

**NOR THE LEOPARD HIS SPOTS**  
M. FAE GLASGOW

*(Note: This story is set in Albert Square, London—home of EastEnders. For readers familiar with the show, it should be noted that the Professionals and EastEnders timelines have been twisted and pulled a bit to suit the purposes of the story. No matter: this is fantasy about fictional characters.)*

“Oi, Colin, who was that bloke wot was movin’ in your flats this mornin’ then?”

Colin took a careful, calming sip of his Churchill's, damping his temper down with the coolness of his beer. Voice clenched, he gave Darren the same answer he'd given half the Square already. "I don't know, Darren. I've absolutely no idea and if you want to find out, why don't you either ask the bloke himself or get on the 'phone to Kelvin and ask *him* who he's rented the flipping flat to."

"All right, all right, don't get your knickers in a twist. Was only askin', wasn't I? No 'arm in that, is there?" the black man muttered, smoothing down his natty grey suit in lieu of ruffled feathers. "No need to get shirty. Just wonderin', that's all." He leaned in, grinning suggestively, "Wondered if you an' Barry were on the outs, an' you had a new fella movin' in."

“Oh, not you as well! What’s the matter with the people round here? Some man moves in and everyone’s leering at me as if he’s my bit on the side.”

“Keep your shirt on, Col, just ‘avin’ you on. Not that you c’n blame us—I mean, everyone knows you fellers are all the same.”

With exaggerated control, staring straight ahead, Colin put his glass down on the bar, taking his time. His hand wasn't quite entirely steady as he ran it over the tightly rippling waves of his cut-to-the-bone hair. "Darren, this is going to come as quite a shock to you, but I'm going to try to teach you something, so listen to me, will you? Us 'fellers' are *not* all the same, some of us are actually real people, not something out of 'Agony'. And if me and Barry were breaking off, believe me, with the speed gossip travels round this square, you'd know about it

before we did. Now, why don't you change the subject before you put your foot in it again, all right?"

"Okay, okay, if you can't take a joke, man, then I won't say nothin' t'all. Hey, Wicksy, 'ow 'bout getting me a lager before I die of thirst down 'ere?"

Lager delivered, Wicksy leaned across the bar towards Colin, dark hair flopping over his forehead, eyes bright with curiosity. “‘Ere, Col, what’s this I hear about you and Barry splittin’ up and some new bloke movin’ in then?”

“What? Who told you that?”

“Dot.”

“When?”

“When I dropped me washin’ down the launderette this mornin’ on my way to help Ange open the pub.”

"Well, I've got news for you, old son. While Dot was telling you all about us breaking everything off, me and Barry were up West. Together."

"Where you goin' then? You haven't even half-way finished your drink!"

Colin stalked back to the bar, leaning on it with a thoroughly unfriendly smile. "I," he said, mouth tight, "am going down the Market, where I'm going to go to Barry's stall. When I get there, I'm going to talk to him. I'm going to make sure one of you well-meaning idiots hasn't told him all this juicy gossip and landed me right in it, that's where I'm going. Any objections? No? Then I'll be off then, shan't I?"

Behind his departing back, Wicksy and Darren stared at each other in silence for a moment, then Darren shrugged, grinning. “Probably just PMT,” he said, in the tone of a joke.

Wicksy drew him a stinker, turning away from him to serve another customer. "Leave it out or you'll have Ange comin' after you with a cake of soap. Or somethin' sharp, complete with instructions of precisely where you've to shove it."

“Oi, Barry, who was that bloke wot was movin’ into your flats this morning then?”

“Not you an’ all. I already told your wife, I don’t know who he was. Colin dragged me out

at the crack of bleedin' dawn this mornin', I didn't even see the geezer. Why don't you ask Dot or Ethel, they probably know what colour underpants he wears by now."

Pete nudged him, winking as if he had aspirations to being the new Benny Hill. "Thought that was more your line, eh, pal?"

"Won't be your pal much longer if you don't keep your trap shut, Pete Beal."

"Ooh, listen to him. Bit rich, you protestin' your innocence, innit?"

"All right, so I 'ave been known to wander a bit, it's not as if I'm married or anythin', is it? An' it's not as if it's any of your business neither."

"Wander a bit? Christ, mate, you may look like butter wouldn't melt in your mouth an' you may look like a perfect little chubby angel, but I reckon that's only because you've got one of them pictures up the attic."

Barry smiled very, very sweetly at him, the very image of cherubic innocence Pete had accused him of, then gave him the two-fingered salute. "Up yours, mate. The only pictures I've got are the kind you keep stuffed under the bed where your Kath won't find 'em."

"Touchy, touchy. Had a ruction with Colin, did we, then?"

"No, we didn't. Just having a rotten fuckin' mornin' an' you're not 'elpin' an' if you don't shut up, I'll land you one. All right?"

He was still simmering under his breath when another voice spoke up.

"Barry..."

"Wot d'you want, Col?"

Pete, far more sensible than his old battle-axe of a mother ever gave him credit for, quietly disappeared back to his own stall—although he made sure he could still hear every word. Colin and Barry always had such interesting arguments...

"Came down to find out if you'd been getting an earful about this new bloke, but I see you've been giving Pete a mouthful instead."

"Yeh, well 'e asked for it, didn't 'e. Don't need him goin' on at me, not after this mornin', do I."

"Come on, it wasn't that bad. Just another blood test, that's all."

"Yeh, but I don't like 'avin' it all rammed down me throat, do I?"

"Look, we've been through this before. Like it

or not, we have to get checked, make sure we're both still clear."

"Yeh, but I don't like bein' reminded of wot c'n 'appen."

"Burying your head in the sand won't make it go away, Barry."

"Put another record on, Col."

A pause, a customer picking up then discarding a reggae tape as the first plop of rain landed on him.

"All right, another record then. *Have* you heard about this bloke?"

Barry grinned at him, all imp and satyr, argument tossed casually aside, as usual. "You mean the one you've chucked me out for or the one I've gone an' dumped you for?"

"Oh, that one's new. I'd only heard that I'd broken off with you. Well, what does this man you've thrown me over for look like?"

"Come on for tea, might as well 'ave a break, goin' to 'ave another downpour an' there'll be no customers till the worst of it's over, will there. Might as well be comfy while we're waitin'."

"So this rival of mine—or this rival of yours, whichever you'd rather—is he tall, dark and handsome, like me?"

"Or small, fat an' pretty like me?"

"You're not fat."

"Pudgy was wot you said the other day, though."

Colin had the grace to look shamefaced. "Well, I was justifiably furious with you Sunday, so that doesn't count, does it? Anyway, you asked for it."

As they reached the café, Ethel was bustling out of it, muttering away to her pug. "Yes, we shall go an' find Dot an' she'll soon tell us all about this young man Colin's leavin' poor Barry for."

Over her oblivious head, the two men of her gossip exchanged glances. "D'you think she even saw us?" Colin whispered, laughing.

"Nah. We're nowhere near as much fun as wot Dot 'as to tell 'er. Two teas, please, Ali, an' a ham roll an' a cheese'n pickle sandwich, while we're at it."

"Oi, you two, what's goin' on wiv you pair? Sue said she saw some bloke movin' in this mornin', an' 'ere's Ethel been tellin' me that you two have gone an' split up an' this 'ere bloke is your new 'young man', Colin. But now I see the

pair of you standin' there as nice as ninepence,  
as if you 'aven't got a care in the world."

Barry made a face. "Ali, all either one of us know is that someone's moved in. An' seein' as 'ow Carmel's still in 'er flat an' Wicksy an' Mags just moved into theirs, then my guess is that this fella's taken the room Ian an' Tina used to 'ave."

"So you two 'aven't broken off then?" Starling, intently, from one face to the other.

Appointment book firmly tucked under one arm, plates balanced precariously on top of the teacups, saucers held tightly, Colin muttered, "What do you think, Ali? Not yet, anyway."

They were both a good half-way through the food before Barry re-started the conversation. “You know wot’s got me really puzzled is why they all thought he was gay in the first place, let alone your new lover.”

“Who knows. Perhaps it was the lavender shirt.”

“Or the high heels.”

"Or the silver lamé frock."

They were still laughing over it when the rain stopped and Barry went back to the stall and Colin headed for home, strict instructions to find out who the ‘raving poofster’ was still ringing in his ears.

Knowing that the bell wasn't working, Colin knocked hard on the door to Ian's old flat, but then shrugged and went on upstairs to get the new logo project finished in time. He glanced back down, briefly, just to check, for he could have sworn he saw a light on when he'd first come over, but there was no sign of life from outside.

There wasn't much sign of life from inside, either. The bed had the worn bedspread on it, the one that looked as if several generations of children had whiled-away their nightmares by pulling out tufts of the candlewick, trying unsuccessfully to make pictures prettier than the ones in their minds. Even the sheets were old, with the faint sheen peculiar only to aged sheets and aged skin. Tea-towels, bath towels, kitchen mat, curtains, the whole lot of it was one step away from the dustbin, and it depressed Doyle to hell, but not quite back again. He was leaning against the alcove wall behind the bed, using the cellulite pillows to dam some of the damp chill, whilst he surveyed his new kingdom.

It wasn't much. One room, kitchenette oppo-

site the bed recess, with only the faintest of lighter patches on the wall, as if the pictures that had hung there had been up for too short a time to make any real difference. The lighter patches marked transience, but the bright red handles carefully screwed onto drawers and cupboard doors, the thriving plants in earthenware pots on the window-sill, the floral appliqué on the bathroom tiles, those things all spoke of permanence. A failed home, then, was where his job had taken him. Seemed appropriate, somehow.

He thought about going out onto the street, getting the oppo underway, but all he could summon the energy for was to go over to the cooker to make a cup of tea. And when, half way through, waiting for the kettle to boil, he realised that he had neither tea nor sugar, nor even instant coffee, he simply shrugged and sighed and went back over to sit, once more, on the bed, surveying the gloom around him. Footsteps sounded on the stair again, but this time, no-one came knocking at his door to disturb him. Shortly, he could hear voices, muffled and indistinct, neither male nor female, coming through the dividing wall. He speculated, idly, on the people next door, doing for them what he should have been doing for himself—creating both histories and personæ. Not that he could be bothered doing that for himself, not after the 14 weeks, 3 days and—a lethargic glance at his watch—11 hours and 33 minutes he'd been working. It didn't help, not really, knowing that everyone else was just as overworked and underpaid, although it did ameliorate the sense of being singled-out for punishment. True enough, mind, that CI5 had had more than its fair share of exceedingly hush-hush cases, more than its share of find-the-terrorist, but that came with the territory. If he'd had the energy, he'd have been busy getting upset over the threat or, to use Whitehall double-speak, the *promise* of having the trimmed-off excesses of MI5, MI6 and that department that didn't actually have a name all sent over to bolster CI5's roster. Just what they all needed: old school boys, complete with the proper ties and marbles vying for supremacy over the silver spoons in their mouths. If he'd had the energy...

He spilled out over the bed, as sprawled as his stiff and sore limbs would allow him to be, a

pillow crumpled under his head. The voices next door turned into a drone, as soporific as bees dipping into flowers, London's version of halcyon summers. Sluggishly, he turned over the details of this latest case of many, a tip-off that the drug lords who were muscling their way into the East End were financing their drug deals with weapons money from the IRA. Or was it they were using the money from the drugs to buy weapons for the IRA? The two threads wove around and around in his mind, cat's cradle turning to tangle, until he was drifting off to the sound of lovemaking next door and the echo of Cowley's voice telling him to infiltrate and report, infiltrate and report. And the knowledge that those instructions were his death-knell, the signal that he was getting too, too old to be on the streets was what made him shiver and pull the candlewick up over his shoulders, then higher, to cover his head. If he couldn't shut the world out, then he'd shut himself in.

By the time the couple next door had had their noisy climax, he was already completely oblivious to them and everything else, lost in the sleep of complete exhaustion.

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It was such a cliché, it should have made him laugh. The good old slip of paper falling out of the pocket, the scrawl of name and phone number silent accusal and conviction, and all of it done like something out of a Trevor Howard film. For a minute, Colin fingered the paper, his own training telling him that this was artist paper, the kind of stuff he used himself. Quite possibly was something he used himself. Wouldn't be the first time Barry had brought someone back to the flat when he'd known Colin would be out for long enough. But then, when it came down to it, just how long did it take? A short fifteen minutes, for a quick shag, or a couple of hours, for a long, slow fuck? He actually believed that it was, as Barry so loudly protested so often, nothing more than sex, a change of scenery, but that wasn't really the problem. Problem was, he also believed that the same description applied to himself. 'Us', he referred to them as, but Barry only used that linking word when they were having yet another serious talk to sort out yet another infidelity.

Slowly, very carefully, he tucked the slip of paper into the pocket, covering up Barry's in-

discretions with his own insecurities. He didn't want to hear about this one, didn't want to have to go through another scene. And certainly didn't want to hear Barry tell him he was tired of the nagging and was breaking off... He could feel his old friend, fear, waking up with a luxurious stretch, spreading out from the pit of his stomach to reach down to his toes. Anxiety joined in, making him tense, making him chill. He wandered into the kitchen, putting the kettle on, taking it off, putting it back on again with a sigh of resignation. Some things never changed: Barry's peccadilloes and the British panacæa for all ills, a good hot cuppa. The bell went while he was pouring the water into the pot and he decided not to hear the self-important chimes. A click, a rustle, and Pauline was coming in, calling out to make sure that he either was definitely out or that he would hear her if he was at home.

He rubbed his temples, the hair there greying and so short that not even the shaking of his fingers could disarray it. His eyes closed for a minute, then he straightened his spine and made the best of a bad situation.

"In the kitchen," he shouted through, before Pauline could start on the hovering, "and tea's just made. D'you want a cup?"

Pauline came into the kitchen, face as faded as her overall, her hair straggly and obviously the result of a home-bleaching attempt. You could see that she'd once been pretty, very pretty, but middle-age was racing her to the finish line and she was losing. She'd become blowzy and furrowed, the wear and tear of motherhood borne in poverty marking her. But her smile, if you didn't see her eyes, was happy and bright, bringing back some of her past glory. "Ooh, I could murder a cuppa. Absolutely gasping, I am, desperate for something 'ot an' sweet. Wot with Dot beggin' off sick till late..."

"Again? She should just move into the surgery with Doctor Legg, save everyone a lot of fuss and bother."

"Save me some bother an' all. At least then I'd know not to depend on 'er. Launderette was supposed to be opened for ages before she even rang me to tell me she wasn't coming in at 'er usual time. Not that she's got a usual time these days, not with the way she's been skivin' off. Bloody hypochondriac, that's wot she is."

Deftly, he loaded up a tray with tea things, smiling to himself at the way Pauline's eyes widened when he took out the gâteau and added that. He'd bought it for Barry today, in a rush of benevolence after the giggle they'd had about their new 'young man', but not surprisingly, he was feeling less than charitable towards him now, thanks to one more piece of paper. He'd make sure there wasn't a bite of cake left, even if he had to eat the whole blasted thing himself. Leading the way into the sitting-room, he kept up his conversation, even as most of him was thinking wicked, vengeful thoughts he knew he'd never enact. "What's it this time? Her stomach again?"

Pauline collapsed on the sofa, her breath gusting from her wearily. "No, that was Tuesday mornin' an' it would never do to 'ave the same thing twice, would it. So "Never? You mean, you know," he went on, imitating Dot to a T, "*down there?*"

"Oh, yes, *down there*, she says. Honest, the way she talks sometimes, you'd think she was 'avin' tea with the bloody Queen 'erself."

"Well, if she did, she could tell Her Majesty all about her trouble 'down there', couldn't she?"

"Probably would an' all. Speakin' of trouble, who's this bloke wot moved in downstairs?"

"Oh, don't you start, Pauline. I've no idea who he is. We weren't even home when he turned up, Kelvin hasn't uttered a mutter about him, not so much as a quick 'phone, nothing. Tell you what I want to know, though, and that's why everyone in the square seems to think he was moving in with me. Or with Barry, which is a lot more likely if you stop to think about it."

Pauline quietly forbore from commenting, Barry's wanderings common knowledge and common source of pity—or ridicule, depending on one's sympathies. "Lovely cake," she said instead of offering platitudes that wouldn't help. "All that talk, well, came from Dot, dinnit..."

"Oh, I *am* surprised. What brought it on this time?"

"Well, she says that she was on her way to see Dr. Legg this mornin' about 'er problem..."

"*Down there*," he intoned seriously.

"An' she says she sees these blokes parkin' this flash car outside 'ere. So Dot bein' Dot, she stays to watch, don't she, even though the launderette was supposed to be opening by then.

Anyway, she watches them an' they take a couple of suitcases an' a telly an' a box of stuff down into Ian's old flat."

"So if she saw two blokes moving stuff into the basement flat, then why's she spreading all this rubbish about me and Barry?"

"Well, she says that when the second bloke was gettin' ready to push off—an' a right 'ard nut an' all, she says 'e was."

"Must've looked like her Nick then, mustn't he?"

"Don't be nasty, you, just cos you're ticked off at 'er. But as this bloke's leavin', 'e shouts over to the other fella, an' 'e says somethin' about the other feller not sleepin' with any strange men while 'e was away."

"And of course she assumes that means he's gay. So what you're telling me is that because this man's gay—because she *thinks* this bloke's gay—she's spreading rumours all round the square that me and Barry are splitting up?"

"It's not as if she means any 'arm, Colin."

"That's not the point, though, is it? She might not mean any harm, but the last thing we need is anyone making up stories about one of us running off with someone else. And I don't see the point in that either. I mean, surely there's enough truth there to keep even her stocked in gossip for a month without having to make up lies."

"I always land myself right in it, don't I? 'Ere I am, tryin' to tell you wot's all been goin' on an' wot's been said an' you end up biting me 'ead off when I've done nothin' but 'elp. I ask you, sometimes I wonder why I even bother."

"I'm sorry, Pauline, you're right. Shouldn't have taken it out on you." He gave her one of his loveliest smiles, his eyes warm with affection for one of the few people in the Square who genuinely accepted him, warts and all, middle-class background not the least of them. "Listen, you've had to cover for Dot, why don't you skip here today, come back tomorrow then?"

"Would you mind? It'd be lovely—little Martin's playgroup's 'avin' a party this afternoon an' I thought I'd 'ave to miss it. 'E'd be ever so pleased if I could be there. Wouldn't be puttin' you out too much, would it?"

"No, you go. And put that tray down, I'll do the tidying up."

"I shouldn't, not really. I'm supposed to be



‘doing’ for you, not ‘avin’ you make me tea an’ everythin’.

“Least I can do. Go on, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“If you’re sure you don’t mind...”

“Pauline, just go! I’ve got work that has to be done, anyway.”

But after she left, the only work he did was another dozen sketches of Barry to add to his collection.

The sky was crawling over the roof-top when he awoke, all the light leached from the streets in that strange time between full dark when the streetlamps shone brightly and the greyness that swallowed all light up into a uniformity of dullness. So he just lay on the bed for a little while, watching the way nothing in the room actually cast shadows in the feeble light, watching the blackness creep up the walls as the light from outside faded into night-time and the glow of lamps stayed up in the street away from his new bedsit. He should be up and bathing, he knew, but it seemed pointless. One more possible terrorist supplier, or just another entrepreneur in London’s fastest expanding business. Didn’t seem to matter too much, not now. Once, when first he’d started, he was going to be SuperCopper, Chief Constable Raymond Aloysius Doyle, the best and most incorruptible policeman on the face of this God’s green earth, scourge of criminals and bent coppers alike. But that was half a lifetime ago, and he was feeling every single one of those years in every joint in his body. He raised a hand to his cheek, feeling the bump there, wondering, for the first time in a long time, just how different life would have been for him if that night had never happened. Wondered if he’d have been able to make it all the way to the top instead of stalling at lowly Detective Constable. That last meeting he’d been at, the one Cowley had him sit in on, whilst the various delineations of authority between the various departments were worked out. Cowley had been the only one there who’d been an out-cast like him, product of neither the right school, University nor regiment, but even he had the advantage of years in the right spy pool. Even had a couple of years at one of the ‘right’ Universities, even if his accent was off by 500 miles or so. But Doyle... All he had going for him was

an integrity that didn’t know how to bend, nor how to disguise itself as the same self-serving ambition of a stripe of ruthlessness shocking to anyone who had ever believed in English fair play. Not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game. Now, going on 40, he could no longer ignore the fact that he wasn’t even being allowed to play the game. Oh, Cowley wanted him as his right-hand man, to match Bodie doing the dirty on the left, but without Cowley, he wouldn’t even be allowed to hold the doors open that led to the hallowed corridors of power. And if Doyle were feeling his age, then Cowley was showing his, his skin more often the colour of putty than rose. Once Cowley went, someone else would come in, and where would that leave Doyle? On the dole, probably. No room at the inn for aging moptops still playing cops and robbers long after it was obvious the robbers had won.

At least, that was how Doyle felt, right now, snowed under by both case-loads and failures. He couldn’t forget that woman’s face, when he’d interviewed her after her husband had been gunned down. Even as she blended into a montage of faces made ugly by grief, she remained individual: the way she’d twirled that pound coin endlessly on the coffee table, picking it up every time it fell, to spin it again. Like June Cook and her screaming at him, it stayed with him, building up the pressure until something had to give. And the way he was feeling, it would probably be him.

There was only the one light on when Barry came home, blowing on his hands to ease the pins-and-needles itching at him as warmth returned after the dankness of a day spent working his stall. Such an illusion of warmth, the draw of it visceral, reaching in through his skin, enrapturing a path through the fulgent brilliance of DNA, spiralling back through the ages to the beginning of memory. He was smiling under it, coming closer to the warmth and the man sitting within its glow. Colin was sitting back on the settee, a magazine open upon his lap, the light upon his hair, upon his skin, skimming his clothes, sending the beauty of his hands into a collage of shadows.

“Lovely an’ warm in ‘ere,” Barry said, dumping his belt bag, the coins jingling and clanging

according to weight and value. The old-timers down the market swore they could tell how much money was in the pouch by sound alone, but Barry never had time for tales the likes of that. He was more interested, at the moment, in coming in from the cold and filling his belly. "Strewth, it was bloody Arctic down there today. Lost track of me feet a few times. Wasn't too cold in the mornin', but by the time it got dark, it was bleedin' dismal. Poor old Pete, 'e was the worst off. 'Ad old Mother Beal on his case all afternoon, didn't 'e, 'arping on about 'ow 'is dad 'ad done things an' 'ow it was better in 'is day an'—'ere, you listenin' to me, Col?"

Still not a look from him, winter's eyes fixed firmly on the glossy page. "Yeh, 'course I am."

“Not sayin’ much, are you?”

“Well, I can’t, if I’m listening, can I?”

Barry plonked himself down on the coffee table, not even noticing the annoyed tightening of Colin's mouth. "Nah, I know you, mate. Somethin's wrong, innit?"

Magazines slap shut very ineffectually, a whimper of paper instead of the bang of hard back book. "Never happy, are you? You get on at me for nagging at you and talking at you all the time, now when I'm quiet, you're complaining about that, too. Make up your mind, Barry, will you? And when you do, you'll be sure and let me know, won't you?"

Barry's hands descended upon Colin's thighs, squeezing the cord of muscle. "All right, all right, 'ave it your way. It's usually me wot goes flyin' off the 'andle about you moanin', but if you want to do a turn-about... Hey," he leaned forward, cocking his head, trying to get Colin to look at him, "could be fun, that. You an' me swapping, playing roles. Fancy a bit of make-believe to-night, then, do you?" Familiar fingers traced even more familiar territory, homing in on the vulnerability at the cusp of strong thighs, pressing, just so, offering the only solution Barry knew. "C'mon, Col, let's go to bed. We can 'ave supper later, bring it through the bedroom if we feel like it after. Go on, cummon through to bed."

"I'm not coming anywhere. Look, I've got to finish reading this thing in the magazine on design, so why don't you just go off and 'phone your friend and have a lovely time with him."

“Now wot’re you goin’ on about? You made that sound bloodywell significant, ‘my friend.’”

“Yeh, well, you’re the one who’d know if it was significant, wouldn’t you?”

"You accusin' me of 'avin' it off with some other bloke, is that it? After that row we 'ad just last month?"

Weary, hands rubbing across reddened eyes. “I’m not accusing you of anything, Barry. You’ve never promised fidelity, but I hope you’re being bloody careful.”

“Oh, that’s rich, that is, after this mornin’. If I’m goin’ to the AIDS clinic like a good little boy with you, d’you think I’m goin’ to be off shaggin’ strangers round the back of the pub, is that it? Well, if you think I’m stupid enough to do that, then you’re way out of my league, mate. An’ it’d never do for the workin’ class to get above themselves, would it, m’lud? So I’ll just remove myself from your royal highness’ presence, shall I? Wouldn’t want to forget me station nor nothin’, would I?”

The door slammed behind him, knocking a pile of papers skittering to the floor. And knocking Colin back against the sofa, more tired than he'd been in years.

The jacket was faintly ripe with the dogged smell of wet cloth, but he barely turned up his nose at it, barely noticed it over the dampness crawling up the front wall. This place reminded him, the reminding making him feel vaguely sick. The folly of youth, throwing away what had been happiness, of a sort, for ambition, of a sort. An ambition which was now bearing fruit, as withered and as bitter as the cursed fig. He stood staring at his own wraith-like reflection in the window, wreathed round by the invisible smells and invisible memories, letting himself drift. The road once trod is easier to find when the present is comfortless and the future barren. He looked at himself, as he had been, as he was, and inevitably found the man he had become to be sorely lacking. To have given up so much, for what was now nothing more than an unattainable goal... To have denied the very truth of what he was, all for the childish dream of making the world safe and Disney-bright. So much for dreams: now he was left with the awakening and age was telling, making the waking painful and slow and difficult.

A finger rose to trace where his silver chain  
used to lie, before he'd lost it in that chase down

in Kent. He'd never bothered to replace it, disheartened even then, and the gnawing cancer had quietly metastasised since then, spreading its blackness through every fibre of his being. The lies were wearing on him, the lies he'd told himself more than any other. Too many tell-tale signs demanding that he follow them to their answer. Too many inexplicable dreams refusing such a cowardly description. Too, too many waking temptations, stamped upon and ground underfoot with half a life's practice. And all it left him was standing here, cataloguing the big, fat zeros of his life, pretending to be someone else. Again.

He straightened his shoulders, coming to his full height, letting his hardness and bitterness show in his face. If he were to 'infiltrate and report' a criminal activity, looking the part was one of life's little basics. So. He'd be... Richard Duncan, a name he'd used so often, it required absolutely no effort to maintain, coming complete with personality and history. Yeh. Richard Duncan, hard man, trouble with a capital T, chip on his shoulder bigger than the Rock of Gibraltar, nasty temper and nastier record. Perfect.

Hand on the fecund roundness of the door knob, he hesitated, struggling to find some small spark of energy that he hadn't already used over and over again. But there was nothing there, apart from duty, apart from the hollow knowledge that if he didn't do this, then all the losses and all the denials and all the work had never been worth anything in the first place. Ray Doyle grimaced: Richard Duncan strode up the stairs into the night.

There was an old pub almost directly opposite the stairs, an even older woman coming out of it, small dog clutched to her bosom, words spilling out of her, high-pitched and fractious, the sounds of either the very young or the very old. Behind her, a taller woman, the kind who maintained a very proper façade to plaster over the cracks age was leaving behind, was going on about the 'young man' who had moved into Number 3, her voice cutting the night stillness to ribbons.

"...right downstairs from that Colin an' 'is Barry. An' I ask you, you know wot that sort are all like, all those men-who-lie-with-men, so I ask

you, 'ow long will it be before they're all doin' it together, or 'avin' rows all over the Square, sayin' all them things wot shouldn't be said where a decent, God-fearin' woman can 'ear? Not that I've got anythin' against Colin nor young Barry, mind you, but you know wot I mean, you mark my words, Ethel Skinner, you just mark my words. No good'll come from all this, no good at all. Turnin' the Square into another Sodom, that's wot they're doin' an' no good can possibly come from somethin' as 'orrible as that..."

The local gossip was the last thing he needed, and it was obvious that Bodie's stupid comment had been heard and misinterpreted and now he was lumbered with the reputation for being queer.

"Wonderful," he muttered into his collar, turning the thick fabric up to keep the wind away from his neck, turning himself away from the kind of pub he'd grown up around—and in—to go up the street to the flash new place he'd noticed when Bodie'd driven him in this morning. With ease so long established and so automatic he didn't even notice it, he skipped over all thoughts of Bodie as anything other than colleague and back-watcher, focussing entirely on details of the job they were both in.

Except that this time, it didn't work, not entirely. The woman, with her face as out-of-time as a fading rose, had planted a maggot in his brain, eating away at his defences, his carefully constructed façades that kept the world, and himself, away from the truth. He wondered, far from idly, just how prevalent the story about him was. Could complicate things no end for him, if the rotten bastards he was after heard about it. Not that he could summon up the fire to go with the words, the language that of habit, not conviction or passion: that had been dying for a long time, and now the body was barely twitching on its way to becoming a corpse.

The music spilled out of the pub even more brightly than the neon lights, the sounds of Erasure dancing and soaring out to snare the passer-by. The door to this pub was all glass and vaguely seen figures, the translucent barrier between the bitter night outside and the laughter within.

Reminding himself who he was, Ray Doyle took Richard Duncan inside to start making contacts with the young trendies that would use



both this pub and the drugs that were being brought in.

The woman behind this bar made him wonder if there was anyone round here under the age of 40, or if all the young people had managed to escape what the rest of the world labelled 'gutter'. He nodded to her, got a wonderfully bright and perky smile, found himself responding to it in spite of his own lethargy.

"Wot'll it be then, dear?"

"Half, please."

"Churchill's do you, love?"

He shrugged, not particularly interested in the name of the brewers. Such concerns were best left to the Bodies of this world with their discerning palates and pert taste-buds. He skittered away from his partner again, uneasily unwilling to think of him as a person, avoiding a multitude of issues that were becoming harder and harder to deflect, escaping instead into his one and only refuge: work. He went over again what the old women had been saying, thinking of the best way to lay that rumour to rest, thinking about the possible complications if the tale reached the hard men before the 'truth' did. A breath of wind stirred his curls, setting the hair on the back of his neck to attention.

If the wind had made him shiver, the voice made him go stock still with shock.

He hadn't even allowed himself to think of that voice for years, not since he'd consigned it with all the other secrets to the tacit anonymity of wet dreams...

"Ello, Colin—"

*—Christ, it was him, after all these years, couldn't be, was, what the hell could he say, so much for Richard Duncan, oh fuck, why did Colin Russell have to show up now when he was losing the battle already—*

"—didn't expect to see you in 'ere tonight. Thought Barry was over the Vic, givin' our Den a run for his money."

"That's a bit of a sore subject, Ange."

Sympathy softened her face where her make-up had made her hard and brittle. "Another row, then, love?"

Silent, resigned nod, reluctant smile, all of it glimpsed out of the corner of Doyle's eye. Beautiful hands, so strong, long-fingered, hard-working hands that could out-paint and out-draw Doyle any day of the week. Colin was reaching

into his pocket, pulling out a pound, fingers as deft with the gold-toned coin as he had been with—

*—50p pieces when the meter had run out and the lights were out and I wasn't about to brave the stair cupboard, not when the fire had been out for hours, leave that to him, he never feels the cold, even when the covers would fall off him when he was—*

The spilling of the glass off the bar garnered Angie's quick mopping up and drew Colin's attention.

Doyle swore the world stopped, just for a second, then and there, when that man laid eyes on him again for the first time in almost 20 years.

"Ray? Is it? Ray Doyle? My god, it is!" Face bright with pleasure, the memory of the ending not yet come over him.

And Doyle, oh, poor Doyle, inundated by years of denial poisoned by dreams, all the goodness viciously suffocated so that he wouldn't ever remember or think about what he'd given up to become a policeman, years of suppressed desires and re-routed predilections, lies and self-deceit, all of it coming home to roost with vitriolic glee, laughing at him whilst it merrily snowed him under.

So much for his homosexual tendency being nothing more than just an extended bout of adolescent confusion, so much for it being a temporary experiment, so much for it being dead...

For this was far from dead, this surging of blood through his veins, this blossoming of heat like summer suffusing him, all this life suddenly erupting in every cell. His body thought itself a teenager again, hands suddenly sweat-damped with the rush of adrenaline excitement, his cock abruptly, devastatingly hard, springing erect with frenetic need. So many years and so much denial, all denied in its turn, by the resuscitation of the past. Every other time arousal had begun because of a man, he'd been able to damp it, reclaim it for a woman's lushness, turn it into a romance with a lady both willing and enthusiastic.

Enthusiastic enough to cover up his own lack of ardour—at the very start, anyway? All their hunger for him feeding him, helping him paper over the cracks in his façade, until he'd convinced himself that the homosexuality was over

and done with, that now it couldn't stop his career—

—*but it had, in a way, hadn't it?*—hand going to cheek, covering up the deformity, as he had covered up that which the Met considered a sexual deformity.

"My god, Ray," Colin was saying, eyes bright and friendly, tactfully ignoring the battered cheek and the wrinkle of weariness and depression around the eyes and mouth, concentrating on the lean strength and the wildness of hair that hadn't receded a millimetre. "The years have been kind to you, mate."

He brought himself to speak, to look at Colin straight on, mouth in automatic overdrive, giving him cover while he regrouped and recovered. "You're just sayin' that, Col."

The same old sweetly wry grin, the once forgotten twinkle of the eyes answered him. "Of course I'm just saying that—have to, otherwise I'd have to say the years haven't been kind to me, wouldn't I?" And a hand as self-conscious as Doyle's went to touch not the disfiguring of the face, but the encroachment of age, where rich brown had melted into grey.

"You look all right to me," he said, quietly shocked at the lust laid bare in his voice. His voice, then, remembered being with Colin, too. Just like his cock did...

The skin in the small of his back shivered, remembering the feel of hands on him there, or a tongue, or the sharpness of teeth. Or the blunt hardness of cock, before it plunged into him, deep, so deep, inside... Colin was looking at him funny, and Doyle wondered if Colin were remembering it, too. He smiled, his balls ruling his mind, all thoughts of job and career driven out by months of depression burst by the rebirth of an old happiness. He wouldn't look away, let his tongue touch the bow of his upper lip, knowing how much Colin loved to kiss...

"Don't, Ray."

A crinkling smile: Col always had liked to spin the foreplay out, making it last, making the anticipation erotic in and of itself. "Don't what, Col?"

"Try to go back to what we used to have. *Used* to have, Ray, years ago, when we were both a lot younger and lot more foolish."

"Trying to say you don't want me, is that it?" He glanced pointedly down to the point press-

ing outwards at the top of Colin's left thigh. "Never used to be much one for lying, mate, you weren't."

"You ought to try keeping a monkish view when you've got someone practically coming all over you. C'mon, Ray, put it away."

"Haven't taken it out—yet. Was saving that for you."

"For 19 years? Don't play me for a fool."

The waters between them certainly weren't a child's paddling pool, more the churning aftermath of Moby Dick. "Sorry about all that."

"Yeh, well, so was I, at the time and for a while after, for that. But that's all long past, Ray, *all* of it, good and bad together."

Ray watched, fascinated, as his hand relived the memory of touching Colin, a lone fingertip brushing his fly, feeling denim warmed by a cock other than his own. "Are you sure about that?"

A hand slapped his own away, an angry voice snapping at him. "Leave it out, Ray, we're in public! And I'm *not* going to start all that all over again."

"Why not?" And part of him was sitting down in a dark corner of his mind, having complete hysterics or a nervous breakdown, he wasn't quite sure which. He wasn't even sure of what he was doing, or trying to do here. To jump in with both feet like this after almost two decades of pretending he didn't want men, that he was completely straight, apart from that protracted incident of his youth... Now here he was, racing back into it as if he'd never been gone... His hysteria took a deep breath, got a grip on itself and recognised what it was doing: he *was*, in fact, racing back in as if he'd never been gone, leaping back into the past as if it were an old skin he could zip on, a cartoon character's charade. Mid-life crisis, he supposed, detached, running back to his youth.

Pity that his youth could cost him his career. The hysteria giggled at him: there was always Palace duty, being gay was a big plus for that. And think about all the handsome Guardsmen...

"Ray, you all right?"

"What? Oh, yeh, just thinking, that's all. Been a long time since last we saw each other, innit, Col? And if I remember, I wasn't exactly decent to you, was I?" He'd taken his hand back, but his gaze was just as caressing as it wandered over Colin's groin. Some of the words from that

night jolted into him and he raised his eyes to actually look at Colin. It was only as he said the words that he realised they were true: "If it's any consolation, if I had it all to do again, I wouldn't give you up for the Police. I'd find something else to do. And I am sorry that I left you."

"You've really changed, you know that, Ray? What happened to the man who was going to right all the wrongs of the world?"

"Maybe he realised that all he was doing was tilting at sodding windmills."

"You didn't stay in the Police, then?"

"Nah, went on to..." his training and years on the street finally made their way through the shock of coming face to face with both a former lover and the man Doyle himself used to be, rescuing him from completely botching everything even more badly than he had already done. "Went on to something else, and that didn't work out either—" *—oh, clever, he thought, right out of the books. Use the truth as a lie to give yourself cover, but they never warn you to know what the truth is before it gets you in the back of the neck, do they though?—* "—so now I'm footloose an' fancy free. What about you?"

"Oh, this is a fine kettle of fish, innit? Talk about the pot callin' the kettle black?"

Doyle turned round to see a young man, early twenties, small, dark brown hair, hazel eyes, round faced and almost furious enough to hide the hurt and the jealousy. Beside him, he could feel Colin stiffen, feel the tension surge through him, feel the pain and anger begin.

"I come back 'ere cos I found that bit of paper in me pocket an' I wanted to set the record straight for once, didn't I. Came over 'ere to tell you I wasn't 'avin' it off wiv 'im, cos 'e's me bruvver-in-law. An' 'e an' me sister just moved, which is why I 'ad their 'phone number in me pocket, right? So I'm sittin' there, an' I can't enjoy any of it, cos I know 'ow upset you was about it all, so I come over 'ere just so's I c'n sort it all out. But look wot I find 'ere. Mister Fidelity, sittin' chatten' up an old flame of 'is. Got tired of 'avin' to keep up wiv me, is that it, Col? Thought you'd try somfin a bit more your speed, eh? You'll be raidin' the old folks' 'ome next."

Doyle stretched his legs out, emphasising their length, baring his teeth in a predatory smile. "Tell me somethin'," he said, letting his own accent slip back to his knife-wielding youth,

"you always this Cockney, or d'you just do it cos you know 'ow much it turns Colin on, eh, mate?"

"Ray Doyle, you can just pack that it in right now—"

"Oh, Ray, so that's 'is name, is it? Well, Colin," leaning forward, face inches from Colin, both of them so terribly pale, prideful façades up to hide the hurt, "I 'ope you an' your fancy man are very 'appy together."

"Barry! Hang on a minute."

Doyle grabbed his arm, holding him at his side. "Let the boy go, Col. Didn't think robbing cradles was your style, *mate*."

"Now you just listen to me, Ray Doyle. If you think you can come waltzing into my life after all these years and start wrecking everything for me, then you're just as immature and self-centred as you were then, the only difference being that this time, I'm not about to let you do it. Now get your hands off me, because I want to go after Barry and undo the damage you just did."

"C'mon, Colin, all this for a boyfriend, a kid who's still wet behind the ears? When I'm offering you something really special?"

"For your information, he's not just a boyfriend, he's my lover and he's a hell of a lot more special than what we ever had, mate."

"Get off it, Col!"

"No, you listen to me. We had great sex going for us back then, but that was it, that's how you were able to up and off the way you did. But I've got someone I really love now, and I'm not going to lose it just because you've got an itch between your legs you can't scratch often enough."

With that, he wrenched himself free, leaving Doyle chained to the ugliness of his words.

A patch of dingy white on the other side of the doorstep became a used envelope, Bodie's scrawl covering the back of it.

Terrific. Just what he really needed: Bodie coming over tomorrow, first thing, to find out for the old man how much progress he'd made. Progress? The only progress he'd made was in going backwards. His hands were shaking as he washed his face, brushed his teeth, did all the nightly ritual that becomes so entrenched in all our lives. Under the bright bathroom light,

he stared at his face in the mirror, counting wrinkles, stopping when the number became depressingly high. Another entrenched habit of his, marking the march of time, fighting it every inch of the way, with his yoghurt and exercise and giving-up smoking, not that it had stopped time from scything through his life. Smoking was another thing he'd given up to join the Force, convinced that if he wanted to have the puff to chase the baddies, he couldn't be puffing away on fags.

And that word made him think of an American he'd seen once, very briefly, so briefly he'd been able to forget all about it, forget about the way his heart had beat a little faster at the sight of the man, gloriously aglow with the pleasure of being blown against the 'cottage' wall by an English fag... He'd buried that memory deeper than the sea, but he'd woken up with wet sheets and foul temper for months after, snapping at everyone, biting Bodie's head off... Wasn't going to think about Bodie, didn't dare think about Bodie, think about the past instead, leave today alone.

He'd been so bloody young, then, when, with the zeal of a true convert, he'd decided to join the police instead of drifting into petty crime the way his dad had, Mum dragging the family all over the country, settling in town after town, until the Law started sniffing around too closely. Swore he would never end up like his Dad, swore blind, but it had been so easy in college, to lift a couple of quid left in someone's jacket, or a book left behind, or a bit of portable equipment... That was what had scared him, seeing himself slipping down the same slope that had claimed his dad, and his younger brother. Oh, definitely the zeal of the convert, for there is nothing more adamant than someone sinking their teeth into a saviour, whether it be religion or authority or cause. He'd thrown over everything to become a copper, to save himself from ending up nothing more than a thief. And it had seemed so easy then, the immortality of the young blinding him to the fact that forever is a very long time. Giving men up had seemed like nothing, not when he could function perfectly well with women, and liked them, too. Except, giving up men wasn't so easy, was it? Breaking off with Colin—a sudden whisper of shiver down his spine, a curling of arousal in his belly, remembering the

taste and feel of Colin filling his mouth, spilling into him, down his throat, inundating him with the taste of man—had been bad enough, but that was still easier than learning not to look, learning not to touch. And learning not to want had been impossible.

Ironic, wasn't it, that the need he had denied to join the Force had ended up being the cause of his being denied getting anywhere with his precious career. One night, one moment's weakness, when he hadn't been able to control the hunger, when he hadn't been able to deny what his body knew it needed: *the lean hardness of a man in me, after all the plunderings of soft femininity that left me hungrier than when I started.* And he'd been beaten up on his way to a gay pub, although the bastard who'd done it swore that Doyle had been coming out of the pub and propositioned him, as queers will, so what was he to do but defend his virtue from an insistent poofter? Of course, a policeman landing in hospital, ribs cracked, face stomped into the concrete, nose and cheekbone broken by the enthusiasm of bover boots, that causes Questions to be asked. He'd cleared himself, the barman swearing that Doyle had never set foot inside the place, but still... The taint was upon him, and unless it came complete with the right school tie to make it all respectable and therefore not really homosexuality at all... Detective Constable he'd been, and they made it very clear that that was precisely where he'd stay.

And then Cowley had descended upon him like the angel Gabriel, offering to take him away from all this, giving him his chance to get the really powerful bastards, not the petty crooks. He'd jumped at the chance, grabbing it with both hands. But that still left the problem of certain wantings that wouldn't be controlled.

So if they wouldn't be controlled, he'd make them go away.

Naked, shivering in the chill, he switched the light off, stumbling into the main room, barking his shins on the chair before his fumbling hands found the bed. Clambering under the covers, he couldn't forget the nights he'd done this, in a flat almost the double of this one, a gigglingly warm Colin waiting for him with tongue and mouth and hands...

But he'd made himself forget all that, the way people make themselves forget things that hurt



too much, or that they simply can't face: the man who worked in the factory supplying gas to the concentration camps forgot that his company produced anything other than paints; the woman who had brutally ostracised the unwed mother forgot her role in it all when the young woman was found suicided; the rapist who forgot that the woman had said no; the sex abuse victim who forgot what the vicar had done to him.

Not forgot, not precisely, but locked away in the fallow corners of the mind along with all the useless memories that are never brought out for dusting: the smell of the nursery school, that first day; the name of the little corner dairy that time you went to Portsmouth on holiday; the colour of the library book that was lost and never returned. Harmless little memories to act as bolster to the memories that could rend, pillows to be sandbags of protection for the conscious mind. He made it as if he'd never been 'that way inclined' in his entire life, remembering only the girl at the cinema, not the boy in his form at school. Remembering only the sweetly smelling charms of women, not the sharpness of male musk that intoxicated him so. And it had worked, albeit leaving the odd foible of a scar behind, his furies and his guilts prime examples of that. And all his dreamless sleeps, blank façade to cover what his waking mind couldn't deal with.

He pulled the covers up over his head for warmth, the movement reminding him of reading under the covers as a child, engrossed in Biggles and Kipling, tearing off on his ripping yarns. So natural, then, to envision himself as 'best friend' of the woman-less manly heroes, so natural to picture himself crawling into their lonely beds with them to make them less alone. And what a sickening lurch in his stomach the first time he'd mentioned his innocent longings to a grown-up and seen the horror on his Mum's face... That had been worse even than the expression on his Sergeant's face, that night in hospital. And an expression he never wanted to have to face again, not when the price paid was the loss of belonging.

The only place he still belonged was with Bodie: ergo, he refused to lose Bodie. Not his Bodie...

But he couldn't lose the memories either,

rampaging through his mind with all the delicacy of army boots. Make or break. He'd finally hit make or break.

A choice. Fulcrum of life, balancing his future against his past with the present in the middle. And this time, he knew full well how long forever lasted—a far smaller number of years than it had been when he'd been young. He was past it, now, as far as being a field agent was concerned, so that left him still convincing everyone he was straight and going in for management and information gathering. In Whitehall, with people he wouldn't want to spit on if they were on fire. Apart from Cowley, and there were times, even with him... Or giving up all his years of working for the Government, giving up all his seniority and finding something to begin all over again with, with the added cross of being publicly gay.

Not much, was it? Not for half a life already gone for good.

He closed his eyes against the shadows around him, let his muscles loosen, his body sag.

And let his heart rule his mind and think about Bodie.

A dangerous thing, that, unless you looked at today as the day he'd opened his very own Pandora's Box and all that was left inside now was his personal Hope—Bodie. Or perhaps Bodie would prove to be his Bitterness. Or Hate. He wasn't entirely sure which way Bodie would react, the only thing certain about him was his sweet tooth. If he were to confess... Bodie might throw him up against the nearest wall and fuck the life out of him, for Doyle was well aware of the fact that Bodie would screw anything if it stood still long enough—and was still alive. Career and prospects were two things very low on Bodie's list of priorities, coming long after surviving and living whatever life was left to its absolute limits, so he cared not a fig for what the authorities and the world said about him. He had nothing to lose, not when you viewed things from Bodie's point of view. And the other reactions? Contempt, for never having the balls to be honest? Pity, for having been so wounded and driven that he had deceived himself as much as everyone else? Or horror, a sudden shying-away from the affection and friendship they had.

Had had, before these three months past.



Things had been getting decidedly rocky between them of late, as exhaustion had worn Doyle down and his id had started making him suffer from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. It had been Bodie he'd taken it out on the most, for obvious reasons.

You always, after all, hurt the one you love.

And that thought got him back up out of bed, padding on bare feet to the small hearth-rug, hunching down, lighting the electric fire, the twin bars slowly turning bright orange-red, the fake flames setting the fake coals on fire. He was bathed in the light, face and legs and arms burnished, chest hair glinting, his back white and blue in the dark light of night-time. He rubbed his forearms, bringing the heat back into them, aware of the heaviness of his sex hanging between his legs, heavy with unspent desire. But there was a part of him scared of bringing himself off, doing it consciously thinking about men for the first time in years. Afraid of what it would bring to the fore and what would catch him unawares. Admitting that you've made a complete bollocks of your life is never an easy thing to do, especially when the only way to undo that is to bollocks up the other half of your life. But the box was open, and if Pandora, with all the ancient gods hadn't been able to close it in time, then no more could Ray Doyle.

He dragged the bedspread over, wrapping it around himself, resettling himself in front of the fire, biting on one thumb nail. The more he worried both the nail and his brain, the more the obvious began to scream for attention. The exhaustion and overwork and disillusion were only the symptoms of this re-awakening of his recalcitrant libido. The cause was entirely different, wore size 8 shoes and went by the name of Bodie. It was difficult—and unhealthy—enough to ignore sexuality, but it was outright impossible when there was a man beside you who had become the centre of your Universe and the barometer with which you measured your happiness. Not to mention the fact that the man constantly felt you up, made blue jokes and generally threw his sensuality in your face.

Christ, to think he'd even been able to suppress his tendencies for this long! He supposed he should be grateful that he hadn't turned into a queer-basher or Bible-thumper, the Mr. Whitehouse of CI5. No, he hadn't turned into

that. But he had turned into a unhappy, sere man, middle-age and all its crises threatening him, bitterness and disillusion gnawing away at his bones, a ghoul feeding on the guilts of the dreams he never dared look at.

Not much, for half a life already gone.

Or, his partner's irrepressible voice piped up, half a life yet to come.

He spread his hands before him, supplicant to the warmth of the fire, filling his hands with the glow of flames that weren't there, worker at an anvil. His artist years long gone, he still thought most clearly in images, not words: in his one hand, he held Whitehall, with its backbiting and corruption, its politicians and power-broker Civil Servants, Permanent Under-secretaries sabotaging good ideas for no other reason than the politician who proposed them was Labour instead of Tory; MI5 squealing for more funding at the cost of CI5, complaining about spheres of influence and overstepping of boundaries, jockeying for position, pushing and shoving for the sake of keeping face and maintaining façades; MI6, still too busy playing James Bond to recognise what was going on in the real world that was frivolously passing them by.

And in his other hand, he held...nothing. No certainties, save the knowledge that he could at least try to grab his share of happiness, snare a plateful of love for himself, before he found himself in his bath-chair, retired out into the country with all the other senile old 'civil servants'. But no Bodie. Not necessarily, for although there was a good chance that Bodie would leap at the chance to screw him, there was another chance.

He might run a mile, even if Doyle never actually said that dread word out loud. Oh, it wasn't that they didn't know that each loved the other, but it was a matter of the whys and wherefores, now. It was one thing to love a mate to whom you owed all nine of your lives, plus a few more, borrowed on account from all your reincarnations yet to come, but it was something else entirely to love your partner as if he were your...well, mate, was the only word that came to mind, with its connotations of both rutting and standing side by side to face the world. Animals mated for life, swans coming back year after year, until suddenly, the pair would disappear, unable to survive without the other. And that was precisely the kind of metaphor that

would drive Bodie miles away, to the second star on the right, straight on till morning.

Always supposing that Bodie was surprised by all this, of course. He wouldn't be at all surprised himself if the rotten bugger hadn't known all this for years...

The knock at the door was the familiar rat-a-tat-tat signal his lunatic partner had stolen from the Secret Seven books. Startled, Doyle straightened, taking a minute to clear the guilty expression from his face. Bloody typical of Bodie to come over in the middle of the night and catch him mooning over him and still dizzy from what he'd discovered about himself.

Rat-a-tat-tat, less politely Enid Blyton, more insistent Maggie Thatcher.

"All right, all right, I'm comin'," he said, loud enough to be heard, not loud enough to waken the lovey-dovey couple next door. "I'm coming!" he snapped. Then, muttering under his breath, with a wry glance down at his turgid prick, "I should be so lucky."

"C'mon, Doyle, it's cold and wet out here and these bags are bloody heavy and I'm starving."

The door groaned open, a grinning Bodie, hair and jacket dripping, framed in the meagre light from the street. "Aw, you shouldn't have bothered getting all dressed up, not for me, Ray. You know I love you no matter what old rag you've thrown on." He took a good look at Doyle's face, recognising all the old signs of turmoil and trouble. "Ray? What's the matter?"

"You wake me up in the middle of the night and you've got the cheek to ask me what's the matter? Stupid git."

"What d'you mean, wake you up? You were never asleep, not with the fire on, you're too bloody mean, worse than Cowley, you are. Anyway, saw you through the window. Ought to make sure your curtains are drawn properly, mate, never know when a Peeping Tom is going to turn up on your doorstep, do you."

"Such as tonight, you mean. Anyway," standing aside to let Bodie in, pointing at the two bulging carrier bags where one sharp corner was winking its way free, "what's all this lot then?"

"Dinner for two from the local chinkies, and milk, tea, sugar, bickies, and all the other necessities that you won't have bothered getting in, right?"

"Right. An' why should I, when you're the one

who's going to scoff the whole lot anyway?" He was very proud of himself and the total normalcy of his voice, keeping up their usual patter as he followed Bodie over to the kitchenette, propping himself up against the doorjamb whilst his partner rummaged through cupboards and drawers.

"Scrooge the Second, that's you. Here, take the cutlery, or is that too much to ask? Go on, I'll bring the nosh and the drinks."

They didn't talk during their supper, letting the silence seep in after too long on the front lines.

"Nice, this," Bodie finally muttered, spoiling it all by burping indelicately.

"Yeh. Been too much running from pillar to post for my liking recently." Then he said it, started what he had no idea how to finish, but he had to tell Bodie. His voice was very small in the brightness of the fire. "Bodie..."

No answer, simply a silence that invited Doyle to fill it with whatever he wanted to say. "Bodie, I've been thinking..."

"Trying to give yourself a strain so you can get a sick line? Won't work, mate, Cowley'd just give you a rollicking for damaging Crown property."

"It's got to that stage, 'asn't it, though, us bein' nothin' but useful gadgets to be used wherever he needs us most. I'm gettin' properly fed up with it an' all. I mean, we haven't stopped for three months, an' what do we have to show for it? A handful of small fry stuck behind bars until their fancy barristers get them out and a lot of aches and pains for our trouble. We're not making a difference any more, Bodie. Not the blindest fuckin' bit of a soddin' difference."

"Give it a rest, Ray, we've been through all this. If it's getting on your goat that much, then it's time to throw in the towel, isn't it? Or tell Cowley you're burned out, make him give you a breather. But stop moaning about it, for fuck's sake."

"Yeh, well, after I do the big confession, he might not give me a chance to resign."

He wished the words unsaid the moment they left his lips, but they just sat there instead, grinning at him, like a rabid Cheshire cat.

"Something you ought to tell me, Ray old son? Gone over to the other side, have you?"

"Could say that." Deep breath. Hold it. Let it go slowly, let the words come out. "I'm gay."

Bodie nearly choked on the last bit of spring roll. "You what?" he said, finally, eyes streaming, face red. "Come on you all of a sudden or something? Or had you just never noticed before?"

"Nah, always been there. But I stopped letting myself see it, cos I wanted to get on in life and you know how far queers get in this line of work."

"About as far as I've got, and I'm only bi. So come on," a gleeful rubbing of hands, a pantomime leer, "you tell your Uncle Bodie all about it then. What brought this on? And don't spare my blushes."

"Will you be bloody serious for five minutes, Bodie? Look, this might be a breeze for you, you've never given a piss in a pot what anyone thought of you, never wanted to do better for yourself. But I did, always have done. Wanted out, wanted to be different from my old man. And..."

"Back then, the only way to do it was to pretend that you were straight, right? So that's what you did. Go down the cottages a lot did you, nice anonymous blow jobs in the toilets, or did you let them fuck you up against the wall?"

"You bastard, get your mind out of the gutter for a minute. Listen, Bodie, I've given up half my life for this fuckin' job, so don't you go making it into some sordid little secret that doesn't mean anything. Means something to me..."

"Half your life to save the world? Well, hip, hip, hooray. Bring on the violins and the bleeding hearts while you're at it, mate. Just because you didn't have the balls to face up to the truth..."

"It was because I *did* have the balls to face up to it that I forced myself into a square hole, Bodie. Knew that I wouldn't get past Detective Constable if I didn't keep my nose clean, and that meant no shirt lifting, not even a hint of it. Couldn't even look at a bloke, in case someone got suspicious. I've spent years, Bodie, fucking *years* pretendin' to be someone I'm not. Pretendin' to *myself* to be someone I'm not."

"And when did you—what's it the Yanks say? Oh, yeh, and when did you find yourself then?"

Doyle lowered his head, temper rising like a louring storm. "Tonight, if you must know."

Silence, ponderous and heavy. Then—"Christ, mate, sorry. Thought you'd been brood-

ing on this, you know, thought it explained your rotten temper this past while. Thought you'd known for ages and this was you just getting round to tellin' me. Didn't know it'd just hit you." He stopped for a moment, using the drinking of his beer to give them both a breathing space, trying to give the tension enough time to fade, at least a little. "Seriously though, what brought it on? My lovely body?"

"Yeh, actually." It was worth the risk of saying it for the expression on Bodie's face. "Some old dear heard your loving farewells to me this morning and spread the word round the Square that I was as queer as a three pound note. So that got me thinkin', and on top of all of it, I've been sick of the job for ages, then when I went into the pub tonight... Bloke who used to be my lover came in an' it was as if I'd never been away."

"What d'you mean, never been away? Thought you hadn't realised you were gay?"

"Don't you ever listen to me? I told you, knew that I liked blokes when I was still a teenager. Then when I went to college, I got involved with Colin, even moved in with him. We had a place the spittin' image of this, in an area like this. An' seeing him again, Christ, I went right back to being the way I used to be." He saw the look, explained a bit more. "Back to being a kid before I decided to join the police."

"And in the bad old days, you couldn't be a poof and a policeman at the same time, so you had to give one of them up. So bein' the selfish little bastard you are, it was this poor sod, Colin." And he grinned at his pun, turning the mood topsy-turvy, making everything between them all right. "And then you pretended you were the local vicar and convinced yourself that you didn't even fancy men any more. Right?"

"Dead bloody right."

"So now what? Or haven't you got that far? You're not going to take up with this Colin bloke, are you?"

Doyle wondered if Bodie even knew how much jealousy there was in his voice, or how much possessiveness on his face. "Chance'd be a fine thing. He's got someone, not that I'd call the little boyfriend a man."

"Ooh, ducky, you must tell me all about him! Is he absolutely divine?"

That got Doyle laughing, finally breaking him out of his steadfast gloom. "Bit precious, though.

You know the sort, too young—well, very early twenties, anyway—bit plump, lovely smile, nice hair, angel-faced and hard as nails, and he has Colin wrapped round his little finger.”

“Christ, don’t tell me even gays go through mid-life crisis by chasing after someone half their age?”

A sudden dangerous glitter of angry eyes. “Not all of them, no. Some of us finally can’t go on pretending any more, that’s all.”

Neatly, Bodie sidestepped the abrupt flare of hostility, sliding straight past it on to the friendship they’d built over such a long period of time. “Which brings us back to what are you going to do now? I mean, you can stay on with our mob, Cowley’s not about to throw anyone out because they’re queer—”

“Well he couldn’t, could he? Lose half the squad that way.”

“And lose the other half if he got rid of the loonies. Yeh, well, you could stay on as an instructor or administrator, cos let’s face it, you’re gettin’ too old for the streets.”

“Oh thanks a lot. Make me feel good, why don’t you?”

“Rather keep you alive, mate. You’re getting slow—even I’m slowing down a bit, and I’m younger as well as handsomer. Time for us both to be off the streets and Cowley knows it. Bet you a pound to a penny, the minute some of the new lot are experienced enough, he’ll have us down the Bowels, feeding those fucking computers.”

“No bet, mate, no contest. Not sure that I want to be shut in all day, though.”

“Well,” Bodie leaned over to him, putting on his best upper-crust face and plummy voice, “there is always the Palace, you know. They’re always looking for a few good men, aren’t they, petal?”

“Don’t knock it, mate. Money’s good, not to mention the work conditions and if me bein’ queer goes on my security record, it might be all that’s on offer.” He looked at Bodie, face alight with suspicion. “But you’re taking this very well, all things considered. You’d twigged before, ’adn’t you?”

“Be a liar if I said I hadn’t wondered. Nothing specific, just undercurrents sometimes, signals that I didn’t think you even knew you were sending. Or sometimes, it was the way you looked at

me or camped it up with me.” It was his turn to take a deep breath, hold it, let it out slowly, jump in with both feet. “You fancy me something chronic, don’t you, Ray?”

Doyle didn’t know where to put himself. To say yes was to invite Bodie to bed, to say no was to push him away. And although his cock was screaming, ‘take me, I’m yours’, his other head was screaming caution just as loudly. He didn’t want to be hurt, didn’t want to have a quick leg-over and then nothing—at least he didn’t think so. A great one for worrying a subject to death, he’d barely had time to start chewing this one over, let alone make any decisions. And then Bodie made his decision for him, a large hand snaking confident as the Serpent under the folds of his cocooning bedspread, enveloping his cock in matching heat. He could feel how perfectly he filled Bodie’s palm, could feel how hot and hard he was compared to the softness of Bodie’s skin. And Bodie’s other hand was taking his, leading him on, taking him to explore the smoothness of fabric, the parallel pattern made by zip. He heard the zip come down, felt his hand move, under Bodie’s, to do it, felt himself shake Bodie’s grasp off to dart forward, faster, and touch Bodie himself.

There. He sighed, relief and passion and a feeling of rightness commingled in that sound. Christ, but he’d missed this, both in the abstract of having a man and in the very personal reality of it being Bodie. In the palm of Bodie’s hand, he had become nothing more than a fascicle of nerves, sensation flooding him. He buried his head in Bodie’s shoulder, opening his mouth soundlessly, sucking on flesh that tasted, smelled of Bodie. Was pulled close, had Bodie’s body pressed hard against him, overbalancing them until they had tumbled to the floor, Bodie thrusting hard against him, hands hard under Doyle’s hips, cock even harder against Doyle’s cock. All he could do was gasp for breath and swim in the sea of sensation, losing himself in the purest delight of being with a man again, of having Bodie. A subtle shift, a flip of awareness, and he was complete in himself, welcoming the return to what he should have never left. He spread his legs wide, wrapping them around Bodie, thrusting up as Bodie thrust down, dark clothes rubbing on his own denuded skin, na-



ked cock on naked cock. It was wonderful, hearing Bodie's breath so ragged and shaken, every juddering breath wracking them on pleasure. Bodie's finger found him, whetted with spit, pressing into him, fucking him as much as the frantic need of the moment allowed. Doyle turned liquid with pleasure, his cum letting Bodie slide smoother and faster over him, adding to the darker man's lust-filled pleasure.

He lay flat on his back, holding Bodie tight and close to him, rocking with the motion of Bodie's body whilst he himself floated on the after-glow. Bodie's eyes were closed, body arched with rapture, then he felt the stickiness blossom on his belly to mingle with his own spilled seed. Bodie was heavy on him, the once-familiar weight of a man pinning him to the floor, the bedspread a buffer against the cold. Gently, his own eyes wide open, he stroked Bodie's hair, fingers dappling in the small waves, the dampness of sweat on his nape. He was content enough to be silent, all the confusions in him slowly settling, a Christmas snow-ball coming to rest to show tranquillity. Shaken by the day, more shaken by the night, he was finding his path, beginning to know where his feet were going to lead him. Somewhere he could take Bodie with him, somewhere they could be together. Seemed so right, that he should come back to himself at last, only to find Bodie already standing there, waiting. A chuckle tickled his throat, wry amusement coming to rescue him from raving sentimentality once more. *Oh, yeh, you've got it bad, thinking like some blushing heroine from a bloody Mills & Boon. But it is right that he's here, now that I'm finally facing that there's nothing left for me worth sacrificing who I am for.*

He dropped a small kiss on the top of Bodie's head, hands moving down to stroke the breadth of shoulder, rising and falling with each of Bodie's breaths. There was a ripple in the muscle under his touch, then movement of the body pressing down on his. A fluid moment, then Bodie was lying beside him, arm up to cover his eyes from the brightness of the electric fire, other hand lower, covering the vulnerability of his cock.

"God, that was fuckin' fantastic, mate. Quite the little firecracker, eh? If that's you out of practice, I can't wait till you've got your hand back

in." A filthy chuckle, a pointed grope of Doyle's rear. "So to speak, eh?"

Doyle rolled over onto his side, going up on one elbow, the better to gaze down into Bodie's face. "Romantic sod, aren't you? Small wonder none of the girls—or blokes—would take you on. Was good, though, wasn't it? Should've known we'd be perfect together. I mean, stands to reason, doesn't it? You and me. Hephaiston and Alexander. David and Jonathan."

"Bill and Ben, the flowerpot men. How does it feel to be a pansy again then, Ray?"

Doyle grinned at him, fingers busy arguing with Bodie's over the minor matter of just how many shirt buttons should come undone. "Ooh, it's ever so nice," he camped, then, lowering his voice, dropping the act, "'specially since it was with you, love." He was coming closer, eyes warm and smiling as he leant down to have his first kiss.

And Bodie turned away.

With alacrity all the more startling amidst the languor, Doyle scrambled to his feet, candlewick billowing around him like a burnoose, covering him up. "Tea, then, mate?" he said, voice nowhere near calm, perilously close to betraying him as he had just betrayed himself to Bodie's casual, callous sexuality. He jabbered on, covering up his weakness, giving himself something to do to stave off the emotional reaction. "After you going to all the effort of bringing it, least I can do is make it, isn't it?"

Bodie, at least as uncomfortable, desperate to escape before this could turn into a scene, before emotions could spill over and complicate life beyond all endurance, was coming to his feet, tucking in and zipping up, erasing every sign that they had ever been intimate. "No, no, but thanks all the same. I really should be getting home, catch a forty winks before I have to go out on this bloody consulting game Cowley's got me doing for some Arab embassy. Thanks for dinner..."

Awkward silence as both remembered who had brought dinner, and both remembered numberless nights that had ended up as one night stands and the difficult moment of saying goodnight to the girl without insulting her or getting her hopes up.

"Shall I report in to Central, or does Cowley want me to wait until you can pop over again?"



Bodie's gratitude was palpable: he'd obviously been worried that Doyle was going to be difficult, was going to turn all limp-wrist and lavender on him. "He said to give your reports to me, unless something urgent crops up, then you've to get in touch with him himself."

Not-quite able to look at each other, then the shuffle of feet, the restless silence before embarrassment became terminal. “Best be off then, hadn’t you?” Doyle finally said, keeping the disappointment inside where it wouldn’t make things worse than they already were. If he could keep things where they stood now, then at least when next they saw each other, they could pretend that tonight had been nothing more than lust given rein and a quick fuck for both of them. And give him time to lick his wounds in private and sort out what the hell he wanted out of life in the first place.

But for all his rationalisations, his eyes were hollow with misery as he watched Bodie walk out the door.

The unholy clatter of a beer lorry being unloaded, dozens and dozens of bottles rattling in crates and kegs thumping to the ground, woke him up, rudely. At least the sun was out, watery greyness filtering in through the curtains, casting shadowy patterns of dirt upon glass, lace against curtains, the floral pattern of the fabric overlaying it all, the whole *millefeuille* of it finally coming to rest upon the wall, with its accusatory pale patches where the pictures had hung. It took him a long time to get up out of bed, the prompting of his bladder far more effective than the nagging of the clock and his job.

Ah, yes, the job. He pondered that, in the kitchenette, making tea with all the stuff Bodie had brought. That started him off down a track he didn't want to follow, not yet, not while the pain of disillusion was still seeping raw. If it hadn't been so pathetic, he'd have laughed at the picture of a man leaning on 40, finally giving it all up and coming out of the closet, only to find that he was supposed to leave the loving still neatly hidden away.

The clicking-off of the kettle brought him back to the job in hand and there was some measure of relief with the distraction. He'd better think about the bloody job before he went

outside, get it all sorted out in his mind. His real life would have to take a back seat to Richard Duncan's, for the time being. And if he were really lucky, Richard Duncan could keep him occupied long enough to get the disaster with Bodie into some semblance of perspective again. Who knew—he might even be able to come up with some way of rescuing the whole situation with Colin as well. But better to concentrate on the job—that wasn't too depressing. As long as he didn't think about how little a difference he was making, as long as he didn't think about sitting behind a desk in Whitehall, as long as he didn't think about how Cowley would react to his announcement. Perhaps he should send a card, thick cream parchment with gold trim, elegant black calligraphy: *Raymond Aloysius Doyle is proud to announce his formal coming out. Tea and sympathy at 3 p.m., R.S.V.P.* Oh, yeh, that was definitely the way to go.

But in the mean time, until he ended up on the dole, he *did* have a job to do. There wasn't a snowball's that he'd be able to infiltrate the drug/weapons group as Richard Duncan, not unless he could persuade Colin to cover for him and as that boyfriend of his had heard his name, then he'd have to bring Barry in on it as well, which didn't exactly auger well for the success of the oppo. He could always play himself, stretch the truth a bit, claim he was a good copper gone wrong, kicked out because of what he was. Which might not be fiction soon—Cowley hated, with a passion, his agents lying to him. You were more likely to be fired for that than any nefariousness. But the idea of living here, for however long the operation took, as a gay man, that appealed. It'd be like dipping his toe in the swimming baths, give him a taste of what it would be like. And whether it was even something he wanted to do. After all, he had too many years of living in deception behind him to be sure if he could even make so radical a change, despite what his psyche was demanding.

The door went, an insistent peal of the bell. Not Bodie—he wouldn't be back until Cowley threw him back in here, too scared that there'd be the scene to end all scenes, his partner throwing himself at Bodie's feet, doing a wonderful impersonation of Juliet. So that left...postman, with a parcel for the couple who used to live

here. Or a neighbour—*i.e.*, the ratty old gossip who'd started this all off in the first place.

It was his neighbour from upstairs, a lovely black woman, introducing herself as Carmel from upstairs, wishing him well and welcoming him to the Square. He almost put the moves on her, but then habit was superseded by the burgeoning desire to try out being himself and not what his career had dictated him to be.

"So, d'you know anyone round here? Sorry, don't mean to pry, it's just that I'm the local health visitor an' I sometimes forget to switch off."

"Not to worry, I don't mind. Actually, a bloke I went to college with lives in the Square, so I'll look him up again. Haven't seen him in years, though, if you don't count bumping into him for two minutes at the flash pub last night."

Someone who had already finished college could be only the one person in the Square. "You mean Colin? Colin Russell?" He could see it written all over her face, the question of whether or not he knew about Colin, and if he did, did he know about Barry, and if he didn't, should she tell him—and how *did* you tell someone his old mate was queer? "Did you know him well?"

He grinned at her, winking. "Very. You might even say intimately, if you were being naughty. And don't worry, Carmel, I also bumped into that vixen of a boyfriend of his."

"Oh, you mustn't mind Barry. He's still a bit confused, a bit unsettled about which lifestyle to pick."

*Me and him both.* "Well, he's young yet," so what's my excuse?, "he'll get himself sorted out eventually."

"But in the meantime, Colin has to go through the growing pains all over again. Well, I had best be off, now, I've got too many cases on today as it is. It's lovely to meet you...?"

"Ray," he answered, after a moment. *Not everyone who had a chance to try a life out for size before deciding whether or not to buy it.* "Ray Doyle. I'll walk out with you, you can point me in Colin's direction."

"It's lunchtime, and I know he's out, so that means he'll either be over at the tea-bar or at the stall with Barry."

Now there was a prospect singularly unappealing: facing the pair of them, and in public

at that. Oh, well, he had decided he wanted to try the lifestyle out, hadn't he?

Hovering in the background, Doyle stood back, thinking, while Colin and Barry indulged in another of their famous spats. "I'm telling you, Barry, yes, he is someone I used to know and no, I'm not going to take up with him again."

Doyle was appreciating the slim body, strength and suppleness obvious under the open jacket and closely fitting jeans. He still wanted Colin, wanted to bed him again, relive and enjoy some of the best of his past, but he could control it, now that the first mind-numbing shock of discovery was past, now that he might have—he hoped—Bodie. But that didn't stop him appreciating the view, and revelling in his freedom to enjoy it and to stand there, watching, not running away to sublimate it in a woman or work.

"And anyway," Colin was saying, unaware of the approval his body was garnering, "what's all this carry on about? You take the hump when I get upset when you go off with someone, but now it's all right for you to cause a fuss because I was speaking to someone I knew when you were still in nursery?"

Sullen expression on pleasant face, enough to curdle milk. "E seemed to think there was somethin' between the pair of you, didn't he? An' you know wot they say."

"Yeh. You can't believe everything you hear. Look, Barry, you know perfectly well I've no intention of breaking off, so what's behind all this?"

"You an' 'im are the ones with experience, so you tell me."

"So that's it. You're not just jealous, you're worried that I might be tired of all the aggro of living with you and I might want someone who knows how to cope with a proper relationship."

"An' if that's the case, then don't look at me, Barry. 'Lo, Colin."

"I'll go off an' leave you two to it, shall I?" Said so sweetly, but with such vicious intent.

"Oh, stop bein' such a stupid little prat, will you? Me and Col aren't goin' to run off and fuck each other blind, so for Christ's sake, grow up will you. Could do with having a word with both of you, if you could bear to spend two minutes in my company without throwing a fit."

"Yeh, well I'm busy, got a stall to run."

"An' I used to be a barrow boy, so I know that all you have to do is get someone to keep an eye on it for you for half-an-hour while you have your dinner, right? Come on, I'll make it worth your while—I'll buy us all lunch. What's best, pub, caff, Chinese?"

The last voice he'd expected to hear put in its tuppenceworth. "If he's paying, pick the dearest—he owes me a fortune in lunches."

"Bodie, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Had the afternoon free, thought I'd pop over and see how you were settling in. Occurred to me that there might be a couple of unforeseen complications, as the Cow would say."

*And make what you will of that*, Doyle thought to himself, following Colin and Barry to the Chinese restaurant, noting the way they had automatically split into couples, trying not to crown Bodie one for being bastard enough to pretend that last night hadn't even happened. Now all he had to do was undo the damage he'd done to Colin and Barry, persuade them to provide him with a cover and juggle whatever the hell Bodie was up to.

"No point in beating around the bush, is there?" he said, discreetly showing the two men his ID. "Recognise that, do you?"

"I thought you lot did terrorists? If that's wot you're lookin' for, you won't find many round 'ere. Closest thing we've got to one of them bunch is old Lou Beal. An' I wouldn't take her on, not if it's just the two of you."

"Barry, is it?" Bodie asked, all good manners and smoothness, the velvet glove over iron fist. "It's not just terrorists we go after, it's anyone who doesn't fit as a Police matter but isn't halloved enough for the other departments. We," he leaned forward, smiling quite sweetly and with great enthusiasm, making Barry suddenly nervous of this nutter and appreciative of Doyle, "get the really nasty ones."

"So who are you after now?" Colin, to Doyle.

"That'd be telling, wouldn't it?"

"But if you don't tell, we can hardly help, can we?"

"What I need you two to do is not blow my cover. The fact that you know me, Col, 'ad to change who I was coming in as, an' unless we end up tabling the whole operation, we need you two to keep quiet about CI5 and all the rest of

it. Let people know that you knew me in college, then lost track of me when I started to get in with the wrong crowd."

"Like the 'eavy team 'ere, for instance?" Barry said.

Bodie bristled, very convincingly, at Barry, actually quite enjoying the whole by-play that was going on, everyone either jealous of or fancying everyone else. He hadn't played like this in years, not since he'd left the Forces and put on mufti. It could be fun, taking Ray places and watching all eyes turn to him. Even pretty Barry—whom Bodie could see the point of, even if Doyle seemed to think he was a right wally and ugly to boot—was having problems keeping his attention to himself, eyes wandering down to stare at the open neck of Doyle's shirt and the hair curling there, or to the purse of his lips as he bit into a bit of food that was too hot even for him.

"Don't push me, son," he said, seeing as how Doyle was too busy choking down water to answer Barry. "Look, we can tell you this much. There's a new mob trying to move in on this area, and they're pushing drugs on the kids, and then using the money to buy nasty little presents to leave in the shops at Christmas. Now, you can either help by keeping your mouth shut, or you can blab all over town and warn these bastards that we're after them."

"Can do one better than that, if you want."

Bodie looked politely disbelieving, whilst Doyle warned him off with his eyes. Doyle might not like Colin's little friend, but he didn't want to have to explain to Cowley precisely how his cover got blown sky-high. "An' how could you help..."

"Wait a minute," Colin butted in. "I thought you'd given the drugs up? And no, it doesn't make a difference if it's light stuff or the hard stuff, you said you'd given it up!"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Col, I did give it up. Wasn't worth the money, wasn't worth the risk. But I can still tell you who the suppliers on the street are. Can tell you who pushes it round the market, can even tell you the names of some of the West End blokes who're selling the stuff to the pushers. An' I can tell you who in this Square to watch, because 'e just had a very interesting trip, paid for by the local 'eavy team an' come into a ton of money, unexpected, like."

"Den would never push drugs, Barry. He's not the most honest of blokes, but no-one in the Square is."

"Wot d'you mean no-one's 'onest? Just cos we don't 'ave the money to afford your middle-class morals an' middle-class attitudes—"

"Who's Den?" They both turned to look at Bodie, tacitly dropping their argument.

"Den Watts, runs the Queen Vic. Been on the take for years, went to school with the blokes wot run all the crooked deals round 'ere now," Barry said with the nonchalance of familiarity.

Colin was staring at him, taken aback by something he'd never bothered to see before.

"The usual games 'aven't been doing so well, wot wiv people 'aving no money, so they've been gettin' into the drug game, cos they know that if it comes down to it, the kids'll steal or mug if they 'ave to, but they'll come up with the money to get their fix. Guaranteed income for the 'ard nuts, keeps the big wigs in business an' keeps them off the backs of villains like Den."

"Dennis Watts, then. I'll get onto it right away, Ray and I'll be back this evening. See you."

"He always leave as quick as that?"

"Usually can't see Bodie for dust." Colin looked at him sharply for that, hearing the undertone of bitterness, but before he could say anything, Barry piped up.

"You said you used to be a copper. Did you get tossed on your ear cos you're gay?"

Doyle stared at the froth decorating the sides of his beer glass, the patterns as delicate and pretty as lace. He raised his eyes, looking at Colin, offering explanations more to himself than either man with him. "Not really. They had their suspicions, but it wasn't as if they could prove anything. So I moved on to CI5, where the slate was clean an' I could keep the rest of it quiet, as long as I packed in all the gay stuff. I'd never been openly queer anyway, even though I lived with Colin when we were both at college."

"Livin' with octopus 'ere an' you're tryin' to tell me that no-one knew you were gay? Pull the other one, mate."

"There were hardly any openly queer blokes at our college, so no-one gave it a thought. Anyway, lots of people shared digs to save money, an' we never did anything outside our closed door that could tip anyone off." He stifled his grin, enjoying the cat he was just about to set

amongst the pigeons—especially the pigeon called Barry. "Just the same as you and Col, when you think about it."

Contempt, and an edge of possessive pride in the face of an out-done rival coloured Barry's face and words. "That's not 'ow me an' Colin are, mate. Everyone knows we're living together, an'—"

"So you've told a couple of people, oh, I am impressed. But apart from that, it's precisely the same as we were in the dark ages."

Doyle was watching them like the hawk he was, cataloguing, learning, measuring. Seeing what it was to love someone and not be loved in return, watching how Colin dealt with the same situation he was in himself.

"Ow the hell can it be the same? You two went sneakin' round, pretendin' to be straight..."

"Col didn't exactly prance about, but he never lied about it the way I did. It was me that wanted a career that stopped me from lettin' on that I was gay. But you know what I'm on about, so don't come the innocent with me, pal, an' don't try to change the subject."

"You keep your nose to yourself, mate. This is between me an' Col, it's none of your naffin' business."

Doyle grinned cheerfully malicious, Barry reminding him of a terrier protecting its own: all teeth and bristling hair. "That's more or less what Colin said last night an' I'm willin' to listen to 'im, so don't get yourself in a tizzy over nothing. All I'm saying is, that as an observer, mind, an outsider, you two don't look like lovers to me. Oh, yeh, everyone knows about the pair of you, but you two behave like maiden aunts, the way you never touch each other. It's exactly the same as it was with me and Col years ago: sneakin' around an' all behind closed doors."

"You don't know nuffin', so shut the fuck up before I ram your tonsils out your arse along wiv your teeth—"

Doyle had time to be surprised by the viciousness and aggression coiled tightly in Barry, before Colin spoke up, metaphorically stepping between them. His voice was less than totally steady and the veiled hurt and defeat in it pierced even Barry's livid temper. "Yeh, but it is the same thing, Barry, just the reason that's different. Then, it was because we didn't want



the trouble that went with people knowing, didn't want being called pansies and fairies and getting jumped by yobbos. Now...the people round here more or less accept us being gay, but keeping it all on the qt—well, it's a way for you not to make a commitment to me, isn't it? Apart from the sex, you act as if you're simply sharing the flat and nothing more."

“That’s not true! An’ even if it is, you’re the one who insists I pay rent to you...”

“I want you to pay your *share* of the rent, Barry, the same way any other working couple does it. But you don’t want to be one half of a couple, do you? You’re the one who wants to be able to waltz off with anyone who strikes your fancy. But if you let what we have go beyond the bedroom, you wouldn’t be able to do that any more, would you, cos people would know and talk and remind you that you’ve made promises to someone else.” He looked at him, as sadly as Doyle had stared at Bodie’s departing back. Barry looked ready to keep on fighting, and Doyle recognised the weary retreat in Colin’s expression: it seemed Ray already knew some of the ways of coping, when you loved and weren’t needed. Colin was getting to his feet, digging in his pocket to pay the bill Doyle had apparently forgotten. “And in the mean time, I’ve got work to do. Walk me back to the flat, Ray?” He smiled, quite melancholy: continued, “We’ve a lot of years to catch up on, haven’t we?” He reached out, touching Doyle’s broken cheek for the first time, lightly, as if wary of doing more damage, as if there was already enough pain for both of them. “And by the looks of it, those years have been what the Chinese would call interesting.”

Bodie didn't come back that evening, but the 'phone rang, Central telling him that Bodie had been put on to cover while Donaldson had an impacted wisdom tooth pulled out and that Doyle's instructions from Cowley were to stay put and hurry up with the information. There were some very interesting patterns developing in the drug movements across London and his boss wanted to find out about them. So he settled in, two full days of being Ray Doyle, good guy gone wrong and queer to boot, gathering information, watching all the ones Barry had fingered and coming up with some very interesting stuff indeed, not least of which was a

certain Mr. Watts' trip to a country which boasts more drugs than water.

He would walk around the square, passing the time of day with the locals, talking to Colin, sparring with Barry who was still after his blood, even if he had buried the hatchet enough to help get the buggers who were pushing to kids like his youngest sister. Not that the young man had any time for a bugger he thought was trying to push in between him and Colin, though. But it was fun to talk to him, pushing and prodding him, feeding the jealousy and possessiveness that was there. It was nice to know he was still attractive, that he wasn't so old he wouldn't be seen as a rival.

It went without saying, of course, that Bodie showed up out of the blue—after several days silence—on the dot of tea-time, although to give credit where credit was due, he'd brought food with him again, from the fish restaurant this time, half the vinegar-drenched chips eaten long before they made it all the way across the square to Doyle's flat.

“Watcher, mate,” Doyle said, not noticing just how much the East End had permeated both skin and language, taking him back to what he had been before. There was a moment of intense awkwardness, this first moment alone after the emotional and sexual tangle of the night Bodie had refused Doyle’s kiss. But then Bodie grinned, holding the brown-paper-wrapped food out as if it were a gift to the gods.

“Nectar, this is, Ray, pure bloody nectar. Best cod an’ chips I’ve had since Liverpool. Remember that time?” he said, moving around with brisk efficiency, the old routine between them unchanged, despite all the changes that were clamouring between them.

Until Doyle stood behind him, close, terribly close, so that Bodie stumbled into him, all unsuspecting.

And felt the hardness taut in Doyle's jeans and the heat of his body as it flared against Bodie's smooth bulk. It began all over again, a grain of sand gathering other grains to it until it was the expanse of the desert and just as heated, the ground shifting constantly under their feet.

The awareness was there between them, all through the chatter and shop-talk of that meal, that the inevitable was going to happen: they were going to end up having sex again. It was



there in every less-than-innocent glance, in every 'accidental' touch when they both reached for something, or in the brush of thigh against thigh as they sat close by each other on a settee that was big enough to seat three with some room to spare. It was there in every sentence that fell away into silent staring, and in every word that ended with a tongue-tip moistening lips, adding to the allure.

A spring was poking into Doyle, and he made a mental note to make sure that he wasn't lying on it when they got going. It was that simple, no more soul-searching, no more analysis, not when the answer was so well known to both of them. The acknowledgment crept between them, that Doyle, like Colin, would settle for the sex, if it was that or nothing. *Half a loaf, and all that...*, he thought to himself, his jeans already uncomfortably tight. He'd settle for a quick mutual wank on the sofa or a scramble on the floor, if that was all that was on offer. Not quite what he wanted, but it'd do. And it was early days yet, still fledgling time, when he had barely found his feet, was still trying all this out, getting used to what he should never have given up. Time enough for love, later, if Bodie didn't run from him, if Bodie wouldn't let the feelings slide from friendship into something more. But for now, there was the heat of the body beside him, a hand stroking his thigh, Bodie turning to cover him, pressing him into the sofa and he was beyond even noticing the spring that was digging into him, as he felt Bodie's mouth on his neck, biting and sucking whilst his hands were stroking and squeezing.

This time, they both ended up naked, clothes all over the place, and Bodie was lying as he had after the first time, except this time, Bodie was on the settee and they were far from finished yet. Doyle's erection was rubbing against the hardness of Bodie's shin, the froth of hair there teasing him with its light touch. And his mouth, his mouth was open, wet, laving the length of Bodie's cock with a skill that had been buried, not lost. He was almost drunk on the smell and taste of Bodie, intoxicated by the quintessential strength personified by the rampant cock. His tongue slipped under the fore-skin, silking it back to bare the head to his sight. He opened his mouth wider, taking the head in, groaning in pleasure at taking Bodie in. His

tongue caressed the flange of the head, then the vein with its rhythm of Bodie's heart, and he was swallowing, pulling Bodie in deeper, until his nose was being tickled by the prickle of hair and his chin was pressing into the fragility of balls.

There were noises coming from Bodie, small sounds of helpless hedonism, involuntary little thrusts of his hips, pushing himself in and out of Doyle's tight-kissing mouth. Doyle sucked on him, his hand playing with Bodie's balls, rolling them between his fingers, feeling them jump with the leap and pulse of Bodie's pleasure. His other hand was splayed, fingers wide, on the sharp jut of hip and the fineness of skin, the large vein there beating in echo of the one that he was tonguing. He could feel the ripple of Bodie's belly, felt the pleasure peak in the other man's body, drank deep of the lifeseed plashing down the back of his throat. The cock in his mouth stayed hard, his tongue caressing it, his mind glad that Bodie didn't become hyper-sensitive after. He nuzzled away, worshipping with his body, loving the sex and the man. And not wanting to pull away, for when he did, he knew that it would be all harsh reality again, Bodie sitting up and complimenting him like some stranger he'd picked up for the night.

Instead, Bodie's hands were on his hair, carding through the curls that he refused to cut off for the sake of paltry fashion. "Shouldn't've done that, mate," he heard Bodie say, and tried to close his ears, not wanting to hear it, not wanting to hear Bodie say that even this was more than he was willing to risk in the emotional morass that lay in wait for them.

"Shouldn't've, Ray. Shouldn't swallow like that."

He let go of Bodie then, sitting up, averting his face, wiping his lips and chin, licking his fingers clean, silently defiant. "Why?" he finally said. "Afraid it'll turn me into a frog or a bleedin' fairy? Too late, mate, it's already happened."

"Nah, not worried about you turning anything awful—you couldn't get any worse, could you? No, Ray," the gentle stroke of his hands on the soft hair of forearm giving lie to the unfeeling calm of his voice, "you shouldn't suck a bloke off like that, not nowadays. Christ, mate, you're not that innocent that you haven't heard of AIDS, so don't look at me like that."

“Shite, I never even thought of that. Had some french letters in case we ever did the other, but never thought you might... Was so desperate to have you...”

“Yeh, well you have been out of the game for a while and old habits die hard, eh? Fucking equals durex, but when was the last time you sucked someone off, eh?” Doyle watched the expression change on Bodie’s face as the rhetorical question burst full-blown in his mind, becoming something that he had to know. Not that Bodie was going to ask himself why. “Colin, was it?”

“No,” a shake of Doyle’s head, as deeply concealed memories meandered, ghostly faded, through his mind. “There were a couple of times after that, when I couldn’t handle pretending to be straight as a die. But not for years, Bodie, too many bloody years. And yeh, you’re right, I should’ve put something on you.”

"We'll remember next time."

All bulldog tenacity, Doyle latched on to that. 'Next time', Bodie had said, even if the man hadn't seemed to have heard himself make that promise. Next time...

“Now come here, you, let me take care of that for you...” And Bodie pulled him close, large hands pressing into the small of his back, rocking Doyle against himself, one hand sliding lower to play with the opening to Ray’s body. “That’s it, mate, let yourself come, make it feel good, yeh, that’s it. Rub your cock on me, fuck yourself on me, c’mon, fuck us, let me have that cock...”

He came with the sound of Bodie crooning dirty words in his ear, Bodie's hands on him, Bodie's body under his. Afterwards, he lay limply sated, listening to his heart slow to match Bodie's, basking in the simplicity of holding and being held. *Next time...* That kept all the woes at bay, making it so easy to simply drift along and let life happen, for once not running himself ragged trying to control the world and everyone in it. Languid, he rubbed his cheek on the satin of Bodie's chest, a small fist of nipple rising to press into him. He flicked his tongue at it, enjoying the responsiveness and the slow fall back to the nitty-gritty of reality. He was quite content, for if there was something he was good at, it was making things invisible, so he didn't even see the need in himself, whether it

was to love men or to kiss and make it more than just ‘good mates’ sex. He didn’t even flinch when Bodie eased him aside and got up, going into the bathroom to wash Ray’s musk off.

By the time Bodie came back through, the fire was on, his clothes were folded neatly on the couch and a fully-dressed Ray Doyle was in the kitchenette doing the washing-up.

“You off then?” he asked over his shoulder, taking casual to new heights, not looking at Bodie, but listening to every rustle that signalled him getting dressed.

"Suppose so. Got anything else to tell Cowley?"

"Just what I told you over supper. Be another few days before there'll be anything else. Bit slow to accept newcomers round here."

A long pause, with nothing to fill it but the swish of water and the whisper of clothing being donned. Then, Bodie's voice—"You all right, mate?"

“Why shouldn’t I be? This is a bloody dawdle, your old granny could do it.”

"I'm not asking about the job. I'm asking about...you know, all this. The sex an' everything."

"It's not like you to be this concerned, Bodie."

"Yeh, well, you're not much, but you're better than being partnered by some of the weak-kneed kids that Cowley's bringing in. And it can't be easy, what you're doing."

"That's where you're wrong, mate, it's the easiest thing in the world. And it's a bloody site easier than the way I've been living. I've got this weight off my shoulders, now. I can stop pretending, I can actually pay attention to what I really want, not what I'm supposed to want." As he said it, he felt the truth of his words settle into his soul, easing the last of the churning there. "It's absolutely bloody brilliant, Bodie."

Bodie frowned at him, unconvinced.

"Yeh, yeh, I know it's not all going to be a bed of roses, but give me a chance—I'm still feeling like a kid starting his summer holidays."

“What about the job?”

Doyle shrugged, going back to washing the dishes he'd accumulated over the past couple of days. "No great loss, is it? Never going to get any higher than I am, so it makes no odds, does it?" He slid a pile of plates into the suds, face thoughtful. "Miss you, though." He

could've bitten his tongue out the second the words got loose.

"Only cos perfection's hard to give up once you've found it." The joke fell, landing flat on its face between them. "Look, Ray," Bodie was bluff and gruff, his tried-and-true method of hiding when he cared. "Look, all this...it's just cos I was there when you were ready to find a nice warm body. It's just infatuation and sex, that's all. Give you a week and you'll've moved on to someone as pretty as that Barry and forgotten all about messing around with your partner. And that's better than you going off like a lamb to the slaughter to the nearest gay pub and getting picked up by someone who would hurt you."

"Someone who wouldn't be gentle with me?"

"Or someone," Bodie insisted, the weight of experience behind him, "who would hurt you. Really hurt you, and maybe not just emotionally. I don't want you getting torn to pieces by some bloke who's kinky and would screw you up."

"Specially not after I've done such a good job of screwing myself up all these years, is that it?"

"Partly. You've got to admit, what you did was bloody unhealthy, Ray."

"You'll be getting me an appointment with Dr. Ross in a minute."

"Might not be a bad idea, that."

Slowly, Doyle pivoted, unable to believe his ears. "My Christ, but you're serious. You think I'm that far gone?"

Face hard, body immovable. "I think you're taking it so fucking lightly, you're going to need help. Ray, you're changing your whole lifestyle, throwing a career away, going to alienate your family..."

"Hang on a minute there. Throw away a career? What career? In case you 'adn't noticed, mate, I'm not the right sort to get anywhere in Whitehall, even nowadays. Ten years from now, things'll've changed enough, but not right now. I've no chance, Bodie, of anything better than a desk job. And just because you've alienated your family, doesn't mean to say my family'll do the same thing. And as for changing my lifestyle... Haven't you been listening to me? The mistake I made was when I got the idea that I could just stop being gay, that I could just go out there and pretend, like thousands of other blokes, that

I didn't fancy men. And what good did it do me? You've seen what I've been like these past months. The strain was beginning to show. Only a matter of time, Bodie, it was only a matter of time."

Another pause. Then—

"And don't worry, your virtue's safe with me," he said, all the more angry for the quiet, "I've got the message, Bodie. You'll break me in gently, but I've not to get any stupid romantic notions about you. Well, no need to worry, mate. I wouldn't touch you with a barge-pole. If I remember correctly, I like a bit of maturity to my men, not scared little boys who'll run away at the first sign of commitment. And didn't you say something about having to get on? Work to do or something?"

The longest pause of all, whilst Doyle washed the same plate again and again, dish-mop circling endlessly through the suds. Footsteps, then, the sound thudding into the tense muscles of his neck, and then he heard the turning of the handle, felt the gust of cold air leaching the life from the room, until it was shut out again with a very quiet click of the door closing.

He could feel the emptiness of the room on his skin, matching the emptiness in the pit of his stomach. *So much for 'all this' being a dawdle, he thought, and so much for the truth setting you free an' all. I might be free when it comes to sex, but Christ, I've really landed myself in it when it comes to feelings, haven't I? And there's not a fucking thing I can do about it. You can't make someone feel the way you want them to. More's the fuckin' pity.*

He dropped the soggy tea-towel on top of the wet dishes in the drainer, turning on his heel and going out. There was still time for a drink before closing—in fact, there was still time for several, if he went to the Dagmar with its late-lisence. And its decidedly mixed clientèle. Who knows, perhaps he'd cock a snoot at Bodie and pick up some dangerous man in leather and take his chances. After all, he couldn't get any more hurt than he already was, could he?

The bubbly brunette was behind the bar again, a fresh-faced young man pulling pints beside her, his bow tie askew, hair falling over his forehead. Wicksy, he remembered, running through his mental files, Simon Wicks, son of

the hatchet-faced blonde barmaid over the Vic and so squeaky clean, it was enough to bore you to tears, instantly. Bustling out the door after him, came the old dear, the Square gossip, done up to within an inch of her life, and beside her, an even older woman, resplendent in wig and powder, a drooling little pug clutched to her dried-up bosom. A lot less inspiring than the night he'd come here after Bodie had left so silently, but if he hadn't bothered to pick someone up then, he didn't know why he was even bothering to look for talent tonight. Apart from the obvious, AIDS had a lot to answer for, when a man couldn't even sow a few wild oats any more. Not that there was anyone here he'd be willing to get close enough to to turn into porridge, never mind sow any oats with...

He heard them arguing, as usual, before he saw them. These past few days, he'd learned what everyone in Albert Square already knew: Colin and Barry used arguing the way everyone else used valentines and boxes of Black Magic. He called Wicksy over, setting up a round, waiting for the other two to come over. Barry still didn't like him, but he was beginning to realise that even if Doyle would have Colin, Colin wouldn't have him. It was bitter-sweet, watching himself become part of the glue that was holding the other couple together, seeing all the little arguments turn into solutions, with the attractions and refusals surrounding him used as proof of genuine affection between the pair of them. They were shutting him out, but not so far that he couldn't see what he wanted for himself: something to which he was more than entitled, something he had given up years ago and denied himself ever since. A bit of happiness, that was all. A relationship that worked, some kind of home and someone who loved him. Everyone was entitled to dreams, weren't they? His stomach tightened as he thought of Bodie four nights before. Oh, yes, everyone was entitled to dreams, even if they were impossible.

Oh, well, at least he had the sex. Always supposing Bodie came back for more. And if he didn't? You might not be able to engender feelings in someone else, but sparking lust in Bodie was as easy as pie. He felt the other two come up behind him and he interrupted their backbiting with the flick of his voice.

"White wine with orange juice for you, Colin and bitter for Barry. Perfect choice, eh?"

Barry glowered at him, but he took the drink, starting off for one of the tables against the wall. "Aren't you comin'?" Ungracious, but still an invitation.

"Not with you here, I'm not."

"Oh, ha bloody ha. Very funny, I'm liable to die laughin' at you any day now. Listen," leaning forward, whispering, "you gettin' anywhere on all that stuff we were talkin' about at Wu's?"

"Got some more names, found out some of the distributors, but still no farther in actually getting on the inside. Why?"

"Cos my sister almost got hooked, didn't she? Anyway, I might 'ave a way in for you."

Colin's voice, warning. "Barry..."

"No, not through me. God, you're worse than me mum, you are. No, me brother Graham 'ad some stuff wot fell off the back of a lorry," he studiously ignored Colin's aggrieved and long-suffering expression, "an' 'e approached this fella to sell it, didn't 'e. At any road, the bloke wanted 'im to do a job, but me brother won't touch drugs, an' 'e won't 'ave nothin' to do wiv roughin' people up. But the man said that if Graham found someone who wouldn't have no problems doin' it, then the job might be open."

"Then have your brother put my name forward then. Thanks, Barry."

A shrug, leather jacket creaking. "Don't mention it. Can't stand these toffee-nosed gits wot're tryin' to move in on our area. Sorry, Colin, didn't mean you."

"Better not. Your rent would take a sudden leap upwards if you did."

Barry glanced slyly at Ray, winking at him, waiting until Colin had taken a healthy mouthful of his 'toffee-nosed' drink, timing it to perfection. "Could always take it out in trade, couldn't you though?"

Perfection. Cocktail sprayed everywhere, mainly on Doyle, with Barry sitting back, laughing like a drain. "Gotcha!" Watching Doyle mopping up the sticky spray of drink, he grinned again, not quite as nicely this time. "Didn't I just?"

"Barry! Colin! C'mere, you two. Need to talk to you." Angie, shouting at them from behind the bar, cut with ease through the loudness of music.



"Scuse us, Ray, we'll be back in a minute. An' I'll be having words with you when I get you home tonight, Barry."

"Promises, promises."

Colin gave him an old-fashioned look and turned to the woman who was still yelling to them. "Yeh, Ange, what is it this time? Need another judge for one of your competitions or what?"

Someone jogged his elbow as he was reaching for his drink, and he knew instinctively it was Bodie. "Can't you watch what you're doing, you great oaf? Now look at what you've gone and made me do. Beer costs money, or hadn't you noticed?"

"Don't worry, brought you another anyway. We've just about got time to drink it before we have to get on our bikes and pedal off to do Her Majesty's bidding."

Doyle groaned, loud and long. "I was just beginning to really get places on this one, Bodie. Can't this other one wait?"

"Leak from an informant that one of the IRA cells over here has picked Her Royal Highness, the Princess of Wales as the perfect Christmas target? Not bloody likely, mate. We'll be lucky if we have time to pee before New Year. So drink up, it could be your last."

"Marvellous. Absolutely fucking marvellous. You know something, Bodie? I don't think I'm going to miss this job at all."

Bodie didn't take his eyes from Colin and Barry at the bar, nor the people they were talking to, but all his attention was on Doyle. "Definitely going to move on, then, are you?"

"Think so. Can't blame me, can you? The way we work, the way we get paid and for what? So that just when you're about to finish something, Cowley can haul you off to do something else."

"I'm handing in my notice as well."

That took Doyle by surprise. He'd made no secret of his own dissatisfaction, but Bodie hadn't uttered a mutter.

"Heard something when I was in HQ this afternoon. Cowley. The old bastard's retiring next month."

"Cowley? I thought the only way they'd get him out of CI5 was in his box."

"Close. Apparently, his heart's getting worse and he can't keep up any more. And he is getting on a bit, isn't he?"

"Still..."

"And even if we wanted to stay on, we'd have to join MI6. Apparently, the Cow lost that round of negotiations and it's not the other departments that are going to have to tighten their belts. It's CI5 that's getting the chop."

That was greeted by stunned speechlessness. "Of all the stupid, idiotic, ball-less... Christ, what's the use? Nothing you can say to that. So after the bombing season, it'll be all over then?" He chuckled, filthily. "Could always throw a party and do what we've threatened to do for years."

"The stripper, you mean?"

"Yeh. One of each."

"Could pass the hat round, get everyone in on it..."

"Send CI5 off in style."

"Like those two?"

Doyle looked over at the bar, at Colin and Barry. It wasn't just the conversation about drugs Barry remembered from Wu's, that was clear. He was stretching up, giving Colin a very chaste, but very blatant, kiss on the lips. Over the top of Colin's shoulder, he looked straight at Doyle, grinning at him, pleased as punch that he had Colin and Doyle couldn't.

Bodie was even more aware of it, had spent many a dull hour of obbo thinking about that and sundry subjects. He leaned over, jogging Doyle's elbow again, without spilling the drink this time. "Time to go, mate. Cowley's waiting for us at HQ."

"I'll need to go back to the flat for a minute, some stuff there I don't want to lose."

"Already taken care of, sunshine. Stuff's all in the car, unless somebody's nicked it. C'mon, off we jolly-well go."

In the car, driving round the Square, Bodie pointed to the boarded up building next to the one Doyle had been staying in. "Course, it needs a bit of work, but that could keep us occupied until we come up with jobs, couldn't it? Wouldn't cost much, and with what we've never had the chance to spend, and our redundancy pay, we should be able to afford that."

Doyle let it all slide, ignoring the seeming commitment, giving Bodie all the space he needed, concentrating on the bare facts of practicality. "Don't be stupid, Bodie, have you any idea how much that'll go for?"



"Still cheaper than anywhere else in London." The Square was behind them now, the houses around them becoming steadily more gentrified. "And I s'pose I could always chip in some of my mercenary money..."

Wonders would never cease, taboo subjects being broached like so much tissue paper, not that Doyle was stupid enough to comment on it to a man as skittish as Bodie. "Thought you'd spent all that years ago?"

"Never even touched most of it. It's been breeding quite happily in a nice little vault in Switzerland."

"You sure you want to do this?" It had to be said, for he knew well enough what happened if things were ignored completely. It was one thing to be tactful, another to play ostrich. "Aren't you scared shitless I'll be all over you with red roses and chocolates? And kisses?"

Doyle wasn't the only one who was capable of thinking and changing the leopard's spots. "Worse things in life, Ray. As long as you don't hit me with your handbag, I'll cope."

"Yeh?"

"Yeh. Any objections?"

"Apart from your smelly socks? Nah, but don't worry, I'll come up with some."

But he wasn't looking back towards the Square any more, and he was grinning happily as he considered just how quickly Bodie had yielded some of that much-vaunted and often flaunted autonomy. Casually, he reached out to rest his right hand on Bodie's left hand, grinning even more when the driver, even more ostentatiously casual that Ray had been, lifted that hand and moved it a little higher, where it could rest on a quickening hardness.

"Barry, where'd Ray go?"

"If 'e's lucky, probably exactly we're goin'."

"And where's that?"

"E went off with that great bruiser of a friend of his and hopefully, 'e's goin' to get fucked into next week. Just like me, right, Colin?"

"Barry!" Angie leaned across the bar at them, manicured fingernail stabbing Barry in the chest. "You want to watch your language round 'ere. I run a clean pub, I do. Go on, Colin, take 'im 'ome, before 'e gets hisself in trouble." She smiled at them, face lighting up, giving Colin a quick kiss on the cheek from lips that were as

red as her nails. "An' do yourself a favour. Do wot 'e tells you, love. 'E's making sense for once in 'is life. 'Ello, Pete, wot'll it be?"

"Ethel? Ethel? Did you see that? That man's back, an' 'e's takin' all that Ray Doyle fella's stuff out. Leavin', 'e is, a moonlight flit. 'Asn't paid 'is rent, I warrant. Should be grateful we don't 'ave the Police round 'ere wiv the likes of 'im 'angin' about, up to no good. Should've known. Nothin' but trouble, that one, wot did I tell you?"

"Actually, if I remember you rightly, you said 'e was a very nice young man, you did."

"Oh, I did, did I? Well, just goes to show 'ow that type can take in even the most discernin' of people, like wot I am. But movings in an' movings out, I don't know wot this Square is comin' to. Wasn't like this in the old days, was it, Ethel?"

"Nah, not back then. Back then, whole families would live here, year after year after year. Squads of children everywhere, an' the parties we used to have. D'you remember the parties, Dot? Everyone all 'avin' fun together. 'Ere, d'you remember the V-E Day party? Wiv all them flags all over the street, an' the bunting 'angin' from all the windows?"

"An' Dr. Legg—'e was just a young man back then, weren't 'e?—brought out his fancy gramophone player an' we was playin' all them wonderful, old Glenn Miller 78's 'e 'ad, quite lovely they were, not none of this modern muck. An' there was dancin'..."

"An' the punch old Will wot used to 'ave the Vic gave out?"

They were quiet then, old faces recapturing some of the glow of the past as each remembered their salad years. Their footsteps tap, tap, tapped on the slick pavement, dulling as they stepped off the kerb onto the street, pools of reflected light rippling in shallow puddles. Behind them, little Martin was crying over the last of his teeth forcing its way in, and in front of them, Pete was shouting to Ali to wait a minute, he had something to tell him.

Dot sighed and helped Ethel back up onto the pavement, steering her clear of the slippery rain. "Oh, it was marvellous back then, wasn't it, Ethel?"

"Grand, it was grand. 'Specially when all the men came 'ome..."

They were quiet again, listening to the men of the Square today, remembering their own men, long dead, gathering their sadnesses together to be put away until tomorrow.

"I shall have to tell Lou Beal all about that young man movin' out when I see her tomorrow, she'll want to 'ear wot's been goin' on round 'ere. Promised 'er I'd go over an' 'ave a cuppa with 'er in the afternoon, when all that mob've

gone out an' she's got the 'ouse to 'erself. 'Ere, why don't you come over with me, an' we could play some of the old songs, 'ave a bit of a party ourselves, the way we used to."

"Just like the old days..."

"Oh, yes, just like then. An' it'll be grand, you'll see. Some things never change, do they, Ethel?"

Apart, perhaps, from the leopard's spots.