

STEP|WE|GAIL|Y

As an opening story this is a rather unconventional piece for Professionals fandom, and therefore quite appropriate from the Glaswegian. Told entirely from one character's viewpoint, it excavates past the public surface and into the private interior, bit by bit revealing both the perfections and imperfections of the man, examining the control of self and others that he strives to maintain, and watching as he finds himself unraveling with a passion and lust that may bring his ruin or his salvation. Two notes to the reader: certain events of the 1980s have been moved backwards about five years or so. Think of them as creative anachronisms meant to enrich the story. Also, beware the Scots English throughout. A dictionary which defines Scottishisms may be helpful to the lexicologically inclined.

CURSING himself for both his cupidity and the mortal weakness that drove him here even when he knew better, George Cowley passed through the street door and pushed open the inner door that led to the scene of so many of his downfalls, so many of his defeats at the hands of his own carnality.

Packenham's, it had been in his day, this discreet pub with even more discreet clientèle. For all that the name over the lintel was different these days, some things never change, although others had changed beyond all recognising. Oh, it was still the same odd mixture of the sort of rough pub that soldiers and workmen would frequent, with the elegant touches here and there to ease the sensibilities of the upper crust aesthetes who came here for the coarseness of base passion but who would shudder if enclosed by unplastered walls and uncomfortable seats. Within these walls, the décor had scarcely altered, the unlit murals touched up for years and then gradually, one panel flowing infinitesimally into the next, the images were updated, until the entire history of this place could be seen on its walls, from the early days of starched upright collars, boating on the river and the Elysian backdrops to summon thoughts of Greek love, into the War years and beyond, coming to War once again, moving eventually into handsome, stylish profiles that could have graced the covers of *Homme*—or been perfectly at home in the original murals. The tables were still the small round ones

on sturdy legs, but there were no soldiers' names carved into them with pocket-knives, no society sobriquets linking themselves with favourite Guardsmen. The tables along the walls were of the same half-moon shape, polish gleaming with the reflections of light and the hopes of those looking for love or sex, but the banquettes now were of textured cloth, the plush velvets and leather of before worn out and discarded. Small pools of subtle light still that bespoke and begat intimacy seeped from the same low-hanging lamps, and the high-backed booths topped with a topiary of carved wood promised the same seclusion and secrecy that George Cowley had enjoyed more times than he would ever confess.

Clothes and hair and chatter different, yet the clientèle of today would be instantly identifiable to the founders of the inner circle of this pub, as would the mix of ages, older men with younger, a group of older women sitting together, providing the only loudness of laughter, the occasional young woman hesitating by the bar until a gentleman of her choice invited her to a table. Of course, once our vision adapted to the subtle shadings of light, as did George Cowley's from the safety of the doorway, we would realise that the women were actually those brave souls who dared transform themselves, some arriving in full regalia, others stepping into the private rooms upstairs as stolid businessmen and emerging, chrysalis-like, as painted beauties, or as the still-ugly with attempted

beauty painting over the cracks.

Some things never changed, indeed, but others were so different as to be inconceivable to a man who had been scarce out of his teens the first time he had taken a deep breath and pushed open those doors to step inside a magic world of acceptance and seduction. Cowley looked around, taking his time, identifying the difference before he would commit himself fully once more to this den of his iniquities. It took him a moment before he realised that his suspicion was caused by the atmosphere that had become so different in the year since last he'd yielded and come here, but most of all, the problem lay with those things that had been transformed since he'd come here as a young man. It was far more than the immediately obvious, the reduction of blue tobacco smoke clustering at the ceiling and the absent undersmell of Brylcreem and Kölnischwasser: it was in the ambience itself, the attitude of these people. In his day, when he'd been young and spry and handsome and his hair still gleamed redly in the sun, the laughter in this place had been undercut by despair, the jollity barely masking the fear, the invasive knowledge that this place was but a temporary respite, and that the law and prison lurked outside.

Not so different today, for the men of his own generation still coming here after so many years, but the young ones, oh, they were the ones who were so different, and deserving of the new word. Gay. He tried the word for himself, the fit awkward and uncomfortable, alien to his own image of himself. He wasn't like these blithe young men who had come to maturity—what little of it they had—after the sword of 'justice' had been lifted from their necks. He was of the old school, who had first thought themselves diseased and insane, corrupt and debased, for whom epithets defined the names they used for themselves. He was a dinosaur, a remnant of the days when 'gay' was an adjective to describe a mood or a colour, not the word that told the world the self-same secret men had died from. In his day. For these young men, their loyalties were forged from friendship and the embattling of disease, where for him, in his day, loyalty had come from mutual fear and protection, friendships formed to take care of those few who were one of 'us'.

In sadness and in relief, he thought about the man he'd been then, and what he'd done and for which reasons: thought about the rôle he'd played

and the benefits he'd garnered. Thought, again, of how young he'd been, his body whole and unscarred, knee not yet maimed into ugliness, skin not yet wrinkled by the years. Remembered his own laughter in here, remembered how he had flirted and danced and flattered, and the changes in him were bitter at the back of his mind and the corners of his eyes. But as he looked around at the handsome young men, his body and soul reminded him that there was one thing that never changed, never altered for him, and that was the need that haunted him and drove him, herding him in here like lamb to the slaughter when the hunger and loneliness became too much and the dangers were nothing compared to the siren-song of sex. For all that everyone from his agents up to the Prime Minister herself would doubt it, even George Cowley was only human, a failing for which he never could forgive himself.

The door dunted him from behind, someone else wanting in, someone less inclined to linger, or perhaps simply someone with less to lose than George Cowley, head of CI5. He moved forward quickly, stepping aside to permit entrance to the collieshangie tumbling in with such a riot of noise and movement, the chaos sorting itself out into disparate people, the group claiming several tables, the racket of them settling themselves and garnering drinks covering Cowley as he slipped quietly up to the corner of the bar. He had to wait while the chattering, laughing horde—'gay', as they called themselves, well-deserved here, with their bright smiles and laughing eyes—were finally satisfied with their drinks, but eventually, the barman was finished with them and was there in front of him, his pretty face bedecked in a prettier smile.

"Yes, sir?"

"Laphroaig, please. A double." Enough to see him through the initial uneasiness, the time when both his conscience and his security awareness troubled him. There still lingered in him the horror of first understanding that the sweet joys he shared with Alec McCluskey were the sins of Sodom, the sins that caused God to destroy Sodom and all the sodomites. And the words in the New Testament, letters from Apostles long dead to church groups long turned to dust but condemnation potent enough still to turn his love to ashes in his mouth. And then there was his dear Annie, taking him in hand and promising him the Cure, one that faded

and died as soon as she left him behind, the love of a good woman naught but a temporary denial to hide the hopeless truth from himself. Not that he could blame her for leaving him, mind: running and hiding and hating himself, he hadn't been much of a catch, had been less of a companion. Free only within the discretion of this club and within the circle of friends that stemmed from here, lying had been the only other way of life he could even imagine—in his young days. Looking around himself now, he could imagine, dimly, faintly, but inescapably, a life unrecognisable to the one he now knew. If he were willing.

Not that he ever would be: freedom to 'be himself' seemed precious little to gain when he would lose CI5 and all his past triumphs worth nothing at all if the truth became public fodder. How far, he sometimes wondered, as he did now, sitting in the pub where his life had changed in the giddy, tense years before the War, would he have come, with his accent and his proclivities, without the network of fellow inverters he had found here? Him, with the wrong accent, the wrong regiment and not a school tie to speak of: without the friends and contacts made here, without their invitations and introductions, without them vouching for him with that special nod, that meaningful pause, that precise turn of phrase, he would have slowly worked his way to the upper echelons of his own regiment, and there he would have stopped. Oh, aye, he'd have had his spell with the SIS, but with the War's end, he would have been sent back to his own regiment with a 'thanks awfully, Jock' and a firm handshake. But if he were of this age, these young men with their demands for gay rights and legalised marriage, would he be one of them, would he have found some other career, some other talent besides the Army and Intelligence? Or would he be miserably hiding away still? There was an old song, and it came back to him, the words whistling through his mind as he whistled the tune under his breath: *Step we gaily on we go, heel for heel and toe for toe, arm in arm and row on row, all for Mairi's wedding*. Mind, he thought, not sure if he should be contemptuous or jealous, this lot would be changing that to *all for Barry's wedding*, although such a thing was too far beyond even the wildest of his dreams.

Ach, you're just being a big jessie, crying into your drink, he told himself. It's not as if you came here to ponder the universe, is it?

There was a particularly handsome young man holding court at the centre of the group that filled the pub with their liveliness, and staring at him, Cowley found himself drawn not only by the man's good looks, but by the mystery of what a man like that—his proclivities worn not on his sleeve, but on his lapel, the pink triangle bright against the deep black of jacket—what a man like that needed a pub like this for? And wondered more at himself, looking round this pub, taking each face in, one after the other, cataloguing and identifying. Wondered what *he* got from a pub like this nowadays. A sense of belonging, perhaps, but then, these men with their confidence, with their talk of Stonewall and gay rights—these men were light years ahead of him and more alien than he could imagine.

Face sour, he sipped the smooth, rich peatiness of his single malt, not even the luxury of Laphroaig enough to soothe away the bitterness of his own poverty. He was here for the same reason the older men—not the old men, not yet, not yet—had always come here. He was here for youth, and sex, and perhaps, if he paid enough, and if the younger man were subtle enough, perhaps he was even here for the illusion of love.

Oh, aye, some things never did change, did they, the play remains the same until one day, a man woke up and found himself playing the part of the old man.

Aye well, he didn't quite permit himself a sigh, that's the way the world's ayeways been, and girning over it won't change a thing. Still, he turned back to the bar, nursing his drink, sipping it slowly, letting time and bitterness pass before he would risk looking again at the young men who would look back at him with fiscal hunger disguised as lust.

He refused to allow himself to feel pathetic; reminded himself that there were always the young who were drawn to experience and power and the danger of hard men doing a violent job. He had been himself—still was, and temptation never more than a briefing away.

Which was why he was here.

A small gesture had the barman over and refilling his glass with more amber warmth; a small sip, the flavour savoured, the peat on his tongue reminding him of his early days, army manoeuvres amidst the hills, a clutch of men crammed into a bothy, wind howling and swirling with the snow outside, and inside, a dance of seduction that could

not be acknowledged but might, if he were lucky and reckless, be consummated later. Turning his back on both the memory and the bar, George Cowley faced the pub that had started his career on the right path, introducing him to men he would otherwise never even had the opportunity to glimpse from the distance.

Over there, in the far corner, a man who had been young in here at the same time as himself, and so Cowley nodded to him, and knew himself Ministerially safe for another while, at least until the next election. Longer, if the political punters were to be trusted. And there, in the shadows, leather jacket gleaming seductively, brown hair glistening, the young man leaning against the wall had perfected the fine art of playing rough trade for the sedate and closeted queen.

He barely contained his sneer, mockery spilling into his eyes: thon big saftie wouldn't last two seconds with one of his lads. One wrong move would teach him a thing or two about rough trade! And the pose—crivvens, one absent-minded motion from Ray Doyle would give this would-be seducer a proper showing-up.

Uninterested in a poor facsimile of a reality that tempted him every day, Cowley's attention moved on, his gaze missing nothing, gathering every detail, hoarding it to be tasted and explored later, when this night was long ended, and the dangers of coming back here once more outweighed the driving need for sex. And company, he confessed silently, not allowing himself to stare at the two young men holding hands and leaning so closely together, the merest hint of a kiss apart.

A blur of light caught his attention: just someone coming through the side door that led both to the upstairs and to the public lavatory, protecting the guilty by giving them a legitimate excuse for departing through that doorway. Another slow look around the large room, keen eyes seeking out any detail that he might have missed. Sharp mind noting those patrons who bore the unmistakable mark of the military man, self-consuming cynicism noting how many of those Armed Forces types were ages with himself, the days of the handsome young Guardsmen and the sizzling GIs too many years in the past for Cowley's vanity to appreciate. Mind, that one over there, the one sitting with his back to the wall, cigarette a red-tipped whiteness against the darkness of his skin: that was a soldier if ever there was one. And available, of course,

otherwise he wouldn't be here sitting there with such insouciant ease and such insolent sexuality.

And some things had changed so much that George Cowley was no longer certain that it was a straight cash transaction these days, or if the military men who came here were here for the same discretion that Cowley himself needed. Or if favours would be demanded, where in his day they grew from the need to band together. Not that it mattered, though: George Cowley didn't do favours for anyone, and he'd destroy his career sooner than give in to blackmail. The cigarette glowed again, and the smoker smiled, teeth beautifully white and even, reminding Cowley of the handsome, wild GIs with their jazz and jitterbugs and weakness for Scottish accents. A foregone conclusion, then, that this man would be the one Cowley would approach tonight. Not as young as he had hoped—the younger they were the easier they were to appease with a few folded banknotes. Still, the first flush of youth usually left behind the bloom of experience and skill, and a military man—quick assessment of age and demeanour, assumption that the man was a sergeant at least—wouldn't risk ruining his own career for the blackmail possibilities of a businessman wandered down from Glasgow. The soldier stopped smiling, took another drag on his cigarette, moved so that his shirt fell open a little more, and desire uncoiled in Cowley's belly.

Still, it didn't do to rush these things, not even in this pub that was the closest thing to a public closet the Cowleys of this world could depend on. Another few minutes wouldn't hurt—would only heighten the anticipation—but haste could lead to disaster: how many Whitehall careers had been ruined not by homosexuality but by being caught with their hand down the front of the wrong pair of trousers? A measured sip of his dram, and as the heat slid down his throat, tactile memory rose, times of other heat sliding down inside him, of other hot liquid splashing inside him, of other handsome young men who had sat there, one young man in particular: himself, resplendent in his kilt, the leather seat sticking to the backs of his knees as he'd sat there, trembling with his own daring at coming to a place the likes of this, heart pounding with the excitement of seeing other men who were just like himself, other men looking at him the way he wanted to look at them...

The past hit him like a blow, blood flooding his

groin, passion dimming his natural caution, the whisky depleting his inhibitions. Almost enough, now, to let himself go, to take the next step. He felt in his pocket, fingering the folded money, one that matched the cash in his back pocket and in the inner silk pocket of his good jacket. No need to set himself up for robbery by flashing too much

money—and no need to risk falling short of an offered pleasure. His I.D. and wallet were locked in his desk drawer, car keys were with his own CI5 mechanics, the Rover's service the perfect excuse for him to take the tube, the intersecting circuits the perfect route for him to lose any possible tail. A few coins had secured a locker at Victoria Station, where he'd left his house keys, a bus ride had brought him to a bustling street where a few crumpled, old banknotes had paid for a hotel for the business traveller just down from Glasgow for a meeting, a visit to one of the 'tourist' pubs and a few wee nips, then on to the next, a miniature pub-crawl in perfect keeping with a man here off the wife's leash for a few precious days. Then, and only then, with all the precautions taken, it was a simple enough thing to make his way back to this pub which was so close to his own office, had he cared to simply come straight here.

He relaxed infinitesimally, the alcohol mingling with his precautions, the ambience of the pub working its usual magic on him. The man was still sitting where Cowley's observing had left him, the face as sculpted with beauty, the body as ripe with promise. Aye, George Cowley thought to himself with a smile quite startling in its charmingness, he'll do me the night. Straightening, drink in hand, he went over the man he'd picked for this night's relief.

And the abrupt prickling on the back of his neck made him cut aside from his intended path, leading him to an empty table where he, too, could sit with his back to the wall. Not a thing about him betraying his sudden tension, nothing to indicate his sensing of danger, he sat down quietly, nursing his drink like a caricature of the stingy Scotsman. The only source for his unease had been the opening of the main door, and the three men who came in were no reason for concern, all of them the worse for drink and loud with this alien gayness that was a distant cousin to the giddiness the young men were once wont to flaunt.

Not them, then, and not the men who had already been sitting in the pub: had to be, then,

someone who had come back from the toilet or upstairs, or someone who had come in, discreet as Cowley himself, hidden behind the tumult of the men now draping the bar. Aye, there, someone watching him, shadow detaching itself from the wall, approaching the small light spilling over the tables.

Cowley's heartbeat tripped, a terrifying sensation the likes of which he hadn't known since his first days of combat. Justified, he thought, taking a very blasé sip of his whisky, glancing at his watch, calmly finishing the last few drops of his drink, rising and leaving like any man who's just noticed the time and has to get on to the theatre or dinner or his wife. Neither hurrying suspiciously nor lingering unconvincingly, he walked briskly out of the pub, the doors swinging hissing shut on the terrifying image: Bodie, walking towards him.

Route retraced, the habits of years carrying him through the routine of making sure he wasn't followed—insidious doubt whispering, whispering, asking if he would know he was being followed if it were Bodie doing the following, one of his best men, trained by the best, filled with Cowley's own secrets, Cowley's own experience, Macklin's subterfuge, SAS's ruthless skill: would he know, if it were Bodie—all his precautions fulfilled by rote, his mind carefully becalmed on the surface as he went through the implications coolly, and all the while his stomach churned like his heart, fear and chaos vying for control, only his will, clenched tight, painfully, achingly tight, only that keeping the horrors at bay.

His own home at last, so neat and tidy, picture-postcard perfect, locks intact, alarms unrung, the carefully chosen idiosyncrasies undisturbed by searchers. His coat he hung in the hall cupboard, jacket replaced by the thick Aran cardigan his sister had knitted for him, the heavy near-white concealment for the weapon reason told him he wouldn't need and foreboding demanded he keep on him.

"Alpha One," he said into the phone, the direct line to his HQ. "Status report."

"One moment, sir," the unidentified speaker told him, and Cowley made a mental note to remind Johnson that all his staff had to maintain proper procedure: slack that, Smith not giving his ID nor asking Cowley for the correct code before transferring him through.

A few clicks and then Murphy was there, following procedure to the letter, only then giving

his report as precisely as ever.

"Aye, aye," Cowley said distractedly, routine operations given only the bare minimum of necessary attention, "that would be for the best. Put Matheson and King on stand-by, and see to it that Stuart has a back-up available."

In his precise hand, he made a note on the pad kept by the phone, listening to the rest of Murphy's report, his hand faltering momentarily when Murphy mentioned a name Cowley was going to have to deal with all too soon. "Picked up the files I sent him for?"

Even down the length of the phone wire, Cowley could hear Murphy's grin. "Yes, sir, picked them up not five minutes ago."

"And did he say anything?" Not that he really thought Bodie would: not yet, and not to Murphy. No guarantee, of course, of what he might say to Doyle, or what would be said to himself, later.

"Only the usual," Murphy said dryly, Bodie's rather imaginative comments at having his leave interrupted by a Scrooge of a boss too typical for him to need to repeat them to said boss himself.

A glance at his watch, genuine this time, and not the charade to get him, unnoticed, out of a pub he should know better than to go to. With the way Bodie drove, that gave him fifteen minutes at best before Bodie would be here on his doorstep, looking at him, knowing. "Aye, I can imagine what Master Bodie had to say," Cowley replied, sounding just like himself, feeling like a stranger. Bodie, on his way here, already, no time to prepare, no way of knowing what Bodie was up to. "Anything else?"

"Not at present, sir, and even the Günther Hass situation has stabilised."

"Right you are, then," he replied, one part of his mind automatically arranging the work schedules the various operations would be needing over the next few days. "I'll be at home working on those files if anything comes up." He waited just long enough to make it sound so casual, nothing but pure routine and completely unremarkable. "Did Phillips finish the security sweeps today?"

A ruffling of paper, then Murphy spoke again. "Yes, he did the last of them, and your place was clean as of 7.27 this evening."

So he could be thankful for that small mercy. "Fine, fine," he said, counting off the time he had left before Bodie would turn up. "And tell Pettifer that I'll make my own way in tomorrow."

He could still hear Murphy's voice as he hung up, but that didn't concern him: his agents were well used to him cutting them off, his time too precious to waste on the niceties. With measured calm, he went over to the table in the corner, pouring himself a drink, hesitating, and then pouring another, setting both glasses on the low coffee table. The gas fire next, the low hiss barely audible, the heat welcome on the abstract ache in his leg. Leaning there, he waited, marking the minutes, running every last possibility through in his mind, sorting and sifting, rehearsing his replies and responses. Steeling himself to resist a temptation that wouldn't be even a briefing away this time.

The ache ameliorated by seeping heat, he moved away, going slowly round his sitting room, touching this and that, going over other things, intangible things he usually did not permit himself the remembering of. Faces, not many once he'd climbed a certain height on the right ladder, but not a single face that couldn't immediately be conjured in all its detail, with an immediate replay of activities he could have been arrested for once and could still be quietly ousted for today. Well, he smiled to himself, might perhaps be asked to retire early due to ill health. It wasn't only his own skeletons he kept locked in his closet, enough men's bones squirrelled away to wreak havoc in Whitehall if he decided to speak.

Of course, that was always assuming Bodie was stupid enough to attempt blackmail. If he weren't, if he came here simply asking for minor favours—c'mon, sir, we've been on the go all week, the least you can do is give us the night off, Doyle here's knackered—or worst, a nightmare of promise—what if Bodie came here offering what Cowley had gone to the pub to buy?

This time it was his grandfather's old clock on the mantelpiece that he looked at, the sonorous tick tocking the minutes away as they had all his life.

For God's sake, Bodie, where are you? he thought fiercely, cursing the man for keeping him waiting, hanging on tenterhooks to find out his own future.

The bell went, telling him precisely where Bodie was. On his doorstep, no doubt with enough files clasped under his arm to allay the suspicions of the most gutter-minded of observers. There were times when Bodie's near paranoia had its uses, and sometimes they served his possible victims well.

Hand on the door knob, George Cowley paused, breathed deeply, arranged his expression, and still hesitated. It was one thing to want it over and done with, quite another to face one of his own agents, one who would look at him *knowing*, his secret reflected back at him by eyes that had always been too observant for Bodie's own good.

Mocking himself, he flung the door open, glowering at Bodie as if this were no different from any other time an agent had taken too long in delivering the files.

"I was beginning to think you'd decided to walk," he snapped, knowing it would throw Bodie off his stride. "Well? Are you going to hand them over or are you going to stand there all night?"

And Bodie, never one for conveniently obeying orders, direct or indirect, smiled politely and stepped forward, ignoring George Cowley's outstretched hand, ignoring the infamous glower, walking right past his boss, strolling casually into the sitting room with all the grace and threat of the lethal weapon he assuredly was.

The files were tossed onto the polished desk, fanning out in an arc of bland manilla, one glossy photograph of a minor suspect spilling forth to lie there, frowning over his newspaper, unnoticed by the two living men in the room.

"The Jeffreys file's in amongst that lot. Five minutes reading that in the morning and you can flannel Murphy, convince him that you and me spent hours poring over the bloody paperwork." So confident, obscenely jaunty, Bodie turned towards his boss, smiled with the white teeth of the predator. "Not that you'll be looking at much else tonight, will you?"

Almost anyone else, and Cowley would bluff his way out of this, or at least buy himself a few minutes, but that wouldn't work, not with a man who was as implacable as a Chieftain tank and was too good to be fooled by much. "And what the hell is that supposed to mean? Seeing me there is no proof of anything, and especially not that I'd welcome advances from the likes of you."

"Isn't it?" That one eyebrow raised, and the eyes twinkled, not with humour, but with something closely akin to hunger.

It shivered along Cowley's spine, colliding with the two doubles he'd already drunk, smashing right into the too long self-denial that had driven him to the pub in the first place. "Do you think I went there looking for a cheap thrill? I've had to

speak to you before, Bodie, about you sitting in judgement on folk for no reason. Not every man there was after sex, not by a long chalk. And the last time I looked, this was still a free country—"

"And still smelling ever so faintly of roses," Bodie broke in before Cowley could make him doubt if the moon might actually be made of green cheese after all. The smile was wicked now, inviting Cowley to share its seductive humour. "Or should that be smelling ever so faintly of lavender, if it's thanks to the likes of me and thee?"

Bodie was too sure of himself by half, the sheer cheek of the man taking Cowley's breath away: a convenient enough excuse, and one that suited him better than it being Bodie's dangerous good looks that were forcing his breath into a race against his heart. "How many times have I warned you about jumping to conclusions, eh, Bodie?" Voice so sharp, stinging, the same dressing-down that any agent would get, everything else held in tight check so that Bodie couldn't find fault and see the truth as clearly as he had in the pub. "Goin' in there like dam-busters, seeing one wee thing and making an entire range of bloody mountains out of it—" Hiding his smile as Bodie's certainty faltered, feinting fast to keep the other man off balance, throwing enough sticks and stones that Bodie would be too busy chasing them to sniff out the real truth. "Ham-fisted as ever, an' if you've ruined the plans I've spent weeks on, oh, laddie, by the time I've finished with you, the Outer Hebrides in January are going to feel like a rest cure."

"But sir—"

"Don't you 'but sir' me! Not after tonight's little performance, strutting around, for all the world like a cross between a Hell's Angel and a pop star." It was working, perfectly, Bodie losing the conviction of what he'd seen with his own eyes, Cowley's reputation for triple-think performing its usual magic. "Ach, don't stand there gaping like a landed fish. The damage's done, if it's done. On your way, Bodie—"

But so close to fruition, Cowley's safe retreat was beaten, those too-quick eyes seeing the glasses on the table, two stiff whiskies already poured, and Bodie's suspicion flared again, struggling with the well-earned habit of faith in his boss. "Is one of them for me? Or," he punctuated the comment very precisely, one of the very few who would dare question George Cowley on his home ground, "were you expecting...someone?"

At his most urbane, indulgent as he sometimes was, Cowley waved Bodie to a seat, settling himself opposite, picking up his own glass, allowing himself only one sip for the sake of appearances, even while he thundered furiously at himself for being so bloody lax—or so bloody tempted that he would sabotage himself. Painting himself into a corner, where he could give himself an excuse for indulging himself with Bodie? He'd like to think not, but with Bodie sitting there, large as life and twice as handsome, George Cowley was, for once, unsure of his own motives. "Go on," he urged, the same way he had the last time forgiveness for Bodie's sins had consisted of a good dram and the end of the lecture, even while he totted up the months upon months that he had wanted this man, and discovered that the sum of all that time was more desire and affection than he should ever risk in a lifetime, "drink up. You're not cleared for the reason I was there tonight, so I'll let you away with that. But," and now he was the one to pause, Bodie's eyes flickering to meet his as the atmosphere changed, Cowley manipulating the mood and the attack, all the better to defend himself, "you've a bit of explaining to do yourself, haven't you, Bodie? And I've a busy day tomorrow, so you might as well come up with a convincing excuse tonight."

Cowley sat back, leaning away so that the lamplight didn't mark his face and the glow of the fire didn't touch him at all. In front of him, Bodie didn't squirm, coming instead to the poker-backed posture of the professional soldier, the plush armchair seeming as Spartan as a ladder-back wooden chair. Some habits, it seemed, did indeed die hard. "Oh, come on, come on, Bodie!" he said harshly, harrying his quarry, trying to ignore the lick of desire that all Bodie's self-contained dangerousness inspired in him. "I've not got all night!"

"Sir."

"Not yet I'm not, but at the rate you're going, I'll have my peerage before you've finished." He wasn't gentle, not even close, his every move perfectly honed, cutting Bodie's perceptions to shreds, the firelight glinting hellishly on his skin as he leaned forward to interrogate his own agent. "Well, Bodie? What was a CI5 agent doing in a known homosexual pub?"

"Would you believe having a perfectly innocent drink, sir?"

"What d'you take me for? Willis? Five seconds

in there and a blind man would know the sort of place it is. Try another one, Bodie, and this one had better be an improvement."

Bodie, of course, would never shift nervously, not yet anyway. "I was curious?"

"Not when you're in CI5 you're not. Anyway, an ex-services man like yourself, trying to tell me you didn't know then was a place where army men go to rent themselves out?"

Perhaps Bodie's smirk was supposed to defuse either the situation or Cowley's table-turning suspicion. "I thought that was the Grenadier. Sir."

"This is no time for one of your sick jokes, Bodie!"

"No, sir." The merest flicker of his eyes as Bodie took stock of the expression on his boss' face. "Sorry, sir."

The old unwritten rule had always been that homosexuality was grounds for dismissal only if and when a man was caught: and did Cowley himself seeing Bodie there count as Bodie trapping himself? Or did it count as them each catching the other? Steeling himself against Bodie's undeniable appeal, Cowley gave Bodie a look of his own, conceding that the real reason he was tempted to kick Bodie out of CI5 was because of what Bodie had seen—because of what he had to convince Bodie he hadn't seen at all. He leaned back in his seat once more, but sitting so that the lamplight would fall on him this time, perfectly aware that the light would cast enough shadows upon his face to make him unreadable while still making his face a threatening mask. "I don't appreciate having to ask you again, Bodie. What were you doing in a pub that's a known haunt of homosexuals?"

The silence was almost complete, the faint noises from outside growing larger to fill the maw of quiet in Cowley's sitting room, the comfortable room become torture chamber.

Very, very softly: "Don't make me ask you a third time, Bodie."

Over the hiss of the fire and the far-off whisper of car tyres on the wet road, Cowley heard Bodie swallow, heard him clear his throat, could nigh near hear the wheels turning, and with them, Bodie's future spinning round slowly, the outcome largely dependent upon Bodie's input.

"I..."

Cowley sat motionless, waiting out the other man's nervousness.

"It's never been a security risk," Bodie an-

nounced, voice too loud to be truly convincing, although that might be nothing more incriminating than the natural fear of being caught. "I mean, I've always been careful, and discreet."

There was nothing from his boss, neither help nor encouragement nor condemnation, only that preternatural stillness and impenetrable stare that could impale more effectively than the sharpest of spears.

"I swear no-one knows."

"No-one, Bodie?" Asked, smoother than any whisky, more potent than any bottled spirit.

"Surely the men you..." George Cowley knew precisely how to imply without revealing an atom of truth, that one pause laden with disgust and contempt, "...picked-up know, and what protection do you have against them."

"Durex." Then quickly, the facetiousness going against him: "Yeh, yeh, I know what you said about my sick jokes. Sorry." Another deep breath, another attempt at explaining the inexcusable. "I've never gone anywhere but there or the Grenadier, sir, and not one of the blokes that go there could say anything without getting themselves in worse shit—I mean, worse trouble than they'd get me."

"So you were depending on joint guilt to keep them quiet, just as they depend on your need for silence?" Like myself, he thought, selfish anger growing, in-turned fury at how stupid he had been, what a fool he'd been to delude himself that he was safe if he went to one of those few special, select pubs: such certainties were for the likes of Bodie, not a man in his position. It was pathetic, really pathetic, to let nothing but lust put him in the position where he was dependent upon the loyalty of one man being enough to suborn that man away from the truth and convince the sorry bugger that he couldn't even believe his own eyes any more. "And did you have anything in mind for if they didn't hold their wheest?"

Bodie looked at him then, the honesty an indictment of Cowley's own multi-layered deceit. "Come to you, sir, and ask for permission to resign."

Only the occasional thickening of his accent revealed the stress Cowley was under, his measured and mellow tones such a lush contrast to the choked tightness of Bodie's voice. "And in telling me that, you're admitting to being a homosexual."

Grounds for dismissal; conduct incompatible with service needs; security risk: that one word

held all those meanings, and it echoed between them.

Homosexual.

Applicable to both, unadmittable to the one, inescapable to the other, disaster for both.

Unable to risk meeting his boss' eyes, Bodie looked downwards, only then remembering the glass on the table in front of him. A sudden dart of a stare glanced off Cowley's uncommunicative façade, and Bodie, called a liar by no more than the expression on Cowley's face, looked away once more.

The quiet stretched, marked by the asthmatic ticking of the old clock on the mantelpiece and the receding footsteps of someone passing by on their way to a home that was, hopefully, happier than this.

It was an old technique of Cowley's, this sitting here silently, saying nothing, asking nothing, his very stillness more demanding than mere questions could ever be. Invariably, his victim eventually succumbed to the guilt-sparked need to fill the gaping holes of silence and the only doubt was how long it would take to broach the damned mouth.

Slowly, made dignified either by the grace of his well-trained body or the gravity of the occasion, Bodie came to his feet in front of the fire, automatically coming to parade rest, although any drill sergeant would have screamed at him for those shoulders that drooped more miserably than his mouth and for that faint sheen of defiance. "So are you going to let me resign with a clear name, then?"

"Or what?" George Cowley asked softly, knowing perfectly well that Bodie wouldn't be able to tell if he were being given the chance to insist on doing the right thing for the Department or if he were being given enough rope to hang himself.

"Or," Bodie straightened perceptibly, standing nigh near at attention, a soldier awaiting his commanding officer to strip him of his rank, "you can sack me and have me blackballed as a security risk."

"And which one d'you think I should do?"

There was another look for that, and a pause that in less steadfastly masculine situations might have been called pregnant. "That depends, sir."

"Aye, I suppose it would." No-one who knew him trusted Cowley when he was smoothly plummy and so terribly mild. "And what is it that it depends on?"

Pointedly, and a part of Cowley couldn't help but approve that one of his agents would be so bravely adamant even while he decried the man's tenaciousness, Bodie looked at the second glass of whisky that had been sitting there, poured and waiting for him, hardly common practice if his being drummed out were a foregone conclusion. "It depends on whether or not you really were on a operation or if you were there off your own bat. Sir."

"Are you," and Cowley's voice was as smooth as acid dissolving steel, "implying that I'm a practicing homosexual? Me, the head of CI5?"

Brave, but not stupid. "I'm not implying anything, sir."

"Then what the hell d'you think you're doing?" If it were blackmail, oh, then Bodie would wish he'd been drowned at birth along with all the rest of the rats. "What's your game, Bodie?"

"All I'm saying is that you caught me where I shouldn't've been, but you were there yourself. And I don't have any definite proof as to why."

"An' jist you remember that! You won't get very far wi' your baseless accusations, I'll tell you tha' for nothing." On his feet now, pacing, his surging accent revealing more of his emotions and reactions that he wanted anyone, particularly Bodie ever to see, and he quickly wrestled his temper back under control, sheer will-power the yoke to hold it all in place. And all the while, there was Bodie standing there like the Angel Gabriel just waiting to blow his horn and bring Cowley's career tumbling down. One thing for folk to know he was one of those—or one of themselves, in more than a few instances—but purest calamity for it to come out officially, where it would have to be seen and acknowledged. Prosecuted, perhaps, if the ones that hated him decided to dig deeply enough and link him to the shame that had soiled his old circle of confrères, the old names that were the stickiest of mud for any man's reputation. The gutter press would have a field day with their speculations and their muck-raking, and they wouldn't care one whit how false all of it was, just as long as the scandal sold more newspapers. Gimlet-eyed, he pinned Bodie. "If you're trying to blackmail me—"

"What d'you think I am?" The shout barely leashed, the real emotion bursting through the old soldier façade. "I've been caught with my trousers down, and all I want to do is get out with my rep intact—might actually be able to get another job

that way." A very honest, very intense stare, unflinching, meeting Cowley full on. "I'm not asking for anything but you to let me leave under my own steam."

God help him, but he believed Bodie, even though trust was the last thing he should be indulging in right now: surviving, that was all he should be thinking about, surviving and keeping his own doorstep swept so clean Willis wouldn't have a leg to stand on. "Ach, Bodie, Bodie, what did ye have to go and get yourself caught for?" he asked with more regret than was proper and more dismay than he ought. He should be throwing Bodie out right now and wiping his hands in public and ostentatious distaste—Pontius Pilate crept into his mind, and another hand-washing, another victim thrown to appease the appetites of the mob—but the way the man was standing there, refusing to bow his head, refusing to be cowed, even in the sense his men used the word. Pride goeth before a fall, he reminded himself as Bodie stood there with head held high, but still, Bodie standing there like that served notice that this was, after all, one of Cowley's best agents, and a fine man, if not for that one fault.

A fault, his conscience shrilled all the more loudly, that he and Bodie shared in full measure. He didn't want to even think the word again, preferred not to admit it into the privacy of his own head, but the truth was whistling through his mind like winter's bitterest gales. It takes one to know one, they used to say in the playground when he'd been a wee boy at Napiershall St., and he should be putting all his energies into convincing Bodie that that old adage was a load of tripe.

Should, should: life was full of them, shoulds and oughts and musts, and what was he doing? Sitting here like a doolally-dip, with Bodie standing there like a big wally-dug, and for why?

For the simple reason that beyond his fear of discovery was the repugnancy of throwing a perfectly good man away, just tossing him onto the midden, and for doing nothing more than Cowley himself had done many a time. How many young men had he paid over the years? Oh, he'd never traded favours—but he'd done for certain young men what had been done for himself in the dim past: an introduction here, a useful phone number there, a quiet word in a sympathetic ear.

Made restless by Cowley's uncomfortable silence, Bodie shifted uneasily, his tension as

obvious as the fine musculature his movement revealed under the enticing black of his clothes. Out of the corner of his eye, Cowley saw all this, took in the pose of hard-man that still understated the true strength and ruthlessness of this man, and which denied completely certain details only the psych tests and background information had revealed. Of course, hindsight always being of the 20/20 variety, George Cowley could have kicked himself for being as blind about this young man as he had been about the changes in his old friend Barry Martin. Reading, writing and quoting poetry, the overkill of female companionship, the complete lack of anything approaching a social or long-term relationship with a woman, that terse comment about his reasons for leaving home to run away to sea—good God, the man had dropped hints all over the place. Or so Cowley could tell himself now, with Bodie just standing there in front of him in the alluring clothes picked with obvious care, everything about him guaranteed to draw the eye of like-minded men.

And that, of course, was the one thing that George Cowley should never admit—if he were a lesser man, but brutal honesty had always been both his bane and his blessing. Tonight, it was nothing less than a curse.

Seeing him in Packenham's tonight: if Bodie hadn't worked for him, if Bodie had been some stranger, would this handsome man still be standing there on Cowley's Indian rug?

Of course not, Cowley told himself.

He'd be upstairs in my room by now, face down on the bed, chewing the pillows.

Not the first time he'd had thoughts like that, not that he usually allowed himself gutter fantasies with a single one of his 'lads': they were sacrosanct, because, as George Cowley knew only too bitterly, his own reminder thumping through his brain, the oft-repeated words a mantra of warning: temptation was never more than a briefing away.

Temptation was even less distant tonight. After all, what proof would there be, apart from Bodie's word? And what was it they were called these days? Disgruntled employee, obviously trying to tar and feather the very man who had caught him in the act. For it would be easy enough to manufacture the evidence to 'prove' that George Cowley had been there in the line of duty: there was always at least one diplomat or industrialist or scientist dabbling where he ought

not, always one line of CI5 inquiry that could be re-activated by a conveniently-timed anonymous tip. Oh, aye, he could protect himself easily enough, as long as he discredited Bodie in the first place—and how hard would it be, in this man's chequered past, to find the pattern of perversion? Martell, for starters, a blatant homosexual and gun runner: link Bodie's name to Martell's—just the smallest whisper of Bodie's time in the Congo and the rumour-mill would provide all the 'evidence' the security forces needed—and Bodie could provide autographed photos of himself and Cowley in the act and not a soul would believe him.

So easy. And if he were Willis, and if Bodie were one of Willis' preferred buxom blondes, then he might even do it. But he was George Cowley, and his name and his honour mattered, to him if to no-one else.

Which left him in the position where he should get rid of Bodie, but couldn't quite silence his conscience long enough to do so.

Which left him disgusted that he had even considered having sex with Bodie before ruining the other man—but still, he couldn't silence the hiss of desire leeching at his will.

All of it left Bodie standing there, parader-ground still, waiting.

And knowing, if Cowley hadn't convinced him that Bodie had been wrong about what he'd seen tonight.

"Sir—" voice unsteady, the strain more than telling.

Cowley acknowledged him with a small look.

"What are you going to do?"

I wish to God I knew, he thought sincerely.

"Just tell me—"

Tell him what—the answer, when Cowley himself didn't have an answer because his own motives were so corrupted he couldn't entirely trust himself at this moment?

Look, his body whispered, at the way Bodie's trousers cling to him. Fear and its adrenalin had given him an erection, pressing hard against the black fabric. Think about it, his lust sang, think about that in your mouth, the taste of him, the size of him, the hardness of him—

"Oh, for God's sake, get out, Bodie," he rasped, appalled at where his libido was wandering, furious with himself for succumbing at this worst of possible moments. "I'll make my decision

tomorrow, when I'm not so bloody furious with you."

"Yes, sir," Bodie replied with a meekness that was usually conspicuous by its absence. "In the office?"

"At ten o'clock sharp, after I have my meeting with the Minister."

Another man he'd seen in that pub tonight, information that he would use with subtle ruthlessness tomorrow under the guise of comrades-in-arms. Unfair, so unfair to get rid of Bodie, and so unthinkable to keep him on.

"One thing—"

From behind him, where Bodie was standing in the doorway, not looking at that faux pas of a second whisky.

"If it makes any difference, I'd give you my word that I'd steer clear of places like that in future."

"Aye, but is that the sort of promise a man can keep?"

There was no answer from Bodie for that, although Cowley already knew his own answer, his presence in that pub tonight being more than enough.

"On your bike," he said wearily, for once not even hearing the tiredness in his own voice. "Go on, Bodie."

For a moment, he thought there was going to be an argument over that, thought the mutinous tilt of Bodie's mouth was going to spill over into aggravation and words hurled in haste. But Bodie didn't let him down, taking his tacit rebellion with him, the slamming of the door his only comment.

Respite, but only a short stay of execution. By tomorrow morning, he had to have his answer, decision made and tied up neatly in red tape. There was no surprise in the fact that there was no simple, clear-cut right answer: the surprise lay in the amount of pain the choices wrought. Of course, there was the rocketing he would have to give Rawlinson in 'Reference & Research' and there was the revelation of where they had fallen down so badly. Going through the usual nightly ritual, he succeeded in occupying his mind not with thoughts of Bodie himself, but Bodie as an abstract problem, an aspect of an operation, one where he would have to protect himself, start putting a bit more emphasis on that Soviet 'trade' negotiator who had been seen glad-ragging his way round some of London's mixed clubs and pubs. Perfect cover for

himself, of course, this decloseting the Russian, perfect excuse for him to be in a queer pub himself.

Later, in the wee sma' hours when he needed to be asleep to face the coming day, he was still lying there awake, the blankets a burden across his chest, weighing him down. Uneasy, he shoved them aside, the damp chill of night air slinking over him, welcome for its freshness against the staleness of his thoughts, although his leg would be giving him gyp when he got up.

Worth it, though, to feel that he could breathe again. Worth it, to cool the heat in his flesh and chill his imagination.

The decision should have been easy enough, for didn't they say that such things grew easier with practice, and how many times was it now that he'd thrown some poor soul to the wolves?

Aye, but before, it had always been for the department, and this time, with fear gnawing his bones worse than anything his knee ever gave him, he wasn't so certain that his motives were pure. For the sake of the department, he could argue that. But the stench of self-interest clung to him until he barely restrained the urge to get up for a shower.

After all, Bodie hadn't compromised the department, not this time—and if George Cowley were to sack a man on suspicion of what he might do in the future, then who would he have left? Not even Murphy was entirely beyond doubt, not with those pot plants of his.

On the other hand, there was himself. How many times had he promised himself that he'd never set another foot inside that sort of place? Never lay a finger on a compromising situation, never set himself up for the latest variation in the badger game, never succumb to the hungers of the flesh?

Too many times, so many that the weight of them pressed down on him until he could scarce catch a breath. The cold was getting to him as well, his muscles stiffening, his knee whingeing at him. No chance of regaining sleep, no chance for anything approaching rest, and he was damned if he were going to lie there like a broody hen but twice as useless. A bath, and then into the office—do them all the power of good to have the boss walk in on them when they were all smugly sure he'd be tucked up in bed. Still, he couldn't quite bring himself to move, his mind roving slowly over the evening, highlights replaying. Bodie, ever the soldier; Bodie, too bloody handsome for anyone's

good. Standing there on his dignity when he should have been either begging, calling in every favour he could think of, or going for the jugular.

Looking the way he did, Bodie wouldn't have been on his own in that pub for more than five minutes, and that long only if he were playing hard to get. The military man who had attracted Cowley's attention was already nothing more than another mugshot in his private rogues' gallery: he could remember everything from the way Bodie walked to the way his eyelashes cast shadows across his cheek. Could remember every single detail of Bodie in that pub tonight. If only, when he'd turned round he'd seen nothing more complicated than a stranger's face, if only Bodie had been an unknown quantity and not one of his own agents... Aye, and if wishes were fishes and fishes were currency, he'd be a millionaire.

Lying here wallowing just because he was in a quandary—pathetic, that's what it was.

And dangerous forbye, his mind supplying his hand with the memory of the way the muted light had danced on Bodie's hair, and the way Bodie moved with such stolid control, all that passion secreted within like an old coal fire banked for the night. His hand itched to transfer the knowledge on to other rebellious parts of his body, and his fingers dabbled in wiry curls and stroked along smooth skin before he wrenched body and mind back under the yoke of self-control.

Knee shrieking at him, he launched himself from the bed, wincing as the cold his feet and his body weight hit his knee. Dawn was many a long hour away this far into winter, and the bathroom light was cruel as it staved his eyes, but not so cruel as the mirror. Not half as cruel as he was to himself.

Every line was catalogued, every fraction of an inch that had decimated his skin, the jawline that was softening, sagging with over a half century on this planet. The coldness of his eyes next—no fool he, to think his eyes were the colour of the warm summer sky. Mouth, intractable, inclined towards sourness that had nothing to do with taste. Hair, fading or faded, thinning, the vibrancy nothing more than something he remembered and missed, his vanity battered worse by that that any other single thing. There was a full-length mirror on the inside door of his wardrobe, but he thought the small bathroom mirror was more than enough.

Old, his reflection said. You're getting old.

His body, pulse still heavy in his groin, dis-

agreed, every small movement setting his genitals swaying heavily, skin brushing softly on skin, an echo of the last time he'd had a man's hand on him.

He'd pretended it was Bodie that night as well.

And just how many times had he promised himself—sworn upstairs and down—that he'd never do that again either? Never go to the pub, never pick up a strange man, never allow himself to pretend he was with Bodie—oh, aye, he had definitely been buying his future on the never-never, and like credit, he'd never get his feet clear of the debt.

Water, teeth-chittering cold, splashing his face, icy drops hitting him in the chest like sharp kitten teeth, a spot or two runnelling down his torso to make him shiver, the cold all the more bitter on the heat of his groin. Unmoved by his mind's mewlings, his cock was rising slowly, filling and lengthening, growing heavy against his will.

Bodie. Of all the men who'd ever served under him—in the purest terms only, that is—Bodie was the one who troubled him most, with his black humour and glittering eyes, his insolence and his loyalty. Stony faced, George Cowley looked himself in the mirror and admitted it was so tempting to throw the mad fool out before this new knowledge of Bodie coloured everything and he made a mad fool of himself throwing himself at Bodie's feet—or on his neck, Bodie bowed under him, the long lines of his back, that scar on his left shoulder, just made for a man's tongue to trace...

At this rate, it wasn't a shower he'd be needing, it'd be Niagara Falls. In winter.

Still, when he stepped under the cascade, it was hot, the steam rising, the water easing some of the strain out of his muscles, his knee unlocking, the pleasure soaking into his bones the way the water soaked his hair. Bodie. There, in the pub, not effervescent and gay like some of the new young men, but dark and dangerous, available in the way the other military men were: for a price, no more than a token to salve the raw wound of their need for men.

To give credit where it's due, Cowley was slow to touch himself, washing himself impersonally with the clear soap he'd used since he was a boy. Slower yet to permit the fantasy, reluctant to yield, but the needs were too great, denied for too long, this evening starting off in the adamant expectation of ending in sex. And if Bodie had been a stranger...

His pulse throbbed in his cock, lust uncurling in his belly, his body's demands implacable, his mind going round and round in circles that refused to stay with the safe, impersonal images of other men he'd had, other men he'd seen in surreptitious videos, always coming back to Bodie in that bloody pub.

The minute his hand finally touched the hooded head of his cock, he had lost a battle he had fought only half-heartedly. Who would ever know what he'd thought in his own shower, and since when had he ever allowed his favouritism to show as anything other than aggravation?

Bodie, then, he thought, closing his eyes, leaning his forehead against the warmed tiles of the wall, Bodie walking towards me, a stranger, a dangerous man available for rent, the swagger in his walk, the set of his mouth, the caress of his trousers. The offer, the acceptance, walking out together, him only a step or two ahead of me, and his jacket short enough to see his bum, his flanks hollowing with ever step, and nothing between me and his arse but a wee bit scrap of cloth.

His hand was moving faster now, flesh as hot as the water, fantasy hotter than hell itself. Dark street, scarcely enough light to see by, but there, an archway into a back alley, the granite polluted black as midnight, and Bodie darker still, a shadow, waiting, hands pale, unbuttoning, opening, unmasking, half naked in front of him, already hard, hungry, needing him. Bodie kneeling, mouth agape, begging to be filled, sucking him in, sucking him—

His seed splattered the wall with diluted whiteness, water dissolving him immediately, flushing him down the drain, and his legs were left weak, knees not quite steady, only the stiffness of his arms holding his limp body upright. On his head, running down his neck, into his ears, across his back, even between his buttocks, the water was no longer so hot, the boiler emptying itself until warmth slowly faded into coolness.

Impassive, he stepped out carefully, drying himself on thick, Turkish towels that were a definite concession—a harmless one, he had thought—to the secret pearl of hedonism that lurked at his core. The big towels, soft and white, rubbed slowly over skin he had touched himself, had imagined Bodie touching, and the fabric drank up the beads of water the way he had wanted Bodie to—

But passion was past, the sin done, time and

past time to get on with it, put it all into perspective, recognise Bodie's appeal and deal with it. And well past time to stop thinking of his own agent like that: he was a professional, and he came to believe that, little by little, as he donned his clothes, article by article. Everything perfectly in place, impeccable grey suit over snowy white shirt, dark blue tie knotted precisely, and he was finally presentable. A pause, definite hesitation, but then he looked at himself in the wardrobe mirror, not at all liking what he saw. Oh, aye, the image of the punctilious civil servant was exactly as it should have been, but that wasn't what he was looking at. Did it show, in his eyes, the set of his mouth, the way he stood, the way he used his hands?

Would someone—had someone—guessed about him? Someone not 'in the club', not of his ilk, but someone who could turn that secret into disaster?

And when he looked at him this morning, would Bodie know what his boss had been doing, with the hot shower pouring over him and the lustful thoughts flooding him?

Did it, did any of it, show?

A purely metaphoric straightening of his tie, and the doubts were shunted aside, dunted into the dark areas that would be poked and prodded only after a fair few wee nips, areas that could be ignored and left insensate. For now.

Had anyone been able to muster enough enthusiasm to actually ask, then any census would have clearly declared today to be the worst in the history of CI5.

Bombs in shops were never very pretty, and uglier still was the fact that George Cowley found that there was a very small part of him that welcomed the public crisis as panacea for the private one.

The Press were screaming, the Prime Minister was screaming, the Minister was screaming, and Cowley had gone very, very quiet, a detail that worried his agents no end.

"Answers!" George Cowley thundered in a barely restrained roar, his outburst perversely reassuring to a department used to a boss who spoke . "I've already told you, it's answers I want, not peely-wally excuses. On yer bikes, the lot of you. Every stone, d'you hear me? I want every stone looked under, and then you bring whatever crawls out from under back here to me. Understood?"

Feverish nodding from the assembled partnerships and solo operatives, with even the laconic Murphy acknowledging tersely.

"Well? What the hell are you lot doing still standing there?"

A few murmured, but none loudly enough for the discrete words to be heard, Cowley's office emptying rapidly.

"And where the hell have you been?" A definite shout this time, the show of temper flawless camouflage for the sinking in his belly as he looked up from his desk and saw Bodie, standing there as he had in the living room the night before.

"Checking with Martell, sir," rapped out, militarily precise. "No information available, but as he hasn't heard anything from any of his associates or enemies, he assumes that it came in via the Basques because there was a very large shipment of semi-automatics went over to Spain not a month ago."

"Aye, that would make sense to their sick little brains, wouldn't it?"

"Sir." And before Cowley could ask: "Doyle's talking to a couple of his informers, thinks that if he oils the right palm, he just might come up with the goods."

"Which means I'd best triple check his expenses at the end of this month." Usually a joke, this morning it lightened the atmosphere not one whit, the awareness of the night before, and for Cowley, the illicit pleasures of the early hours, damming up between them, professionalism become a struggle to achieve.

"Permission to speak, sir."

Cowley's hackles actually rose, and his eyes narrowed, all his instincts going into sudden, uncomfortable alert. "Granted," he said without thinking about it, dropping easily back into the old patterns.

"I need to report a possible security risk, sir."

Just look at the pride in that face, dignity clung to by the skin of his teeth, the jaw so set, that muscle jumping, giving him away. As he had last night, as he had too many times before, George Cowley felt a slow, threatening warmth deep inside.

"And what would the nature of that risk be, Bodie?" he asked calmly enough.

"Perverse, according to some people, sir." Another one of those quick glances that Bodie always sneaked in when he was truly nervous. "I

was somewhere I shouldn't have been, and although I left before I did anything I'm not supposed to, I was out of bounds."

That was it? Nothing more? An official notification that would put Cowley in the clear and Bodie in the dung heap? And now, for God's sake, why now, when he had bombers on the loose and a lethal PM roaring down the phone at him? "There's a Force 9 flap going on, in case you hadn't noticed, Bodie, and I've no time to be dealing with your personal life and your sordid little girlfriends. Make an appointment with Betty, and report immediately if anyone tries to blackmail you."

Stoic, it would seem, bar the gleam in his eyes and the relief oozing out of him. "Yes, sir. Brilliant idea, sir."

"Aye," Cowley said, smiling in spite of himself, knowing full well he should be castrating this upstart instead of sinking into a pit of attraction, "it certainly was a brilliant idea." Coming to me to report the incident, letting me right off the hook... "That appointment, Bodie."

"Yeh?"

"There's no rush, unless you're stupid a second time."

"Who, me? Rhodes Scholar, that's wot I am, in't I?"

He really was going to have to watch this appalling tendency to smile at Bodie indulgently. "Then swimming the Atlantic must have mildewed your brain. Now, away with you—I want those bombers found, and I've no intention of letting you off the leash until they're in my custody and off the streets."

"Yes, sir," Bodie said obediently enough, turning on his heels and leaving quickly. Still, twirling his glasses absently, George Cowley was left with the distinct feeling that he wouldn't enjoy finding out why Bodie had developed that gleam to his eyes and that bounce to his step.

They never did find any actual provable evidence against the bombers, although the industrial espionage case was a feather in their collective cap, and the usual run-of-the-mill murder and mayhem was dealt with well enough that the Minister, the Rt. Hon. David Stratford-Johns, invited Mr. Cowley to dinner at his club.

Unimaginative food, thin soups and parsleyed potatoes, bland conversation fitted in meaninglessly between courses, the chat nothing more than

an aperitif for the real meat of the discussion. The usual comments, his usual replies, but his mind wandered, the banality undermined by the sharp, graven images of Bodie in all his guises, the man a cipher, everything from callous gun-runner to saviour of abandoned kittens with innumerable levels in between, a man who used his intelligence to play dumb. And the different looks of the man, all of them experienced in the weeks since that night, every expression and every nuance of appearance paraded in front of Cowley until the unacceptable implication burned in his belly.

Over the port—an overly sweet concoction Cowley had always heartily loathed, especially when he had to drink it instead of a decent malt—the Minister was his usual self, as overly mannered as the port and the self-consciously masculine décor of the club. There was none of the subtle elegance of Cowley's own club with its neutral colours and understated comfort. Here, there were actually big-game hunting trophies on the wall—hardly conducive to a man's appetite and so anachronistic as to be laughable: not that he would ever laugh outright, of course. Oh, no, dinner with the Minister meant shaded conversations about budgets and information, about prosecutions and other things to be swept quietly under the nearest carpet.

"Oh, I understand you completely, Minister," he said, smiling pleasantly, barely touching the rim of the glass to his lips, the smell of the port not quite as bad as its taste. "And I'm sure you'll understand my position completely as well." He leaned back in his chair, apparently replete, apparently concedingly. "Justice must be served, and of course you're right—there are times when the letter of the law is a wee bit too harsh to serve justice properly."

"Then you'll make sure that poor old York's father-in-law isn't prosecuted for this unfortunate incident?"

Sharks should smile so sweetly. "I'll be happy to have one of my lads look into it."

This, obviously, wasn't quite what the Minister wanted to hear. "I don't think you follow me after all, George," and the Minister proved that he, too, could smile with all the sincerity of said shark meeting a surfer. "It would be most upsetting to certain personages if the gentleman in question were to have his name splashed all over the tabloids—" a pause, and they both knew what was coming, "you know how the Fleet Street rabble can

be when they see the slightest hint of clay feet treading the corridors of power."

"Aye, Minister," and how he wished he had a decent whisky in front of him instead of this filthy swill, "I think I do follow you perfectly now." He waited until the Minister's smile was urbane and satisfied, until the other man was quite, quite secure, and then he leaned forward, and spoke. "Now, David, you know that you can be absolutely honest with me," he said, referring less obliquely than usually to that part of their lives that went forever unspoken, "and you can rest assured that I'll take care of any little... indiscretions that come back to haunt you. If you'll just give me the pertinent information...?"

A slow flush rose up over the Minister's face, and his eyes hardened, narrowed dangerously, the suave politician's mask dropping away like scales to free the ruthless former intelligence officer underneath. "I'm sure Mrs. Stratford-Johns would have told me had we received any threats or the like at home."

Touché, Cowley thought, a bit on the amused side. Next the stupid old windbag will be thinking he can dance me hither and yon—and with me paying the bloody piper an' all. "I'm quite sure she would, Minister, and it's always nice to hear that things are so harmonious on the home front. So much better for a man, isn't it? A good wife is always such a stabilising influence, I think."

"Then in that case," the annoyance loud in the snapping, crackling tone of voice, Cambridge smoothness overlying white water rapids, "it's remarkable that you yourself have never married, George."

"And when would I have time to get myself to the Church, eh, David? It takes time to court the ladies, and anyway, it was you yourself who said it when you stood me for membership in the Firm—"

Oh, it was a real pleasure when so civil a barb struck so deeply, David Stratford-Johns in no position to threaten George Cowley with exposure, not when the Minister had been so instrumental in ushering him in. Mud, when flung by Fleet Street, had a tendency to stick.

Cowley was continuing, speaking as if he hadn't noticed the taut expression on his Minister's face, "—I'm married to the job. Dedication, and all that."

"Yes. Quite." A filthy look that should have been stamped out in prep school, and then the curtain of politeness was once more drawn. "And

speaking of the job, we both of us have a considerable amount of work to do tomorrow, haven't we?"

"Oh, yes, you're meeting with the PM, aren't you, and with one or two other personages?"

"Yes. And I had rather hoped to go into the meetings with some good news."

"The news will be good—from your point of view. I hardly think the clientèle of a massage parlour is any of *CI5*'s business, do you?" Which, while it wouldn't necessarily protect a certain father-in-law, the Minister could say that he'd persuaded George Cowley to be reasonable in this matter, and that one slight emphasis would keep George Cowley's and *CI5*'s consciences clear: the department wouldn't poke its nose into this minor domestic matter, but a quick wee phone call to Jackson over at Special Branch...

Or better yet: set Stuart on them, and then file the information away until such time as it would do the most good... He smiled once again, setting his mind to the task of smoothing the Minister's ruffled feathers, plastering over all the cracks until it seemed that the Old Boy's Network had held once more, which it had, but this time, to Cowley's advantage.

When he opened the door to his house, the heat hit him, inviting him in, putting him in mind of coming home from school or the football, his Maw waiting for him in the scullery, floral pinny nowhere near up to the task of covering her great water-wing breasts and doughty arms. Course, back then it was a coal fire that heated them up, all crackling and popping, the flames burning orange and red, blue and yellow, even an occasional lick of green. Now, all he had was the sterility of underfloor central heating, discreet brass grates blowing almost as much hot air as the Minister. Clean, modern heat, in a clean, modern house, with quiet, mature neighbours who would nod a hello if he passed them going in to their tidy, sere little houses.

He absolutely refused to feel lonely: after all, look where it had led him last time. Anyway, he reassured himself, taking a bottle and a glass from the sideboard, putting his briefcase on the table, it wasn't loneliness that was wrong with him, just a lesser, baser need. He hadn't gone near a single one of the safer sources since the last time, when Bodie had caught him. Hadn't dared, not until he'd made the usual discreet enquiries to find out who knew what about him, who knew enough to land him in

it. He was still safe, his squirrelled stock of secrets better than anything anyone else had on him. Case in point: the way the Minister had caved in tonight without a bit of fuss. Oh, aye, the scales were definitely still tipped in his favour.

The level in his glass went down slowly, rising again rapidly as he poured more good whisky in to wash away the taste of the bad port. He should have been warm, but winter clung to him.

"Getting auld," he said aloud, needing to hear a human voice, his father's photograph looking down at him, the expression of half a century ago trapped on the paper. The Peoples' Palace back home was going to get all these photographs when he died, all these mementos from an era as dead as the people who had lived it. His own photographs, what few they were, would go to his sister, if she were still alive. The rest of it, too bulky to be traipsed all the way up to her new house in Galloway, would be sold, and the money transferred up to her using the magic of modern technology. But the things from the past couldn't be updated, couldn't be made convenient, so they'd be shoved somewhere, or thrown out, or sold to rich Americans who had the luxury of not having lived their roots, only read about them.

There'd be precious few who'd miss him when he was gone, and many's the one who would be quietly delighted to see him six feet under. Not much of a legacy for a man's life, was it? His department, his medals gathering dust in the desk's bottom drawer, the letters of recommendation filed neatly away: none of it was much of a comfort, sitting there in the too-warm room, surrounded by the chill of his loneliness.

But when had George Cowley ever given in to misery? Steadily, he put the bottle away, allowing himself only the one more glass that sat, fat and filled with the best money could buy, his one form of comfort alongside his only real refuge. He didn't sigh, for men like George Cowley never do, and reached for his portable office, the briefcase full of folders.

The clock had struck the hour more than once and pages lay across the richly polished mahogany of his coffee table, glossy photographs capturing the occasional glint of colour from the pseudo-coal fire burning in the blocked-off grate. Notes, written in a precise, strong hand, the words very black against the white paper, comments made, plans of action dictated, everything going with its custom-

ary smoothness until his shaking of the briefcase insisted that no, he really hadn't remembered to bring the Simcox file home, would have to drag someone out here with the damned folder.

Of course, that brought it all crashing down on him: the loneliness that had been worming through his bones, the sexual hunger that no amount of work could bury any more, Bodie standing there *knowing* a truth about him and worst, worst, of all: Bodie, a model of decorum who still managed, somehow, to flirt with him, to smile at him just so, to share the right—or wrong—sort of private joke.

No, he thought, staring at the fire, peripherally aware of the weight of his father's disapproval down the long march of years, the worst thing of all isn't the way Bodie's been.

It was the way he himself was starving for it.

Oh, aye, worst of the worst was himself, and his hunger, and the voraciousness of his desire, and the devouring of his stare. Night-times spent in a bed that had always been solitary and was now peopled with Bodie's flesh, Bodie's differing incarnations. Experience and dreaming sparking off each other, his loneliness the flint, his lust the tinder, and his pride the ashes afterwards.

There were times he allowed himself the tormenting luxury of having Bodie's lust match his own, Bodie willing in his bed, even Bodie content to be at his side, unreal times that were always in the safe hours of the early morning when Bodie was well out of reach, or in the unpredictable hours when Bodie was off working with Doyle, not a penny to choose between them.

And with the pair of them lying gassed on that road, he'd known that he could, and would, and had chosen between them. Dangerous that, a well-honed sword of Damocles hanging over his head, and another swinging between his legs as his desire thrived against all will and common sense.

Perhaps, he thought, tapping the Hunterston file that would be a lot more useful with the Simcox file to compare it to, if he were to have Bodie, know him in the Biblical sense, get him out of his system, reduce Bodie to nothing more than a body he'd once buggered...

Then he ran bang smack into one of his own rules: non-fraternisation.

But then again, wasn't he the one who always said only the good rules were the ones that couldn't be broken?

And Bodie had proved himself to be discreet,

and controlled, and bloody good at throwing even their own lot completely off the trail.

Had offered to discard his own career to help protect his boss'. Loyal, then, and to a fault, but one which Cowley could depend on.

As for the Biblical side of things: he'd been arguing that forever and ayeways would, until the Last Trump anyway. There were no answers there, only the hopes his own interpretations fed him, and only the dogged belief that God would never have done so wicked a thing to him as to make him need a sin to survive.

Bodie, of course, with his own hell-bent philosophy, with his own set of morals, he would have no trouble with any of this at all: so fierce it was a physical pain, George Cowley envied him that, would have cheerfully discarded a lifetime's values. Always supposing he could. Not discard then, but...misplace, perhaps. Lose, temporarily, the way he had to for an Operation Susie or one or two particularly nasty situations during the War. Put his morals and his objections somewhere safe, and not find them again until morning...

The last drop of his whisky slid slowly down his throat, and when he set the glass down, the decision had been made. Not for better or for worse, nothing either so optimistic or so permanent: this would be for the worst, for both of them, and his intellect and his pride shrieked at him in his father's voice, and still, he couldn't change his decision.

Wanted to walk away from this, to ignore this lust, subsume it in his work; wanted to wait until this infatuation—for aye, that's what it was, and the shame in him was a terrible thing—was no more relevant than the glowing handsomeness of Sandy MacIlvain in Third Year.

And the wanting was useless, a feeble runt of a thing routed by the consuming, festering need he harboured deep in his bones.

Bodie.

Unable to contain himself, he jumped to his feet, the spasm in his knee reminding him of how old and raddled he was, how far from the desire of youths he was and how pathetic his desire for youth was. There were no two ways about it: Bodie was too young for him and he too old for Bodie.

But he wanted him, oh, how he craved him like an addict begging for his fix. No better than a junkie in the street or hanging about the stench of public toilets, willing to do anything for his fix.

And he was, willing to break his own good rules, willing to risk his career, willing, even, to make a fool of himself.

He could imagine it, had seen it in his mind too many times, had seen it other peoples' lives: the aged queen, simpering after the handsomeness of youth. And youth, laughing.

Not that Bodie had been laughing any of the many times they'd seen each other since. Fretting a bit, aye, there was that, enough that Doyle had given Bodie one or two worried looks of his own, although not enough for anyone else to have noticed. Good at keeping his own counsel, was Bodie, poker-faced to those who didn't know him, and the few that did know him were still kept at a distance, for all that worthy's bantering jokes.

But even if he could trust Bodie's discretion, and set aside his own policies about non-fraternisation, even if he could test just how absolute Bodie's loyalty was—was any of that even a drop in the ocean compared to his lust for having Bodie, a lust both perverted and perverting, turning everything it touched into the funfair-mirror image he wanted to see?

And you could sit here swithering all night the way you have about what to do with Bodie in the first place, and then where will we be? he thought dourly to himself. It was ridiculous, him so indecisive, when he'd built a career out of his ability to make good decisions and instant choices.

More information, perhaps that honestly was what he needed. Test Bodie out a bit, see the lie of the land, do a recce to find out whether or not Bodie could be trusted on this one thing that Cowley couldn't trust himself on.

Aye, well, it was as good an excuse as any, and better than the many he'd come up with before.

Glasses dangling from his left hand, his right hand reached out, and he watched it, as if to pretend that he had nothing to do with this, that this was just some impulse of his body and not what, in cold reality, it was.

Procedures had been gratifyingly tightened, crisp questions and dry answers, and then Murphy was on the phone again, sounding bored and therefore tired. The minor details that had cropped up since Cowley'd left for his dinner with the Minister were quickly mowed out of the way, and then, again as if this were no more than mere impulse, as if this were something he hadn't really thought about, something that he could evince

some small surprise at, he was saying: "I've left the Simcox file there, and I need to go through it tonight."

Of course Murphy didn't show any surprise: he had no idea the Simcox file was a minor document to clarify a point in something else.

"Who's going off stand-by just now?" Cowley asked, as if he didn't know—another of those little surprises, no doubt.

"That's Bodie and Doyle. D'you want me to send them over—"

God, no! One was hard enough to deal with, and if he were going to give in to this impulse, then Doyle would be an embarrassment of riches.

"No. No, there's no point in paying the pair of them overtime for a simple message. Send Bodie—he deserves to be kept late after the cheek he gave me this morning."

"Yes, sir, I'll send him—running all the way."

"Probably be safer than letting him behind the wheel of a car. Just make sure he doesn't forget that file."

The receiver fumbled from his hand, hitting hard enough that there was a tiny ping from the phone: with what he had in mind, with what he'd just done, there should have been a major alarm bell going off. Methodically, he tidied the papers up, checked the various alarms and then, with the monitor he kept at home these days—another impulse that didn't bear close examining—he did a quick and thorough sweep of the whole house, checking the bedroom twice, resolutely refusing to consider the sordid details of this 'impulse' of his.

Satisfied, about the lack of bugging devices at any rate, he stowed the monitor away and went back downstairs, seating himself to belie his agitation. He would not pace, would not let himself get worked up: would sit here, patiently waiting for Bodie to turn up on his doorstep, as the other man had once before.

Of course, he could still his body, make invisible the tension, but as it always seemed to be these days, his mind was on an endless treadmill called Bodie. Speculation, doubt, hope, fear—lust. All of it, and a million more moods besides, spinning around and around in his head. He could do with a drink, or better yet, a whole bottle, but though alcohol was a lovely excuse, he actually needed to stay sober, to keep full control under the appearance of abandonment. He went to the sideboard, took a horribly small sip of malt, swirling it round

and round before he swallowed; took a small dab from the mouth of the bottle and dabbed it on his neck and collar like eau de Glasgow, just enough to smell as though he had a fair few glasses under his belt, more than his usual evening tipple. Enough to convince Bodie that he had been drinking heavily and was, therefore, vulnerable.

Quickly, he put the bottle away before he could give in to the terrible drouth that had come over him. Walked, dignified, back to his chair, still wishing he could get plastered, but no longer so young that he could drink and still be in any condition to act on this ever-more carefully planned impulse.

Up the stairs again, this time to arrange, within easy reach, a few odds and ends that he hoped they would need before too long. Mocking himself as he put clean sheets on the bed, tucking the corners in with tight military precision. Next, the curtains were pulled firmly shut, overlapping to ensure complete privacy—best to do the same with the bathroom window, no need to take the chance of anyone happening to see compromising silhouettes through the frosted glass. The stair window was fine, overlooking the back court and the blank wall of the building behind. Back to the living room then, to check the last details there.

But of course, he was supposed to be pretending that this was all a test of Bodie, that this was all to see if Bodie could be trusted to stay in the Department and that the sexual aspect was nothing but a necessary evil, the ends justifying the means.

He laughed at that one: keep the excuses for the morning, when you'll need them, he advised himself, shoving his hand in his pocket so that he wouldn't touch himself where polite men shouldn't when fully clothed in their own living room. He gave the clock on the mantelpiece a filthy look, wishing that will alone could make time flow faster.

Eventually, a good twenty minutes late by estimates far more conservative than George Cowley's, the bell went, hopefully heralding Bodie. Or perhaps, Cowley's cold feet thought for him, hopefully heralding the resistible Doyle or Murphy, Bodie safely on his way to someone else's bed, someone who had the right and the freedom to be thinking about sex with handsome men. He did not, at that moment, want to remember that he was Bodie's boss, but the remembering was unavoidable, the door opening on a smartly dressed Bodie,

files under his arms like the civil servant he occasionally pretended to be.

It would be wise to simply reach out, take the files and shut the door on temptation, but wisdom was beyond him at that point, and common sense was making itself scarce. "Come away in," he heard himself saying, wincing at the thickness of his accent and the hoarseness of his voice, noticing Bodie noticing, watching the reaction to his own too obvious lack of unconcern. In the living room, Bodie yet to say a word, standing there impas-sively, every letter of body language giving all the decisions to Cowley to make of them what he would.

"Ach, don't just stand there—you're making the place look untidy. Sit yourself down." Inches behind Bodie, hands itching to touch the forbidden flesh, his own flesh rising to reach that which he refused to permit his hands.

"Thanks," Bodie said, and they were both aware of how he had not said sir, had not questioned why his boss was inviting him in at nearly midnight when all he'd done was bring a file over.

"You'll have had your supper," Cowley was saying, not out of inhospitality, but out of haste, out of the fear of turning this into too mundane an encounter, too much like too many other, genuinely innocent, visits from various agents over a multi-tude of years. "D'you fancy a drink?"

Bodie looked at him, and while his mouth said the polite and proper things, his expression was far more speaking, making blatant statements of what, precisely, he fancied.

The pleasure of that kicked Cowley in the balls, and he couldn't decide if he should leap on Bodie and fuck him where he sat, or if he should bend over double, clutching his vitals and crawl off somewhere to die on his own in dignity. What he actually did, of course, was to smile distantly, coolly, and politely enquire: "Would you prefer a beer or—" no, he wouldn't ask Bodie if he wanted anything 'Scotch', it was never safe to give a man like Bodie even an inch of rope, "whisky? Or there's gin, vodka, rum—"

"Rum, please," Bodie replied blandly enough, his next words insinuating their point between Cowley's ribs. "Rum's one of the things I acquired a taste for when I joined the Merchant Navy."

And what was it Churchill had said? Don't speak to me about Naval tradition, it's all rum, sodomy and the lash.

Oh, Bodie, he thought, hand betraying the slightest tremble as he poured the dark rum, don't tempt me too much...

They were seated then, the coffee table playing no man's land between them, the files in neat little squares marking off the distance between them, Bodie sitting tidily contained in the big winged armchair, the dark glass of rum cupped in large, capable hands that threatened death and destruction and promised sensual delight the likes of which Cowley just might regret sampling. Perhaps, George Cowley thought with something akin to self-satirising amusement, another wee dram would be just the ticket, for his hands were threatening worse than anything Bodie's could come up with, the trembling in them too great a betrayal.

As loudly as if he'd been home on his own, the clock wheezed and gasped on the mantelpiece, and the fire, almost a museum piece itself these days, kept up that faint hiss which was so readily drowned out by the smallest of other noises. There—the faint shuss of fabric on fabric as Bodie crossed his legs, the slight click of his shoe against the edge of the coffee table. Time, then, well past time, for Cowley to say something, the right word to get this rite under way, to begin this thing he was so determinedly calling an impulse. But his mind blanked on him, or rather, it filled with all the right words for the right occasion, but this was the wrong occasion, and those words would be disaster here, in the supposed comfort of his own living room. He looked at Bodie, for all the world as if he'd never seen the other man before, and saw himself in Bodie's eyes, in that seriously set mouth. Such a beautiful mouth, so wide, so generous—so able to swallow a man into dark, wet heat—

Refusing to blush or flinch, Cowley wrenched his gaze back under control, eyes going to the files and folders on the table, the innocuous manilla envelope Bodie had brought lying there untouched. Easy enough to open that, take the pages out and let this slip, safely, so safely, into the banality of the job. It would all be a lie, of course, he and Bodie sitting here calmly discussing the finer, nearly unimportant points of some case, with all the other major knowledge massed between them. They both knew, and this sitting here pretending was making him look like a fool. Say something, take command, put Bodie in his place, let him know who's boss and who holds the upper hand...

But before he could so much as breathe, Bodie

was moving, jacket slung across the seat of his chair, his normally silent tread crashingly loud after so much muteness. Coming closer, incredibly tall in this small room, towering over Cowley still seated in the low chair. Stopping, face steadfast and serious, a footstep away from Cowley. Looking at him, calmly, one quirked eyebrow asking the question that words failed.

"Aye," George Cowley said, permitting himself that sigh, "aye..."

And then Bodie was on his knees, and his hands were on Cowley, and then the air was on Cowley, bared, naked, there, his most private of parts exposed to view, taken out and cupped, cradled and caressed, Bodie's hands cool against his heat, and then Bodie's mouth, oh, so wonderful, strong tongue and strong hands, mingling, harmonising, playing Cowley to perfection. That mouth sucking him in, the throat swallowing him down, all that strength consuming him, and his own hands were in Bodie's hair, the softness addictive but softer still was his skin, there, behind one small ear, and there, at the temple, where the vein pulsed with Bodie worshipping Cowley's cock.

There was noise in the room now, a surfeit of sound, a humiliation to be borne later, when memory and sense and shame returned: wet, sucking sounds, the lapping of tongue, the swallowing gulps, the deliberate gag that was such heaven along the length of trapped cock. And over it all, drowning in it, drowning everything else out, was Cowley's voice, hoarse, aching, half-words spilling from him before he could complete a thought, all of him concentrating on the numbing pleasure of release, months of frustration and subsumation erupting into Bodie's throat, not a drop escaping, Bodie's mouth cradling him, soft, soothing strokes of his tongue bringing out the last drop of need, comforting him until his breath and his mind had returned to him, and his cock was small and soft and wet.

Lying back in the chair, the white sleeve of his shirt pressed over the flushed redness of his face, Cowley reached down to fumble, one-handed and clumsy in the aftermath, to tuck himself away. His fingers found himself, wet and sticky, and he wanted to die: to have given himself up like that, and to have orgasmed so quickly, desperate as a boy with his first two quid whore...

But then his fingers were gently dusted aside and Bodie was tidying him, his own hand free to

brush against Bodie's mouth and the skin beside it, and touching, to register how smooth that skin was—and why did it frighten him so that he was moved because Bodie had shaved for him? No beard-burn to betray him, and comfort for skin that was notoriously sensitive, oh, sweet, flattering that Bodie should have thought enough to do that for him—and the tension underlying the skin, muscles too tight in the jaw that his fingers followed. Not the near cramp from sucking too long—he'd been too quick off the mark for that, but he didn't want to think about that, not when Bodie was still here to see his wounded pride—but the tension...

Bodie moved away before Cowley could finish the thought, and slowly, he moved his arm to see if his ears were betraying him. No, he'd heard right: Bodie had stood, was walking stiffly away, keeping his back to his boss as he picked up the discarded jacket, dismissing what he'd done as a trifle.
“D'you need me to drop anything off at HQ for you on my way home?” he asked, and precious few would have recognised the strain in his voice.

“No, I'll bring everything in with me in the morning.” Surely Bodie wasn't doing what he seemed to be doing...

“Well, I'll see you at work tomorrow then,” Bodie said with apparent ease and cheerfulness, as if he hadn't just performed an act of fellatio on his boss, as if he hadn't just completely changed the relationship between them.

But that, precisely, was what he was doing, and George Cowley should have been grateful, but for all his cock had had its fill for the moment, he was still emptied by an unnameable hunger, and over that lay his anger, fuelled by humiliation. To have had Bodie do that to him, to have made sic a fool of himself, and for Bodie to just stand up and walk out as if it was nothing—

“Thanks for the drink, sir,” Bodie, at his most polite, at his most distant, unsmiling.

Walking past, leaving, and then Cowley saw, and reached out before his brain could stop him. His hand, so pale, palmed the blackness of Bodie's trousers, and felt the acute erection, felt the balm for his pride.

“Go out like that, and you'll be arrested.”

“You won't suck me off,” Bodie said flatly, shifting uneasily, moving away enough that Cowley had to reach out and pull him closer, the firmness of buttock lush beneath his hand.

He neither confirmed nor denied the statement,

his own opinion on the matter divided. “Upstairs,” he ordered, slapping Bodie sharply on his rump, more gratified than he should be by the way Bodie's face lit up and his cock leaped under Cowley's hand. “Go on,” he said with a valedictory squeeze of Bodie's cock, “get on with you. I'll be up in a minute.”

Cold, wet weather like this, he could never depend on his knee, and after having come like a teenager, he didn't want to be seen struggling like an old man to get out of his chair. The leather was slick where the sweat of his palm touched it, and cold after the heat of being with Bodie. Listening to the sounds of footsteps climbing the stairs, and then movement overhead, doors opening and closing, the rattle of the piping, the flush of the toilet, his mind providing the images to go with the sounds, all the way to Bodie crossing the hall, entering his bedroom and the absence of sound as he got into the bed: when the noise stopped, Cowley had finished bolting the door and turning off the fire, the heating off for the night, and enough lights left on to make it look like he and Bodie were still up working, should some awkward draught open a chink in the curtains. The radio, too, was switched on, the low murmur of voices indistinct, enough camouflage to pass casual muster. Everything, then, as it should be, and finally, he was on the first step on his way upstairs.

The upstairs hall light was on as he had left it from coming home, but the bedroom light was out, not even the bedside lamp switched on. Oh, aye, his Bodie was discreet and cautious, and it was a measure of Cowley's own state that he didn't even pay attention that he was calling Bodie his.

Light poured from the hall into the bedroom, along the wall where his chest of drawers and wardrobe hulked, only the bottom left corner of the bed catching any of the light. Pulling the door almost completely shut behind him, shutting them in here together, Cowley stripped slowly, folding his clothes and putting them, almost entirely by touch, on the chair. In the dark, the bed was a whitish blur with a ghostly figure on it and he was staring at it, trying to make it come clearer. Closer, eyes adjusting to the near dark, and he could see where Bodie had folded all the bedclothes neatly at the foot of the bed, and could see, now, Bodie lying face down, arms folded under the pillow where his face was pressed, his legs spread, hips undulating as he rubbed himself against the

smooth, crisp sheets.

Better than any commercial pornography, better than anything he'd ever seen in magazines or films brought over from Holland or California, because this was no primped and bleached beauty, this was a strong man, a dangerous man, making himself vulnerable and available for his pleasure, to be used as Cowley saw fit. Bodie must have been able to hear him breathing, might even, Cowley thought, rediscovering something of his sense of humour along with his pride, be able to hear the thudding of his heart. Could certainly hear his footsteps, with that tell-tale hitch to mark his limp. Unhappily, he touched the scars on his thigh and remapped the ridge and the hollow that were so unnatural and made him squirm as his body remembered what his mind had so desperately forgotten. All his mind remembered was waking in a hospital with disembodied voices threatening him with permanent disembodiment, leg cut off, crippled, maimed...

But they hadn't, and he wasn't, and Bodie was making low, subtle noises that shivered through the air to land, exciting and arousing, on Cowley's skin. He could see Bodie now, but still as if in soft focus, all the details there, but blurred as if to take the sting. Kneeling now, the bed dipping beneath him as he positioned himself between Bodie's legs, Bodie's own scars were visible. A knife wound, one that Cowley had seen when it was still bleeding. The pock marks of a shotgun wound, never explained, never alluded to. The mark of a burn on his left buttock, from an incident only those with access to SAS files would ever know about. And there, on his shoulder, the deep mark of a machete. Leaning forward, using the arcing strength of Bodie's back to brace himself, with the breath hissing from Bodie as his excitement rose, Cowley fitted his tongue to the scar, eyes shut tight, as he laved that scar, kissing it and caressing it, taking the sting of ugliness out of it with all the tenderness of a man who knows himself to be scarred.

Under him, Bodie was in a tumult, obscenities pouring from him like sweat, and Cowley pressed him down, eased and incited him by pushing a finger, hard and stabbing, into Bodie's arse. Rotated that finger, moved it in and out to the sounds of Bodie's filthy words and helpless gasps. Withdrew it, Bodie's arse pushing upwards, the empty flesh blindly seeking. A bit of gel from the tube, and then he could sit back on his haunches and watch two of

his fingers disappear inside Bodie, his other hand pulling slowly, carefully, on his own cock, the sheer excitement of being with Bodie enough to convince his body that it was young again.

"Oh, please," Bodie was saying, over and over and over again, "oh please..."

"Please what?"

"Fuck me. Stick it in, go on, oh, please, shove your cock up me, let me have it in me..."

Cowley swallowed hard, mouth gone dry with lust. "Over with you, come on, come on, onto your back," and Bodie was trying to move, uncoordinated by his needs and his attempts to keep Cowley's fingers inside him. "Come on, laddie, let me see you..." And was greeted by a beaming smile and softened eyes and hardened cock, Bodie's nipples small peaks in the smoothness of his chest, hard little nubs of colour in the pale expanse of skin. Unable to keep quiet, Cowley groaned as he leaned over Bodie and took his left nipple into his mouth, licking and sucking and biting it, Bodie's cock digging into his belly, Bodie's hand rooting around clumsily until it found Cowley's cock and then fastening onto it like a baby at a teat. He was growing hard again, and he curled round a bit so that Bodie could reach him better while he engorged himself on exploring Bodie's body. It was glorious, as perfect as Michelangelo's David but far more responsive, the skin shivering under his tongue, Bodie's cock rubbing against whichever bits of Cowley it could reach.

With an intensity that might yet frighten him, Cowley made his way down Bodie's torso, following the alluring scent of musk rising in heated waves. His tongue touched hair, dabbed in it, felt Bodie's hands in his hair, and then, a moment of shock, utter stillness, when the very tip of his tongue brushed against the head of Bodie's cock.

"No..." Bodie moaned, either in denial that Cowley would actually be so generous as to do this, or in begging, pleading that Cowley not stop, should go on, take him inside...

He hadn't done anything like this for years, not since he'd climbed far enough up the ladder of success. But for once, he wanted this more than he cared about any balance of any power, or any position apart from the purely sexual. Only the tip, with its flaring flange and richness of foreskin coiled beneath, the prickle of pubic hair on his chin, the delicacy of testicles balanced on his fingers.

And Bodie, moaning and crying out, stomach muscles spasming as he fought off the urge to thrust, Bodie completely in his thrall.

His own cock was hard again, the thick vein swollen, tangible under the pad of his thumb, and he was consumed by curiosity about Bodie, exploring his hard cock, his tongue tracing every tiny feature until he knew it perfectly and until Bodie was almost sobbing.

"I'm gonna come," Bodie whispered, hoarse. "I'm gonna—"

"No," hissed fiercely, a strategic pinch staving off orgasm, the edge of pain enough to bring Bodie back from the edge. "Not without me in you, you're not. D'ye hear me, laddie? You'll not come until I'm up you, until I've got you spitted on me."

"Oh, god, yes, just hurry, for fuck's sake, hurry—"

He didn't intend to, of course, but seeing Bodie like that, seeing the nearly painful need in him, Cowley couldn't drag it out the way he had intended. Next time, he promised himself, next time I'll make him wait until he screams for it. But for now, he raised Bodie's legs, draping them over his own shoulders, Bodie's arse open and wide, the small dark hole waiting to devour him whole.

"What is you want?" he demanded, the crown of his cock dimpling Bodie's arse.

"You," and Bodie's eyes were devastatingly clear and horribly honest. "I want you to fuck me. I want you to shove your cock in me, ram it all the way in, fuck me so hard you'll come in my mouth."

Cowley pressed in, sliding in slowly, so slowly, Bodie's mouth opening as his arse did, a silent scream of pleasure smothered by a hand across his mouth. Hungry as Bodie was, experienced as he was, Cowley was in him to the hilt, his balls snug against Bodie's arse, his belly flat against Bodie's cock. Every time he thrust in, Bodie's cock scraped against him, and every time he withdrew, Bodie pushed upwards, trying to pull him back inside, the two of them shifting until Bodie's arms and legs were wrapped around him, Bodie taking his weight and his cock and his passion, an endless stream of meaningless murmurings pouring from Bodie's mouth, almost-words that Cowley could not believe in.

Harder now, and faster, both of them sweating, their bodies ever slicker, and moving together, and it was better than it had been for years, this unison, this sensation of a union that far surpassed the

merely sexual. Inundating him were the same fractured words just on the edge of comprehension, words that could make a man believe himself wonderful. Freeing one hand, he grabbed Bodie by the jaw, turning the sweat-beaded visage to face him.

"Look at me," he demanded.

Bodie's eyes stayed shut, his hair dampened by sweat as his head tossed restlessly on the pillow.

"Look at me!" Almost shouted, the tone of command that was never ignored. "Let me look at you."

"No, don't. Just fuck me, look," and Bodie grabbed Cowley's lean flanks and pulled him in suddenly, shocking them with the depth of penetration, "oh, yesss, like that, come on, fuck me—"

Deliberately, cruelly, Cowley withdrew, only the head of his cock inside Bodie to emphasise the emptiness of where he had so recently been filled.

"Look at me."

Nothing.

"If you want my cock back up your arse," and the obscenities shuddered through Bodie as he had known they would, "if you want me to fuck you up the bum, then you look at me, laddie, you look at me now."

With palpable reluctance, Bodie opened his eyes, and looked, until George Cowley closed his eyes in misery and looked away.

Aye, well, he had wanted to know that Bodie was thinking about him as he was being fucked, had wanted to know that Bodie was doing this because he wanted *him*.

Had not, oh, definitely not, wanted to see into Bodie's very soul.

"Fuck me!" Bodie whispered fiercely, surging upwards, impaling himself on the thick heat and hardness of Cowley's cock. "Come on, fuck me!"

No matter how willing the spirit, the flesh in this case was far too strong, and Cowley felt himself drawn back inside Bodie, back into the darkness and the wetness and the heat. Fucked him, hard, shoving home harder every time Bodie demanded it, fucked them both senseless so that they wouldn't remember what Bodie's eyes had said. He couldn't get deep enough inside Bodie, couldn't thrust hard enough, reaching, reaching for that pinnacle of perfection that would let him dissolve, and then he looked down at the wildness pinned beneath him, saw the anguish on that face, found it and echoed it and matched it, tentatively at first, the scarcest

touch of lips to Bodie's, and then the desperation overtook them both, and his tongue was inside Bodie's mouth, and Bodie was wrapped around him, and his cock was deep inside Bodie's body. Bodie was suddenly in counter-rhythm to him, belly shuddering and cock jumping, semen splurting from him to splash, hot, potent, against Cowley's belly and tangling in the light hair on his chest. He waited a moment, and another, keeping his cock deep inside Bodie as the muscles contracted round him in glorious passion, and then he was moving again, slower at first, then faster, fucking Bodie hard while his face was covered in kisses and his tongue sucked back inside Bodie, arms and legs wrapped all around him, Bodie keeping him safe as he orgasmed, body spasming, utter pleasure suspended in a moment of stillness, his seed spilling from his body to fill Bodie's, the passage suddenly slicker, Bodie's grip on him tighter, the desperately affectionate words flooding them both with another, more devastating potency.

Gradually, they disentangled themselves, neither one meeting the other's eyes, neither one of them quite touching the other beyond the necessary. Bodie, with an uncharacteristic diffidence, disappearing off into the bathroom, returning with a warmly damp face-cloth, and Cowley watched, bemused, as Bodie bathed him, his eyes downcast and face turned aside.

"Bodie," Cowley said, needing Bodie to reveal those expressive eyes to him.

"Yeh?"

"Why won't you look at me?"

Oh, aye, his Bodie was braver than any one man ought to be. "Once was bad enough, wasn't it?"

"And are you going to be spending the rest of your life not looking at me?"

Bodie did look at him then, the sudden startlement, the quickly strangled hope making Cowley hear what he'd just said through Bodie's ears.

"Sorry," he said, not sure whether or not he meant it, but honestly regretting the swiftly hidden pain he had seen.

"S all right," Bodie shrugged, pulling the covers up, all but tucking Cowley in, the matter-of-factness of his movements doing very little to hide their tenderness. "Not something either one of us asked for, is it? And it'll pass, these things always do."

They did indeed, if poisoned or only left

unnurtured. "It's early yet," Cowley said, making a liar out of the alarm clock and obviously making Bodie think he was referring not to the time at all. He went on abruptly, to stop the clothes from being re-donned and to clear the cloud from Bodie's face. "Aye, for that an' all, but I meant it's early yet for you to be leaving."

Bodie, to his credit, displayed none of his pleasure, simply climbing in beside Cowley before the Scotsman could change his mind as his rapidly awakening sense told him he ought.

Time passed, as did Bodie, slowly edging his way closer, Cowley content enough to permit it, waiting with apparent passivity to see how far Bodie would go, how far the younger man would push. As far, it seemed, as lying on his stomach with one arm casually draped across Cowley's middle. Absurd though he thought himself to be, George Cowley was deeply pleased that he'd never allowed himself to run to fat, that he was still not, entirely, physically past it.

He should, he supposed, be checking Bodie out, giving himself some pretence to hang onto when tonight was part of the past and he had to face himself in the mirror—and Bodie in the office, either on the job or to fire him. Should be such an easy decision to make, there should be no doubts, there should be straightforward, clear procedure to follow in a straightforward and clear manner. But instead, all he could think of was the taste of Bodie in his mouth, and how he hadn't had long enough to discover it, couldn't quite remember it even now, and how he wanted to taste Bodie again...

"Why did you come here tonight?" he asked into the darkness.

"Could always claim it was because Murph told me you'd said to send me over with that file."

"But the truth is..."

There was a ragged intake of breath and Bodie's arm tightened on him for a moment, so that he had to resist an unnervingly strong urge to pull the other man closer, hold him and kiss it all better.

"I haven't done blokes much since I came back from Africa, what with the Paras and the SAS and all, but once I was in CI5, the old urges came back."

"And so you started going with men—"

"Not straight off," said quickly, reassuringly. "Fact is, the night you saw me in that ruddy pub was the first time I'd ventured out."

Oh, Bodie, he thought sadly, why d'you have to go and start lying to me now? He had sunk so

easily into Bodie's flesh, and with hardly any preparation to ease his way, and George Cowley had cause to know how quickly a man's arse tightened when he was no longer being fucked.

"That a fact?" Supposedly mild, but with a sting to it.

"Yeh. Been making do with a couple of video nasties I managed to pick up. Them, and my right hand and..."

The hesitation, no doubt the truth would come up: apart from my right hand and Doyle, and half the other men in London...

"Don't lie to me, laddie. Don't you dare lie to me."

"Wasn't going to!" The surprise actually sounded genuine. "Was just, well, it's a bit embarrassing, admitting you've been so desperate you've taken to shoving a dildo up your bum. Why—is it important to you that I've not been done before? Cause if it is..."

"No, no, I like a bit of experience."

"But you thought I was lying cause it went in a bit too easy."

"Yes," said drily, this not the sort of conversation he was either used to or comfortable with having.

"Christ, what kind of an idiot d'you take me for? If I lied to you about that, you'd find out and have my guts for garters, wouldn't you?"

"An' what else d'you expect?"

"Nothing." A heaving upwards, Bodie's shoulders gleaming palely. "I mean that, you know I do. I'm not expecting anything. And you don't have to ask or threaten or anything else. I'm not going to say anything and seeing as how I saw you at the pub, you've got a bloody cheek thinking I would."

"Did you believe me that night?" Cowley asked, surprising himself at his own lack of subtlety and sophistication. "About why I was there?"

"Wasn't sure." A very tentative hand, drawing pictures in the few hairs on his chest, one pinky too briefly touching a nipple. "Didn't think you were lying, but you're a devious old bastard."

"Aye, I am, which brings us to another question," he said levelly, wishing that finger would come back to his nipple and bring all its friends to join in the fun. "I'm an old bastard, and you're a handsome young bugger. So what brought you here?"

A wicked grin, visible in the near dark. "Could

always say it's because I'm such a bugger, couldn't I?"

If he were going to be hung, he might as well let them lynch him for a sheep than for a lamb. Cowley took Bodie's hand in his own, bringing it back to his nipple, tacitly giving Bodie permission to be bolder, although he did suspect that give Bodie an inch and he'd take several miles in this as he did in everything else. Ach, well, there were worse things in life, many of which he'd have to face the second he walked into his office in the morning. He sighed as Bodie's clever fingers caressed him, getting to know his body and what it responded to. It had been a long, long time since he'd allowed anyone to do that, a very long time.

"So anyway, as I was saying," Bodie murmured, moving closer until Cowley could feel Bodie's breath tickle over his chest, "I'd been getting to the point where if I didn't have a bloke soon, I was going to burst. Bit messy that, didn't think you'd approve."

"Mmphmm," he mumbled, right hand pressing Bodie's head more firmly against his chest, Bodie's tongue suddenly wet and hot, flickering against his nipple.

"Christ, but you do love that, don't you?"

"I'll thank you not to blaspheme in my bed, laddie!" he snapped sharply before the true absurdity of it hit him and the laughter bubbled up out of him. "Och, don't look at me so," he hiccupped between the gales of humour, "I've not taken leave of my senses." He sobered a little, stroked his hand across the smooth dark hair, stared down into very warm blue eyes. "But I might have taken leave of a few of what you lot nowadays call hang-ups." And in my day, what we called morals. But Bodie had a balm for that as well, hiding his face against Cowley's chest, nuzzling sweetly at him.

The heavy pulse in his groin was unexpected, but Bodie fed it and fed on it, his hand covering Cowley's cock, warming it, beginning to stroke it again. "Been a while?" came the sympathetic murmur from somewhere near his left oxter where Bodie was kissing and licking him now.

"Something like that," Cowley managed, breath taken away by the wash of sensual delight coming over him from the laving tongue and caressing hand. He wouldn't be up to another performance, not for hours at least, but the sensuality of it was wonderful, and deeply satisfying, at least in part because he could feel the effect all this was having

on Bodie. He reached out himself, taking the weight of Bodie's tumescent cock in his hand, enjoying the simple joy of giving another man pleasure.

It took a long time, a time of caressings and kissings, of Cowley's bemusement that he, of all people, should be lying here in a bed like a tip, indulging himself in total carnality.

"That's it, laddie," he murmured as Bodie rubbed his cock against the sharp outthrust of his hip. "That's it, come on, laddie, come on, spend yourself against me, let me have your jism..." So odd to hear himself talking like that in anything other than the extremity of passion, but so perfect to feel his words have their effect on Bodie, to feel Bodie shudder as he kissed him deeply, tongue inside Bodie's mouth, hands on Bodie's arse, one finger shoving deep inside and then, as before, Bodie's cum hot on his belly, their skin slick with it, and Bodie suddenly heavy on top of him, a dead weight he didn't really want to move.

Heavy body, heavier breathing, Bodie slipping into sleep, his body slowly slipping to one side, shifting restlessly as Cowley moved with him, Cowley manoeuvring them until Bodie's back was against his belly and his own cock was nestled warm and snug between Bodie's nether cheeks.

"Worn you out, have I, laddie?" Cowley asked, eminently chuffed to have outlasted a man a good twenty years younger than himself.

"Mmm, for the minute..." A wriggle, Bodie not settling again until Cowley had put his arms round him, the position a bit awkward in its newness for them.

There wasn't much point in asking any questions now, was there, not with Bodie snufflingly asleep, body completely sated and finally limp. But perhaps Bodie's being here was for no more sinister a motive than his own had been; when he'd been a lot younger than Bodie, he had gone with men for all the familiar political and career reasons, and the other reasons, the ones he rarely admitted to

himself: the power older men held, their control, their strengths. Or perhaps it was the feeling that he was someone Bodie could lean against, someone who might actually have a few answers, if only because he'd already made the mistakes. Aye, it could well be that.

Regardless, he still had decisions to make, his head arguing against the rest of him. Some things were as clear as a bell: Bodie knew too much and Bodie meant too much, in everything from his emotions to his passions, and mainly, Bodie knew and meant too much to all the once sleeping depths he had awoken in George Cowley, a man who had actually believed himself resigned to the solitary life. A man, fool that he was, who had actually believed himself untouched by anything save the lonely hankering after something that would never be part of his own emotional repertoire.

The pity of it was that he hadn't seen any of this coming, which made the shock, of course, all the worse, and made his life reel madly.

Whatever it was that had started it, in either or both of them, he had seen the end results in that one unguarded moment, had heard the oblique references to it. Small wonder that it had taken him so unexpectedly: it had been so long and so little for him, that it really should have come as no surprise that he hadn't recognised it until he saw it mirrored back at him in Bodie's too honest eyes.

So he lay there in the dark, with his career quite possibly about to come crashing down about his ears, with his sere and controlled life a pile of ashes at his feet, and the biggest bombshell of his entire life lying trustingly asleep in his arms. He lay there as the birds heralded the dawn and the hands of the clock measured the passing of his life, running things through his mind, planning and unplanning, examining every option that might possibly exist, swithering again, made indecisive by the one thing even George Cowley couldn't control.

Love.