the groans stifled by kisses and love. The rush started, flooding him, erupting from him, their bellies and cocks suddenly wet and slick, sliding together exquisitely.

Subsiding, Doyle still tense above him, Doyle's hard cock stabbing at him, frantic with need. Eyes open, trying to see Doyle in the near dark, Bodie covered Doyle's mouth with one hand, brought the other to his own mouth, sucked the fingers inside. Their wetness caught the faint light, glimmering, addicting Doyle's gaze to their implication. Slowly, Doyle's tongue wet against his palm, Bodie brought his right hand down to Doyle's rump, to the richness of flesh. One finger, only one, but a part of him, his body, entering Doyle, joining them. Doyle's teeth were sharp, biting him, containing the sounds of his impalement, Doyle's eyes closing in ecstatic pleasure, as Bodie fucked him with only his finger, and Doyle came, hips thrusting forward one last time, his cock pulsing against Bodie.

And then it was over, Doyle limp atop him, the two of them entangled, but separate, Bodie no longer inside Doyle, the passion satiated. But something else had been awakened, and they lay there for a long time, saying nothing, sharing small kisses, caresses touching each other in telling affection.

Sounds from the kitchen, Mrs. Cowley up and about, the two of them separating reluctantly, grinning at each other as the state they were in made its presence felt. Doyle retreated to shove on

track suit and socks, heading for the bathroom, real life back in full force, the night before reduced to pleasant memories and contentment.

The red car heading southwards this time, weaving its way through countryside that had been deluged with wind and rain in their absence, a steady, pedantic rain falling still. The windscreen wipers whished back and forth, back and forth, the sound hypnotic, and in the back seat, the papers were no longer shuffling efficiently, slower, slower, until finally that small noise stopped, Cowley's breathing heavy and deep.

"Some party, last night," Doyle said very quietly.

"Looks like it," Bodie agreed, looking at his partner, wondering if he himself looked half as soppy. "Really was quite a night, wasn't it?"

"Nothing on the celebration we're going to have when we get back to our own flat."

Our. Such a small word, and with such a weight of meaning. The rain didn't matter, the cold didn't

matter, whatever Cowley was planning to say didn't matter. Nothing mattered at all, not really. Not when Bodie compared it to the reality of Doyle at his side, with him, the two of them together, and the sweet anticipation of what they were going to do tonight, or tomorrow. No rush, not now.

He looked again at Doyle, catching his partner already staring, smiling, looking—

Yep. No doubt about it: Mr. Miseryguts was looking happy. Cocooned in their car, surrounded by the grey of rain and the steady passage of miles, they drove on.

And for us, this is the end. We leave them as we found them, in their car, but this time our last memories of them are the warmth in Doyle's eyes, and the happiness in Bodie's. We can disperse now, each of us going our separate ways as for once, at last, those two have found a single destination. We depart now, leaving them once more, that bright spark of red amidst the dull grey of dank weather, the road stretching out before them like a promise.