

At the Olympics, the bloke carrying the torch doesn't have to run very fast, but he has to manage to run quite a distance whilst carrying it, and that's a skill I don't believe I have. Never been good at doing two things at once. Don't have much enthusiasm for running, 'less it's to save me own skin.

But I noticed another thing, watching this year, this one more important. The runner carrying the torch—he knows how hot it burns. If you look at it closely, the fire is blue at the center, burning bright blue and steady. So he holds it high and away from himself.

Hold it too close to you and you get burned. Hold it *too* far, and you might drop it. The trick is to deliver it as quickly as possible and get on with it.

Should've been paying more attention years ago, because when Ann Holly let go of it, I nearly missed the relay and then where would I be? Course, I never planned on being the last to carry it, did I?

Unfortunately, the torch in question, one Raymond Doyle, had other ideas.

∞ **CI5** ∞

1981

Cowley was looking over my shoulder, feeling obliged to remind me that the world, though in tatters for Ray, was continuing for the rest of us. And far be it from me to avoid the pleasures of paperwork, but there was no way in hell I'd let Ray walk off right then, alone. The Cow might not've realised it, but Ray was already building up a head of steam even earlier, before Holly fucked him over. He'd been dropping hints left and right about other jobs, even said something completely idiotic about how Holly might get him a contract with her press, something about a job as a cover artist for paperbacks. I nearly choked, trying to imagine my Ray sketching the cover of the next Barbara Cartland.

Unthinkable—the bloke who prided himself on being 'A' squad from day one, who took a dive into binge drinking whenever someone got near his shooting record.

So I, good partner that I am, ignored the Cow's glaring at me and skipped out to stop Ray before he turned the corner at the end of the block and headed right round the bend.

It didn't strike me as odd, not right away, that he wasn't tearing up. Cried easily—not at films, but when it mattered. But so far, he was dry-eyed and I figured the tears'd come later, when the shock wore off.

FIRE HELD HIGH AND AWAY
BY MIRIAM HEDDY

Three pints later at his local, and he was still holding together. Instead, and this I *did* have the brains to notice was odd, he was looking relieved, even daring to smile a little at my patter.

I didn't bring the bitch up, not sure I could be fair about it right then. He didn't bring her up either. Was odd talking about other things, but I figured he'd get around to falling apart any second now.

And I could put him together again. But he gave me precious little to work with, in any case. There was hardly enough of a chink in the armor to plug with anything other than a general show of support—comrades in arms against the female menace.

"Next time I say I'm getting married, do something for me?" He had that half-grin on his face.

"Yeah?"

"Knock me out and keep me under 'til the urge passes."

"How should I keep you under?"

"Few blows to the head, delivered as necessary should do it."

"Might induce permanent injury, that."

"Forget that my head's hard as a rock."

"That it is," I agreed.

"I can take it, you know," he said, nodding to himself more than me and taking another drink.

It was his way of telling me he was going to survive, as if I had any doubts. Knew he would, didn't I? Knew it better than Holly. The bitch was probably waiting for him to crawl back, badge in hand again, on his bloody knees. I knew enough to know he wouldn't, not because he didn't love her—he did, more's the shame of it—but because it was coming clear to him that he wasn't that keen on marrying her after all. Our Ray wasn't the marrying kind. He needed to be needed too much, and he kept picking birds who didn't need him. At cross-purposes, the whole lot of them, high-minded and high-bred birds he picked, one after t'other.

And that was that, as far as grief-stricken conversation goes. Hardly enough to justify our taking the rest of the day off and risking the wrath of the old man, but what of it?

∞ CI5 ∞

Some years later...

"Watch it."

"I'm *watching* it. Hold yer own end up and—"

It was the third flat rotation in two years and I'd given up unpacking the lot of it until the Cow could promise I was to stay put for at least a year. Ray, ever the suffering optimist, said this was the last move he was going to make for the next five, security be damned. And Ray had a point. It was easy enough to do the annual move in the early days. I'd not had much in the way of personal belongings that couldn't fit into the boot. But I knew I was getting soft with this last move, boxing up more things than I could remember acquiring, and not having the heart to be rid of any of them.

Huffing up the last of the stairs with the last two boxes of books and thankful that Ray said the lift would be working next week, I admitted to myself that I was getting soft all round.

Carrying extra weight, and not just the boxes in my hands. Happens to the best of us, even to my vegetable-obsessed partner, who'd put on a stone and a half at least over where he'd been before the shooting. It was going on, what, eight years since that, and he was edging on forty-five now.

Still, we were both fit enough for the job, and I'd always relied on me sharp wit and handsome face, hadn't I? And, when that failed, the fact that I could put the weight behind a blow aimed with a good deal more training and skill than most didn't hurt any. Ray was still quicker on his feet than me, and, although he wore spectacles to read now, he didn't to shoot, and he was still the best shot

on the squad.

And still a stropy bastard who was due to experience a Bodie right hook before the day was out if he didn't keep his temper in.

"Christ, don't know a bookshelf from a table. Over *there*. The corner. Right. Your other— Yeah. Just set it down and I'll take care of it."

He was muttering and on the floor, sweat on his brow and a charming smear of dirt picked up from his bloody boxes and wiped across his cheek. He looked a sight, and I tore my eyes away before he caught me grinning like a fool.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Course it's nothing. Just going to stand there or were you planning on working for your meal?"

"Thought you were going to take care of it."

"All this *and* supper? Christ, Bodie. Don't ask for much, do you."

I didn't remind him that this was his flat and I was helping him move.

He hauled himself up and stomped over to the kitchen and I sat down where he'd been, unpacking his books for him and setting them on the shelves in order, knowing better than to tinker with his new system. Some bird of his had alphabetised them and he'd been so enthused, he'd acted like she'd invented the concept. Far be it from me to set him to rights when he was in love. Again.

Lasted two months, she did—Lucy was her name—and that was three months ago. Her legacy was Ray's current nit-picking about order and classification. He even had the spices in line. He was working on finding a place for me as well, I could see, even now giving me the eye of one who thought the new place was not quite fit for me. There was certainly hardly enough room in the corner for me, the boxes, and the rather dusty collected works of P.G. Wodehouse, autographed to him by someone named 'Pennyluv'. How he ever

came by that was probably a story—Ray's twitty little secret, that was.

I had my nose in one of the short stories by the time he yelled for me again and it took me a minute to shift from Bertie Wooster's latest problems with some odd bird to Ray's sharp-voiced whinging.

"Going deaf now?"

"What?"

"I *said* do you want sweetcorn or peas, but, as it took you ten minutes to answer, we're having peas."

"Peas, then."

He snorted and opened the tin, and, minutes later, I'd cleared the table of boxes and newspapers and set the table.

As he sat down, dropping a plate before me, I got up and wet a tea towel, bringing it back to the table and wiping his cheek for him. He tipped his face up, and it suddenly occurred to me that it would look a bit odd to an outsider, but I kept on until his face was clean, stopping to pick a bit of fuzz out of his hair. I would've loved to ruffle the curls, but he was in a mood enough without me adding to his cause for complaints.

We ate in near silence, broken only by his glare when I added salt to my plate. I glared back, forestalling the lecture on salt and high blood pressure, always motivated more by the perceived insult to his cooking than any real health concerns. My blood pressure was fine, ta very much. I'd had the doctor certify that for his majesty, just to get him off me back.

Clearing the plates away and starting on them myself to forestall another lecture, it occurred to me again that we might well look like a pair of old fairies who'd got bored with the sex bit. I'd run into a few couples like that, too far gone to need to be discreet.

Most took 'em for bachelors and didn't think much more of it, but if you knew what to look for, you could tell. Some blokes carried on with young men on the side but always came home to the other. Like us, but our blokes were birds. Well, Ray's were in any case.

Drying now, I mused on that question. What *did* it matter, if we were together when it counted. Who needed to add fucking to the list of things we did together?

Ray was nattering on and I “hmm” when appropriate, not paying much mind to the words, listening only to his voice, low and a bit less grumpy now that he had food in him. Turning round, the plates done, I watched him at his task, seeing the boxes empty as he worked, the cardboard broken down and flattened at his side as the shelves filled with books and a jumble of odds and ends that he’d picked up along the way.

“This one’s yours I think.” Ray held out a book of poetry.

“Put it in a pile. I’ll get it later.”

“Turn on the telly if you’re just going to stand there.”

I sighed, realising that I had to plug in the video first, and the aerial.

Fifteen minutes later, I had it all set up. Ray had insisted we get a video because we kept missing the matches, and I had insisted he pay two-thirds of it if it was going to be at his flat.

We watched one of last Saturday’s matches, saving the rest for another day, and then an old film that I’d seen before but that Ray found funny enough to watch again.

“Well I’m knackered. Don’t know about you...” I yawned as Ray turned the telly off.

“Knackered? You’ve been sitting on your arse the last four hours,” he said, his growl tempered by his own yawn.

“And you haven’t?”

“Didn’t say I was knackered, did I. Still have work to do.” He yawned again and stretched and I shook my head.

“Knock yourself out, Raymond. I’m heading to me own flat.”

“Pick us up tomorrow?”

“What time’s he want you then?” I asked, gathering up the small pile of books Ray’d weeded out and reminding myself to look for his amongst my much more selective library.

“Eight. You?”

“Half past. Get in earlier, and I can do some paperwork before the children arrive.” I stood in the doorway, hesitant to leave him with so much still to unpack. The idiot’d likely be up half the night, operating on the superstitious belief that if he unpacked it all at once, he’d throw a spanner in Cowley’s plans in some mysterious way. Never had worked before, but he couldn’t be dissuaded. Ray was surprisingly set in his ways for someone billed as “adaptable” in his file.

“You can do some of mine as well.”

“What? Me dealing with Metro? Not bloody likely. ’night sunshine. Swing by at seven.”

“’night. Seven it is. Ta for the hand, mate.”

I nodded and walked to the car, feeling worn to the bone and happy to see the inside of my own flat and my bed.

∞ **CL5** ∞

Half past seven I made it to Ray’s flat, not needing to ring as he was waiting on the kerb.

“You’re late,” he said, highlighting the obvious.

“Got that.”

“Car trouble?”

“Damned heater’s blown and I get water cold enough to freeze the brass balls off a monkey—”

Ray grinned at me, glancing down and up again. “Has it, now?”

“A lesser one than me, that is,” I added, grinning back. “Tidy up the place?”

“Every bit of it,” Ray answered, kicking back and putting his foot up on the dash. “Come over tonight?”

“I’ve seen your place, Ray.”

“’aven’t seen it clean, ’ave you?”

“What, did the cleaning fairy visit you last night?”

Ray chuckled. “Yeah, but he left before the job was done, lazy sod.”

“Ta very much. Call some other fairy next time, eh?”

“Won’t be a next time,” Ray said, trying to sound firm on that.

“From your mouth to Cowley’s ears.”

“Probably bugged the flat hasn’t he.”

∞ **CI5** ∞

I didn’t see Ray again ’til lunchtime, and the day had clearly turned sour on him. I was having a remarkably good start to the week. Something lovely about seeing the new blokes haul their arses in after a weekend of over-indulgence that brought out the Macklin in me, I’ll admit. Never could understand him ’til I took over for him.

“What’re you grinning at?”

“Ah, caught a bright young lad having a mid-morning kip.”

“Oh?” Ray asked, scowl perking up a bit, “What happened to the poor fellow?”

Unpacking a sandwich and noting that Ray had a very unattractive salad prepared, I nicked a carrot from him. He glared at me and poured us coffees. “The *most* unfortunate fellow woke up rather suddenly to find himself dead.”

Ray looked up suddenly and I shrugged. “Well, he would’ve been had I been a criminal, wouldn’t he?”

“Learned his lesson, I gather?”

“One of ’em.” I tried for another carrot, but his hand intercepted mine and steered it back to my sandwich. “So how’s your day been, sweetheart?”

“Oh, lovely. You can’t imagine how much I enjoy contacting every bloody Chief from London to the Hebrides and taking inventory.”

“What of?”

“Who bloody cares?”

Ray had yet to settle himself into the new job. He was good at it, no mistake, but he was a bear on Mondays and Cowley was in the process of settling him into society. It was, as you’d imagine, slow going, as Ray’s temper got in the way where his less-than-posh upbringing didn’t. I’d asked the old man outright if he planned on Ray succeeding him.

His answer was to remind me that his plans were of no concern to me until he made them my concern. And then he’d poured me a drink and patted me on the shoulder and grinned.

“Don’t worry, laddie. I’ve got plans for the both of you.”

I hadn’t responded, too caught up then in realising that I was jealous. I hadn’t ever really thought about it much, but I had taken it a bit for granted that Cowley favoured me over the rest.

“Yes. The two of you between you might be said to have a decent head on your shoulders,” he added, pouring me another.

And that’s all he’d say, even when I’d gathered myself to realise what he might’ve meant, insults aside. I’d taken up the position of trainer last year, without much thought, filling Macklin’s place when he finally retired. Even Ray’d agreed that it was time to come out from the field, active duty feeling a bit *too* active for us both.

“What?” I pulled myself back from reverie in time to notice that Ray’d spoken and lowered his carrot guard.

“Bodie.” He swatted my hand and then sighed, pushing the salad my way. I took another carrot with less enthusiasm. Annoying him was half the fun. “Picked the teams yet?”

“Nah. Barely. Have my eye on a few. I’ll hand on a list when I’ve finished surveying the pitiful lot of ’em.”

“Leave a few alive, will you?”

“Yeah. Weak enough for you to take ’em on. That’s rabbit food, you know.” Ray eyed my sandwich with not a bit of longing in his gaze and I held another out to him. “You can have it.”

Ray shook his head, looking gloomy again. “Nah. Keep it.”

“That bad, is it?” It was early yet and I worried for the men who he was to meet in the afternoon. Bad days for Ray often became bad days for others. He was generous that way.

“Nah. Slimming.”

I laughed. “You? You’ll disappear if you’re

not careful.”

“Chance’d be a fine thing. You’ve a lousy sense of proportion.”

“What’s that s’posed to mean?”

“It means, mate, that you weigh a good stone more than me.”

“One and a half, more like.” I admitted, not in the least tetchy about it. “Still lovelier than you’ll ever be.”

“Won’t argue that. Shit, got to be back to take a call in a minute. Tonight then? Shall I wait for you?”

“I drove, mate. You don’t wait for me, you’re walking home.”

“Right.”

And he dashed off. I nicked a few more pieces of lettuce and put the second sandwich back in the sack. Two stone, more like.

Nearly all muscle, of course.

∞ **CI5** ∞

I was finished before Ray. There were benefits to instructing. I could dismiss the babies as soon as I’d worn them out, or I could run them to ground. Today, as I was in a good mood, I set them free to lick their wounds and mend. I’d taken down one brawny lad who had tackled me on the mistaken assumption that, as I’d heard one say to the other, I was “well past it.” Sad to see a big lad like him fall so hard. Nearly broke a limb. His pride’ll heal slower than bone would’ve.

Still congratulating myself on a job well done, I didn’t hear Ray sneak up. Too many years together lets him be the only one to slip past my guard.

“Ready?”

“Bloody well ready. Was ready an hour ago. I’m starving. It’s nearly nine o’clock, innit.”

Ray growled at me, not a good sign. “Course it is. Cowley had to say one last word, didn’t he.”

“More than one, was it?”

“Try several choice ones. Seems that he’s taking a holiday.”

“A what?”

“You heard me.” He gathered up his briefcase and coat, and my elbow and steered me out, pulling me down the hall as he continued in a harsh angry whisper. “A holiday. Scotland, naturally. For a month, he says.”

“Sounds like a fine—something I’m missing?”

“Course there bloody well is, idiot. Hang on.”

He shut his mouth then, his lips turning to one straight line, white edged. I waited ’til we got outside before prompting him again.

“So a holiday, is it?”

“More like a test. No, *exactly* like a test.”

“Of what?” I asked, not following, not having had the advantage of hearing it first hand from the old man himself, a fact which bothered me only slightly. I reminded myself at times like these that the Cow had clearly said, “one brain between us”, which, whilst not complimentary, held several implications I had yet to discuss with Ray. Now did not seem to be the time for it, though, so I held off.

“It’s a test of to see if I can run this mob, obviously.”

“Obviously?”

He turned to me, only then realising that he’d got in the driver’s seat of my car. He had the key so I nodded and he started off. Let him blow off some steam on the road and not on me.

“You know what I think?” he asked, finally.

“Tell me, please,” I said, drawing a sharp glance from him.

“The problem with being on the ‘A’ squad was that you couldn’t very well go anywhere but down, could you.”

Not knowing what to say to that, I didn’t answer. I had to admit that “Training Supervisor” somehow lacked the panache that ‘A’ squad had, only in name. And it was rather hard to give up the position of best team to

some other lads, even if I was the man to pick them and bestow the title. But Ray didn't really mean any of it. Fact was, I could tell he was a bit scared. More than a bit if his rough driving was any indication.

As if to get back control, he was currently engaged with wresting the streets of London from all drivers who'd mistakenly taken them for public highways.

By the time we arrived at his flat, I was white-knuckled and hanging onto the doorjamb.

I got up the last of the stairs and looked behind me, seeing he was still dragging up the first flight. But he soon caught up as I unlocked the door and keyed in the new codes, wondering how it was possible for one man to remember so many over a lifetime. Ray brushed past me, headed for the drinks and, before I could take off my coat, he was in the lounge with a drink and a moan. I poured my own drink and moved to the kitchen, putting on some water for pasta and finding a bottle of sauce for it. It wasn't much, but neither of us had the energy for more.

He, protests aside, was hungry, and I watched him finish off a plate of it before I was half done, then woefully begin eyeing the remains in the pan.

I smiled and patted his hand, gathering up the plates and soaking them for later. Now we had to talk, if he was to avoid indigestion and I was to avoid having to deal with a nasty temperament all week long. I sat down beside him on the sofa, turning a bit so I could face him.

"Now have at it. What's all this about tests, then?"

"The Cow's been wanting to retire for years now."

"Has he?" I said, doubting that. Cowley lived for CI5. Even if he retired, I'd expect him to have a hand in it 'til the hand was buried with him. And I'd be glad for it. Many had said that the agency couldn't survive without him—that he was the agency. I wouldn't go that

far. We were the agency as well, as far as I could tell. And I'd be damned if I let Cowley down by letting it die with him.

"Yeah. I think he has. Deserves it, doesn't he?"

I nodded.

"Right. So he's testing the waters, seeing how I'll be."

"As what? Has he named you interrim controller in his absence, then?"

Ray blinked at me, then took a second before answering. "No. He hasn't."

"What makes you think he's leaving it to you, then?"

"What..." Ray trailed off, as if he hadn't considered that anything else might be true. "Who do you think he'd leave it to?"

I got up and poured another drink, shrugging in answer.

"You! You think he's leaving it to you."

"Didn't say that, did I?" I refilled his glass as well, noticing that his body was easing, if not his mind.

"Did he tell you about this holiday of his?" Ray accused, on the defensive now.

"No."

"No. He didn't. And there's no one else, is there?"

"Maybe he'll be calling in an old mate to step in."

Ray cocked his head then shook it vehemently. "No. Don't believe it. This is a test, plain and simple. He's testing me."

"What if it is?" I kicked off my shoes and put my feet up on the now-cleared table, noting that everything was in its place, neat enough that I could guess a good deal of Ray's bad temper was owing to a lack of sleep. "What if you fail it?"

He turned sharply to me and looked shocked. "You think I'll fail?"

"No. But then I don't know yet that this is a test, do I? Nor what it entails. Besides, supposing it is a test...double-think it. If you fail, what'll he do?"

"Dunno. 's what worries me."

“If you’re right,” I added, thinking on it now, “and this is a test of you, and you fail...well, he’ll always have me, won’t he?” I grinned, knowing I was onto something when he set his glass down on the table, determination making his green eyes go wide and hard. He ran a hand through his curls and glared at me.

“You? Well, *mate*, don’t hold your breath.”

He was entirely serious and I knew I then how far gone he was. I laughed, not meaning to but unable to help it. He scowled at me, not catching the humour of it, his feathers still in a ruffle, and I couldn’t help it, laughing harder as I watched him through now teary eyes. Finally, he cracked a smile, a small one, then, caught up in it himself, finally laughed. “Christ, did I say that?”

“Yeah. I think you did, sunshine.”

“Sod it, you should’ve hit me.”

“And ruin an evening’s entertainment?”

He was laughing now, low and hard, leaning back on the sofa and looking up at the ceiling, then over at me again. Laughter finally subsiding to a sigh, he shook his head, leaning over to take another sip of his drink. “Sorry, *mate*. I don’t know what got into me.”

“Fear.” I said it plainly, because we were well past having to pretend we didn’t feel it.

“Fear. What if I *do* fail?” He said it softly, serious again, his eyes searching me for something I wasn’t sure I had to give him.

“If we fail...well, we just won’t, will we.”

“Right.” He exhaled and smiled again, putting a hand on my arm.

I don’t know why I tensed then, or why he did. He could sell tickets for the thrill of riding with him through his mood swings at times, and I knew I rode them out of habit as much as anything. But this was different, and he pulled his hand away as if he’d been shocked.

Neither of us broke the silence until the moment, whatever it was, had passed. Then I got up and took our glasses to the sink.

“Leave ’em.”

“You’re exhausted.”

“Yeah, and I bloody well know I won’t be able to sleep worth a damn worrying over this.” He got up and walked me the few feet to the door. “Thanks, *mate*.”

I smiled. “Pick you up tomorrow?”

He started to say yes then stopped, hitting the wall beside the door with the flat of his palm. “Shit. No. Got a meeting with Michaelson in the morning.”

“MI6 Michaelson?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ll get my kip then. We’re to talk about press relations, if you can believe it.”

I chuckled, imagining Ray holding a press conference. He hated the press worse than Cowley, but he’d soon be doing just that, I knew, if he was right about the Cow’s plans. And I repressed the slight irritation that came with thinking that way. Officially or not, Ray’d not be able to do the job alone. Even Cowley knew that Ray and I were partners, still. And I’d never been one to put the individual above the organization. Well, except for Ray. Had to get over that, didn’t I, if I was understanding Cowley’s hints. If we were to be more than a mobile ghetto, *both* of us would have to take responsibility together for the whole department, and that meant thinking beyond ourselves and our own somewhat petty needs for personal recognition.

Remembering Geraldine Mather, now posted as a professor somewhere in America where she could preach to her heart’s content amongst the pacificists, I reminded myself that what publicity CI5 had tended to be less than flattering.

∞ **CI5** ∞

Cowley’s holiday became public knowledge the next day and there was no private audience with me on the matter. I shrugged it off, busy with other things. I’d received reports from Ross on the new mob, in the strange position of both being under her eye and at her side in evaluating the men.



Whilst final decisions went before Ray, then Cowley, I'd the responsibility to make recommendations of pairings and initial rankings into squads. Two of the newest men, Leeds and Radclyffe, had already distinguished themselves, primarily by keeping their heads whilst all around them men were losing theirs. They were cool creatures, twenty-five and twenty-seven, and had the grace and bearing that spoke of an early ability to both stand alone and lean on another. The pairing of them had not been accidental. In fact, I'd done it for pure aesthetic reasons, liking the look of them together, dark and light. Pairings had been founded on less, and only time in the field would prove me out.

I didn't see Ray again for more than a few moments at a time over the rest of the week. His lunches were all taken on the run between meetings, most with Cowley, and a few with various ministers. He was wearing a tie every day now, a strange sight and still a bit awkward on him. More often than not, it was hung loose round his neck, only to be tightened again as he dove into another meeting.

It was Friday before I had the time away from my own schedule to speak to him about something other than team placements and retraining schedules for the experienced agents. Our hour and a half on Thursday had been tense and all business, as we ran down to the month of Cowley's absence, now only a week away. I'd cracked very few jokes, knowing he wasn't yet ready to relax. That would come, I was sure, when Cowley was in Scotland proper. Then, I knew, Ray's confidence would take over, and, as necessary, I would make the requisite competitive motions 'til he righted himself again.

"What's on for tonight?" he asked, surprising me. He hadn't even mentioned the weekend, and it was nearly seventeen-hundred already.

"Might see a film. What about you?"

He sighed, looking at his opened briefcase and shuffling a few folders before answering.

"I haven't spoken to a woman under fifty in two weeks, mate."

"Ah...value experience, do you?"

He chuckled at that. "Value the ability to converse about anything other than government budgets at this rate."

"Too right." I nodded, appreciative.

"What film?"

"What?"

"What film were you planning on?"

"Dunno yet. Have to check the Standard, see what's on. You interested?"

He shrugged into his coat and shut his case, eyeing his desk as if he thought he'd missed something. A moment later, he'd reopened his case and stuffed another file inside. Knowing he'd be at it all night, I grabbed my things and pulled him to the door.

"Not time yet, Bodie."

"Close enough. Let's get out of here."

"Bo-die."

"Cow's leaving the week after next. Let him be the one to stay 'til the wee hours."

Not giving Ray a chance to argue, I dragged him out to the carpark. Realising that we'd driven in separately and not wanting to let him get home and get caught up in work again, I steered him to his Capri and he got in, tossing his case and mine in the back.

I was glad my last duty had been giving a tour of the facilities to some brass, as I'd showered already. I didn't much like spending the day in trainers and track suits, so I'd taken to wearing fatigues to train in, but I'd changed to a black jumper and trousers for the tour.

We swung by my flat first and dropped off our things and then, both of us agreeing, we took the tube to Leicester Square, Ray checking out the marquees as I scouted out for dinner. We settled on an American science fiction film and he bought the tickets for the nine o'clock show. There was a new Chinese place on Lisle Street I wanted to try, and we got a table in the corner.

"No business, agreed?" I asked, desperate now to relax. The rhythms of field duty were

endless waiting and the building of tension, then the explosion of action and adrenalin, then the winding down after. A lot like sex, really. Our new positions, mine at least, felt like my sex life as well. A lot of constant low-level activity that no one but myself seemed to appreciate. My hand and I were so tired of each other that we would've gladly parted ways had I a good substitute lined up.

"Can't even remember where I work, mate. This looks good." Ray was examining the menu and I found myself watching him, not really caring what I ate. He was dressed in a grey suit and a pale green shirt. He'd thrown the tie off at the first opportunity and had unbuttoned the first few buttons of his shirt. The hair peeking out was grey, and I looked away, realising I'd started to stare. Two tables over I saw two men having dinner, intent on their own conversation. The rest of the room held a number of ordinary couples, two nearest the door, two more along the far wall. Near the back were three tables with larger mixed groups. I surveyed the perimeter out of careful habit, vows of no business aside. But also because I was aware again of what we might look like to someone else. Two business associates? On a Friday night? Perhaps. In the West End—definitely could be, you get people out on business even on a Friday. Friends? Rather sad ones, who hadn't found dates for the evening. But, not one for modesty, I knew we were both desirable enough. Our companionship was not for lack of willing women. It was more a matter of ease.

"Number thirteen please, brown rice. Number three to start. And some tea as well. Bodie?"

"Ah," I looked down and decided quickly, "Number eight, white rice."

"Tea for you?" The waiter asked, and I nodded, turning my attention back to Ray as someone poured us water and the waiter returned with the teapot and two small cups.

Ray was easy to be with. We could talk or not, without pressure.

"Girl in the new building." Ray said, setting his cup down and picking at the starter he'd ordered, some sort of spring rolls, one of them now cut up into thin slices.

"What floor?"

"What *floor*?" He laughed. "What kind of question is that?"

"Fine, then." I frowned, pulling the plate from him and taking the second spring roll before he'd had the chance to dissect it as well. "How's she stack up?"

"You might ask what line she's in."

"I might," I agreed, deciding the spring rolls, crispy and light, were promising well for the rest of the meal.

"She's in publishing."

I must've pulled a face, because he added quickly, "Nothing wrong with publishing, Bodie. 's not as if the field were cursed with bloodless red-heads or anything."

"No. It's not. But if there's one there..." I left off, knowing he'd get the point.

"Yeah, yeah. So I'm not looking for marriage anymore. She's nice."

"Nice? Why aren't you out with her then?" It slipped out before I'd thought about it, and I heard the irritation in my voice, as did he.

He raised an eyebrow, taking a delicate sip of his tea and holding the cup in the air for a second before taking another. "Didn't ask her, did I?"

I bit my tongue before I could point out that he hadn't asked *me* out either. Not in so many words. Of course, I couldn't say that, as how could he ask me out but as he had?—both of us at loose ends, settling for each other rather than making the effort to search out people who'd demand more of us. When we were in the field, we'd each *needed* to get away from the other, the need fierce and self-protecting. We would've killed each other if we hadn't. Now, we weren't getting up each other's nose, and so we naturally came together.

Too easy, that.

"You met anyone worth a second look?"

"I've seen exactly fifty-two new people in the past week."

He smiled at that and added, "And all of them under your command."

"Not to mention all fifty-two of them having the innate and curiously instinctive ability to provoke me to near violence."

"Found your button, have they?"

"Yes. And no work. You promised."

"You brought it up."

I shrugged and changed the topic. "Your publisher have a friend?"

"If I speak to her about something other than laundry, I'll ask."

"Laundry?"

"Yeah. She's got the idea that we might all spring for a machine in the basement. Sounds good, except that, soon as we get it, I'll be moving on."

"Thought you were locking yourself to the foundation?"

"Decided I'd have better luck locking myself to you instead. Harder to move you—thicker than the foundation. Let him try to move us both." He grinned.

"That so? Only two stone more than you, mate," I said, not above ruining his meal if he was going to get personal about it.

"Two, is it? Thought it was one and a half."

"Well, muscle weighs more, doesn't it."

Ray laughed at that and pushed his plate of spring roll toward me. "Wouldn't want you to waste away, then. Should let Cowley find us a two-bedroom."

"What?" I finished off his spring roll. "How'd that work?"

"Be cheaper, wouldn't it? Maybe he'd be so thrilled to save a pound or two that he'd be merciful."

"Wouldn't hurt to try it," I said, glad that the food had finally arrived. We still had plenty of time to eat and make the film, but I was suddenly starved.

"Looks good. What's that?" Ray asked, his chopsticks already picking at my meal.

"Bean curd stir-fry with mushrooms, I think."

"You ordered bean curd?"

"Thought we'd share." Ray'd finally turned vegetarian on me, and was not liable to being swayed back, so I'd started to accommodate him a bit.

He nodded, enthusiastically spooning out his rice and some of both our main courses.

I followed, and for a few minutes we ate and drank our tea in comfortable silence.

"I'll put in the request then, if you're not too settled in."

"Request?" I'd bitten into something spicy and had to reach for the water, downing most of the glass of it. "Watch for chilis."

"For a two-bedroom."

"Oh. What? You serious about that?"

"Course I—what, you weren't? Bodie, if you don't think it'd work, I—"

"No. Think it'd save us time and money. Save Cowley some as well."

"Good. Then it's settled. Give it to him Monday and maybe we'll know before he leaves. Damn, but it'll be a right pain to pack up again."

"You think he'll already have a place? And that he'll let us move?"

"Let us? Oh, I know there's a place. Nice, too. Had my eye on it working the budget. If he agrees, and promises not to move us ever again, we could be in straight away."

"And our flats now?"

"He's still got new agents to place, assuming you're letting any of that lot in."

"But—" Things were moving too fast. My eyes were still tearing up from the chili and I took some more water, trying to clear my head. Ray had us living together and I was still trying to figure out *why* he wanted it. And *if* I wanted it. Not that we didn't get on and didn't already spend most of our time together, but this was...too much. Definitely. Latching on to something, I said, "Promise us we'll never move again?"

Ray grinned, waving a piece of bean curd

in the air with his chopsticks. “Bit of hyperbole. That’s exaggeration.”

I knew that. Read a few books, didn’t I? I didn’t comment. It was way of compensating, the poor bastard. I got the looks and brawn, so he had to be the intellectual.

“I just want him to be reasonable, that’s all,” Ray continued, pausing to take a bite. “He can’t very well expect us to focus on our administrative duties whilst he juggles us around like a circus troupe, can he? He didn’t have a good reason for moving us this last time, and we should’ve argued it right then, but it didn’t occur to us, did it?”

It hadn’t, and Ray was right, but that was beside the point. The point was...the point was I’d just about moved in with him and there wasn’t a damned thing I could reasonably do about it.

“Ray, wait, we can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“But how’s it look?”

“How’s *what* look?”

“Well, I’m bisexual.” Several heads turned and I realised that I’d not only said it aloud, but loud enough to hear in most of the restaurant. I could feel the flush rising to my cheeks and gulped down some of Ray’s water.

Ray rolled his eyes at me and hissed, “Why don’t you bloody well come out to the whole of London? I can have pamphlets printed up if you’d like.”

I grimaced at him. “Yeah, that’d help our PR, sure enough.”

Ray laughed. “Cowley’d love that.”

“Cowley knows,” I said quietly.

“Course he does. But is it necessary for the whole bleeding restaurant to hear it as well?”

“No. It isn’t. Necessary,” I said, stating the obvious for lack of anything sensible to say. “He *knows*,” I repeated. “So how the hell will it look, us moving into the same flat?”

“He’ll think that it’s time we thought of it, probably. Possibly, he’ll worry that we’ll kill each other.”

“Rightfully,” I muttered under my breath.

He ignored me and continued. “Very likely he’ll see it as confirmation that *I* am a confirmed bachelor, and *you*—”

I looked up from my meal and waited for him to continue.

“—are utterly hopeless, mate,” he finished, and shook his head, turning back to his food with a slight smirk on his face.

“Very funny. Should book you into the music hall.”

“Need a straight man, wouldn’t I? Seen any about?”

“Sod off.”

He chuckled, checked his watch and announced that we had a half hour. We finished up quickly, dropping the question of housing and sharing the little we’d heard about the new film. One of the secretaries had seen it and pronounced it awful, which was as good a recommendation as we were likely to get. She, ironically, had thought it too violent. And Ray and I laughed over that, having yet to find a film whose violence even marginally reminded us of our lives. Most of the action films were so ludicrous that we laughed about them afterwards.

I paid for dinner, leaving a large tip for the honour of bisexual idiots everywhere, and we hurried to the film, finding our seats near the front. The lights went down and the previews started as Ray opened the sweets he’d purchased, holding them open to me and taking one himself. I held off on reminding him of his diet, enjoying too much his look of pleasure as he shut his eyes and savoured the chocolates.

We made ourselves as comfortable as possible, slouching down in the too close seats, one Diet Pepsi shared between us, Ray elbowing me in the sides when the film started and the hero burst onscreen in a tumble that would, in real life, have got him killed rather quickly by the bad guy hiding behind the door.

The special effects turned out to be above average, the fight scenes only mildly

humourous, and the lead actress was sexy in an “easy lay, not much to say after” sort of way.

Ray was still cracking jokes on the sound effect for the ships’ blasters, which he swore sounded like garage doors opening and closing, when we reached my flat. There was a brief odd moment when we stood at his car and I started to say goodnight, then he remembered his briefcase was inside my flat.

“It really was a spectacularly mediocre film.” He picked up his briefcase and then set it down again.

“Brilliantly mediocre,” I agreed. “Like a drink?”

“Yeah. I could do with one.”

I poured us two whiskeys and handed one over. He made no move to sit down but did set his briefcase down again. I stood, leaning against the door, watching him and waiting, feeling sure he wanted to say something.

“I needed that. Wash down all that chocolate. ’s sticky.”

“Hmm.”

“Hate this desk job. No time but the weekends to get any activity. Shouldn’t’ve let me eat that, you know.”

“You enjoyed it.”

“Yes.” He smiled, brightly. “I did. Thanks for not reminding me not to.”

I grinned back. He’d managed to finish most of the chocolates himself during the film and had looked blissful doing it, his whole body relaxed and nearly boneless next to mine. I hadn’t seen him that unwound in weeks, and it was nice, I admitted to myself, knowing that I’d engineered the evening that brought him to it.

“I—” he stopped, frowning suddenly. He set his empty glass down and stepped closer to the door, briefcase in hand again. “Sorry.” He started again. “I just wanted to say that, if you don’t want to try it—that is, if you think it’s inadvisable—” and here, I heard Cowley’s voice in him, the normal rashness tempered by diplomacy, slowly but surely training into him.

“The flat’s a good idea,” I said, quickly, still not really convinced that was true.

“Is it?” he asked, but he was smiling again.

“Yeah. Be a nice change, wouldn’t it? Save on petrol. Save time, too.”

“Could save on laundry as well. Lots of advantages.” he added and stepped closer to the door.

“Food as well,” I added.

“Right. And—bookshelves.”

“Bookshelves?” That one, I didn’t follow.

“Yeah. Could combine ’em. Alphabetise them all together,” he said, as if it was a reasonable thing to say. And for him, it was. He was probably itching to get his hands on my record collection to organise it right into his.

“Right. And...” Then I lost what I’d been about to say, suddenly noticing that my back was to the closed door and that, to open it, I’d need to step forward. Ray had got so close to me, was standing only a foot away, that there was literally no way for me to do that unless he stepped back first.

“Bodie?”

He didn’t step back and I didn’t step forward, and it was suddenly terribly awkward and almost funny, as it was when you walked towards someone in the hall and both of you went right at once, then left, caught in a little dance until someone thinks to break free.

“Ray—”

He set his briefcase down to the floor and removed his coat, tossing it over a chair before he stepped forward again, and now I was sure it was intentional—he was not leaving yet—but I felt completely paralysed about what to do about it. He was close enough that I instinctively pressed against the door, not noticing it had happened until I felt the doorhandle against my back.

“Bodie—”

Ray’s eyes were wide and dark in the low light of my flat and I noticed that, without heeled boots on, he was shorter than I by a good three inches, moreso than I thought he’d

been when we met. But it might've been an illusion, brought on by the way he was looking at me, looking up almost afraid, as if he were the one backed up against a wall and I were the...

Predator.

Christ, what was he up to? What was this about?

"Lots of advantages to it." He said, and his breath smelled like chocolates and whiskey, the same things I was still tasting, and it was prescient, dangerous, as if I were tasting *him*.

"Ray, what—"

"Fuck." He looked down, breaking eye contact with me for a moment and I breathed in again, feeling asphyxiated from nerves, my heart pumping too fast. Then he looked up again, catching me in that serious gaze, and he smiled, ever so briefly, shaking his head, the smile turning to a grin as he shook his head and stepped back, giving me back my space again. He quickly grabbed his coat and case and I stepped away from the door, letting him open it.

"Night, sunshine." I said, still feeling out of sorts.

He was at the top stair, turning on his heel and I could see that he was unsteady, poised to leave but acting still as if he had something to say. "I'll come round for you on Monday at eight sharp. Don't be late."

"Right."

"I'll fill out the forms and have it ready on Monday."

"Forms?" I stared dumbly at him.

"For the flat."

"Right. Monday."

He nodded, adding, "I'm meeting with him at eight-thirty. Should know by nine, then."

He grinned at his own cocky estimation of Cowley's immediate response and turned away, taking the stairs two at a time. I stepped back inside, surveying my still partly packed boxes and wondering if I should start re-

forming the broken ones. Hearing his car pull out I found myself sitting on the sofa, suddenly remembering that we'd agreed to watch the motor racing on Sunday.

I sighed, shaking my head and realising that, by Sunday, he was likely to have repacked his flat, so I might as well begin again with my own. Maybe not by nine o'clock, but we'd know one way or another before the day was out. Might as well be prepared.

∞ **CI5** ∞

"Send 3.7 in here."

I was in the hall, so he needn't have called me. The old man still used my number and I had the urge to remind him of my name, seeing as how he called Macklin by his. Course, it was all still probably part of his attempt to keep me knowing my place, the bastard.

The secretary waved me in and I entered, quickly estimating the old man's mood. He was sitting down, a finger's worth of scotch in his glass, and I could see there were several files and papers laid out on his desk.

"Sit down, 3.7. Unless you're going somewhere?"

"No, sir. Yes sir." I sat, amused at how quickly that had slipped out.

"Yes. Well." He looked up, picking up a page and spinning it round so it faced me. "I'll have your signature on that."

It didn't take long to read it. I was familiar with the housing request form, having filled it in and been ignored more times than I could count. There were a series of small boxes to tick, listing your ideal specifications for housing. Some of us had taken to filling them in at random, just to test if anyone ever read them. The answer seemed to be no, as Ray'd cheekily filled in "family unit" several times over the last few years and nothing had come of it.

Ray'd filled this one in as well, and I noted the request for a two-bedroom with two bathrooms, a luxury, that. There was an address filled in at the bottom and I smirked,

wondering what Cowley had thought of receiving the form with this information already neatly typed in. I signed it, front and back with my full name and number, then handed it back to him.

“Anything else, sir?”

“What?” He had already turned to his other papers, and he looked up at me with disinterest, clearly having already dismissed me from his mind.

“Anything else, sir? Regarding your holiday...?”

“Ach, no, laddie. Go off and attend to your duties, unless you’re in need of additional work...”

I nodded quickly and headed for the door, seeing his hand already moving toward a stack of agents’ files. Best to go before he made good his offer.

Before I’d shut the door behind me, he called me by name and I turned.

“Bodie, pay me no mind.” He leaned back in his chair, raising his hands to his face and drawing one hand through what remained of his hair, the other removing his glasses and setting them down on the desk. He looked old and I felt a small shudder creep up on me. For all that we joked about the old man’s demise, it had the quality of unreality about it, like speculating on the end of the world. Fun to think about when you were bored, but bloody frightening if you took it at all seriously. He was well past retirement age and, although still a strong-minded bastard, his body had begun to look fragile to me. He cut off my line of thought by drawing himself up behind his desk, staring at me with eyes that suggested he’d be around longer than I would, and I fought not to look away. “I trust that the building and its inhabitants will survive without me for a month?”

“Survive and flourish, sir,” I answered, trying hard not to smile.

“I sincerely doubt that, but no matter. Be off with you.” I turned again to go, but he added, “And see if you can track down 4.5—

save Christine the trouble.”

“Yes sir. I think he’s in a meeting with Burns in the armoury.” I faced him, holding the door open and already wondering if Ray’s meeting would be over by the time I reached him.

“I didn’t ask where he is, 3.7. Just give him the message.”

“Message, sir?” I asked, enjoying this immensely.

“That, if Master Doyle could spare me the time, I’d like to meet with him.” He raised his voice, sounding more exasperated than angry, and I did smile, not bothering to hide it now.

“Ah. Yes sir. I’ll pass that on, sir.”

“Do that and shut the door before I give ye somethin’ else to pass on.”

I shut the door behind me, winking at Christine as I left. She rolled her eyes at me and smiled. I don’t know quite how Cowley managed it, but he always found the secretaries with actual typing skills. Not much there to look at, usually, but always sharp as a whip and appreciative of a bit of harmless chatup.

I was halfway to the armoury when I met Ray in the hall, coming up to his office. “Oi, hang on.”

“Busy, Bodie,” he muttered, closing his office door behind him and leaving me in the hall like an idiot.

I knocked, just to annoy him and he yelled, “Come in, damnit.”

“lo Angelfish, and how’s your day?”

“Sod off.” He kept his back to me, continuing to stare out the window at the street below.

I walked up behind him, skirting his desk with its piles of files and briefs, putting a hand on his shoulder and feeling him tense beneath it, then relax. “There, now. What’s put you in such a fine mood?”

He sighed and pointed out the window. “See those people, Bodie?”

“Yeh?” I said, seeing only a few people off on their lunch hour, takeaway bags and midday shopping in hand.

“Unappreciative, the whole bloody lot of them. Should just give them what they want, see if they bloody well enjoy it.”

“Bad, eh?”

“Fucking awful.” He turned, putting his back to the window and looking over his desk. “I hate this job. You want it?”

I grinned. “Why, you want to take a turn training the agents? Put the fear of God in ’em in the mood you’re in.”

He grinned back, and I could see the tension sliding out of him. “Might make a nice change from this...nonsense. Waste of time, the lot of it.”

“I can see that. Cheer up, mate.”

“Not bloody likely.” He frowned, then perked up curiously. “Why... Is there something to be cheery about?”

“Signed the papers, didn’t I?” He blinked at me and I clarified. “We’ve got the flat lined up. Housing said we could start moving in whenever we’re ready. It’s vacant and, get this, freshly painted.”

“Tonight?”

“What? Probably still smells like paint, but I suppose it’s dry all right. You don’t want to move in tonight?”

“Yeh. Why not?”

“I—have to pick up the keys and check in with Cowley. You packed already?”

“Course I am. Had all Saturday and Sunday.”

“Thought you might’ve chatted up the laundry girl.”

He shrugged, dismissing her with a wave of his hand. “Got a boyfriend.” He pulled a face, continuing. “It gave me more time to pack, besides. You *are* packed up, aren’t you?”

“Course. Have a system, don’t I.” The system involved not unpacking completely for months after each move. I hated it, but for once it had worked out for the best.

“Good, then. I’ll bring the car around and we can start on your place, finish off with mine.”

“Tonight? We won’t get through them both

tonight, will we?”

“Why not?”

I sighed, realising he was serious. “Some of us have to work tomorrow.”

He blinked at me, not getting the significance of that.

“And some of us do not have desk jobs,” I added.

“Gone soft, have you?”

“Sod off, Ray. I am not moving two flats to one in a night and risk pullin’ me back, and you can call it soft or simply reasonably intelligent.”

“Fine, then. We’ll start on my flat first, pick up the clothes at least, an’ I can unpack whilst you rest your weary head.”

“Start and finish on your flat,” I said again, but he ignored me. “When will you be finished?”

He checked his watch and the planner open on his desk. “Six, if all goes well, which it won’t.”

“Seven then?”

He shook his head sadly. “Half past. Come by with your car as soon as you finish and you can start loading breakables. I’ll be round the flat as soon as I’m able.”

“Great.” I stopped. “Which flat?” I asked, too late realising we were back to moving both again.

“Eh?”

“Which flat will you be round, then?”

“Oh.” He smiled. “Ours, I suppose. Pick up the keys if you’re able and leave one with Christine before you leave.”

“Right.”

I waved goodbye, heading back to the gymnasium where I was to begin another round of defense tactics with the new members of ‘B’ squad. I’d already decided to set them at each other’s throats and take on the winners, knowing I’d need the energy for the evening. Easier to let them weed each other out and let the best of ’em dig their own holes, puffing themselves up with each victory before I knocked the wind out of them. Training was

half brute strength, of course, but the rest was pure psychology. I chuckled at the thought, thinking of how long I'd fought off Kate Ross before I'd worked that out for myself.

Sweating after and riding the high of endorphins and the sheer pleasure of a good workout, I headed for the showers, changing into another set of workout clothes, knowing I'd ruin anything better in the move.

Letting myself into Ray's flat, I started with the suitcases nearest the door, not bothering to note how many boxes there were in total. Thankfully, he'd had the sense to put the books in smaller boxes this time, but they were still bloody heavy and I was ready to dispose of the lot of them and save us the trouble. I swung by my own flat to pick up my essentials, deciding that I might spend the night at the new flat, assuming the water and central heating were running.

Jamming another three of my own boxes and a suitcase on the passenger seat, I drove to the new flat, curious and a bit nervous to see what Ray'd got us into. It was in Marylebone and I could see at once why Ray'd been eyeing the place. It wasn't, I could see right off, on the level of our usual flats. Within a short walk of the park and on the second floor of a building with an excess of overgrown potted plants hanging across the front windows and crowding up the front stairway. Picking up the closest box, I unlocked the front door, keying in the first alarm at the first entrance before taking the stairs quickly to the second floor. The door was freshly painted a dark blue. Stepping into the flat, I saw that the painter had taken artistic liberties, all right, and had to laugh, wondering what Ray'd say when he arrived. Three of the interior walls were the same dark blue as the door, but the one facing the street with a window was painted white. The effect was odd but, pondering it a moment, I decided liveable. We could always repaint, but I expected Ray'd naysay the idea, eager as he was to set down roots. The Cow'd not promised anything about

future moves, but I guessed from this flat and the ease with which he'd agreed, that we could count on it for a while yet.

The kitchen was modern, with a large new-ish refrigerator and a sparkling new toaster that, oddly enough, was nearly the same blue as the walls. Running back down for a few more boxes, I dashed up again, torn between wanting to unload the car and the urge to settle in and explore the new flat.

Practical matters won out, and I unloaded the car and headed back to Ray's for another load which I brought up to the new lounge before I let myself see the rest of the flat. I had already chosen the larger of the two bedrooms by the time I heard the thump of a box hitting the floor.

"Oi, what the hell? Bodie!"

"Yeh?" I called out, unable to move from the mattress where I'd collapsed, exhausted. I'd resisted it for the last hour, trying to organise the boxes into some sort of pattern and knowing that, were I to lie down on the bed, I'd be unable to move again. But I'd given up, finally.

I heard Ray stumble over a box and swear, then saw him standing at the doorway with a smirk on his face. "Gerroff, Bodie. We've work to do."

"Done and done, mate."

He stepped to the bed and grabbed my hand, jerking roughly 'til I had no choice but to sit up, feeling the pull in me lower back that meant I'd be a fool to keep at it.

"Lazy sod. Got hardly any done."

"Bloody hell, I brought half your bleedin' belongings here and a good portion of me own. Sod off so I can die in peace, will you?"

I closed my eyes and sank back down to the bed again, resisting the tug of his arm. He let go before I brought him to the bed with me and I heard him trot off to the hall.

A few minutes later, having dozed off, I heard him yell again. "'ave to get up if you want to eat."

His voice sounded far away but I heard

the distant rustle of paper and the scent of curry carried through the air, driving back the need for sleep. I could sleep after I ate and let Ray have his joy unpacking for the rest of the evening.

I eased off the bed and slowly shuffled to the bath. Ray'd unpacked his toiletries and I took a quick shower, borrowing his shampoo. Coming out in my robe, I realised that I must've been out for a while. The lamps were on and it was dark outside the front window. One of my suitcases was now laid out open on my bed. Grabbing a pair of running pants and a t-shirt, I walked to the lounge, kicking aside a few boxes to form a rough path.

"Time's it?"

"Nearly eleven."

"Eleven?"

"You went out like a light. I tried to wake you but you kicked me."

"Served you right."

"Some laugh," Ray said, looking around the place.

"What?"

"The painters. Think we've been setup."

"Cowley?"

Ray shook his head, smiling. "The bedroom's pink, you know."

"Noticed. 's why it's yours."

"Yours is purple."

"Lavender, leanin' towards blue, I thought."

"Bloody optimistic of you."

"We can paint 'em over."

"Can't think about it now. Can live with pink if you can live with lavender."

"Can live with chartreuse at this point. 'm too exhausted to argue with the walls." I dug into the curry and took more than half of the rice. Ray picked at his, looking a bit pensive.

"Yeh?" I asked, hoping he'd get on with saying what was bugging him.

"What? Just thinking's all."

"Careful y'don't strain somethin'."

"We going to kill one another?" He looked

at me, his face serious.

I paused as if to give it some serious consideration. "No plans on it, why?"

He grinned, handing me an extra serviette and poured himself another beer. "All right, then."

I nodded, wondering how much trouble it'd be to set up the telly, then remembered the time. Still, it wouldn't do to go right to bed after a curry. "Plannin' on stayin' up?"

"Thought I'd get a bit more done. Coming in at nine tomorrow. You?"

I sighed. "Have to finish the arrangements with Major West for the explosives training next week."

"Early?"

"Eleven. But I've not finished the field assignments yet."

"Leave 'em. I won't get to reviewing them 'til Thursday, at earliest. The IRA bombing's coming up empty, no surprise."

I stretched my arms up. "IRA did it. Not likely to get more than that, I imagine."

Ray scowled. "You try tellin' the Cow that."

"Rather not. Oh. Well then. Guess I'll sleep in. Cowley will disapprove of that as well."

"The Cow can kiss my arse. I got everything ready for 'im to shove off. All I need now is for him to get on his bike."

"Now, now, Raymond. Best wait 'til he's gone before you clear out his desk."

Ray'd moved swiftly from abject fear to cocky sarkiness, seemingly based on his victory over the move, but I knew better. He was building himself up and, come Monday next, he'd be back moaning and needing shoring up again.

He cleaned up the boxes and left the crockery, unwashed, in the sink, and I got up and watched as he wandered around the flat.

"Oi. Bodie."

"Hmm?"

"Flat seemed larger when it was empty." He looked critically at the boxes covering most

of the floor and obscuring half the furniture and I bit back a sharp remark, realising he wasn't complaining.

"Tomorrow we can start in on that lot."

"Where'll we put it?" He sounded defenseless and irritable and I recognized the grumpiness for exhaustion.

"It'll be fine, Ray. Get ready for bed and I'll start pushing these around, get the books on the shelves."

"In order."

"Yes, Ray."

"By author," he added, hovering in the doorway, frowning slightly.

"Go to bed, Ray."

He nodded, shuffling off to the bath and I heard water running and then the door closing. Then it opened again and I caught sight of his back, wrapped only in a towel, and I heard a faint sigh as he fell onto his bed.

"'night, sunshine," I said, too low for him to hear me, going back to the boxes and seeing what I could make of the disaster Ray'd begun whilst I'd slept.

Three hours later I gave up, leaving off and feeling too tired to see if I'd made progress or not. Bloody ridiculous to try to finish it all in one night. But it was easy to get carried away on Ray's projects, not noticing you'd lost the weekend until it was Sunday night and you were still working on his oily excuse for a bike.

∞ **CI5** ∞

He was already up, dressed, and pondering the blue walls by the time I finished showering. In full daylight, they didn't look half bad. Ray's pink room was really less offensive than I'd remembered, soft and light like the sky was at early sunset. The lavender of course really was purple and would have to be fixed when I had time. I was not living in lavender, not even as a political statement. I grinned at the joke and dressed quickly, realising that I'd slept later than I'd planned. Wouldn't do to be late for my first meeting.

Major West was more eager to be done

with me than I with him, and the meeting went by, leaving me the rest of the day to reorganize the training schedule. Macklin had his own system, seemingly based more on Cowley's whim than any logic I could fathom, and I was still working out my own system, based on Cowley's frequent complaints that the seasoned agents thought they were above such training, whilst the new ones didn't learn enough from training only with their own. I agreed, not sure yet how to arrange the schedules so that old and new could meet on the gymnasium floor. Ironically, the very work we trained them for made training itself near to impossible.

After juggling the hours 'til early evening, I finally set it aside, having one more "class" to instruct. I was demonstrating blade defense maneuvers. Ray's unofficial survey of the infirmary found an unreasonably high number of agent's injuries were knife wounds, and some of those were self-inflicted, or at the very least caused by carelessness. It was easy enough to avoid another man's knife in training exercises, but, in the heat of battle, it was another matter. I was still trying to work out how to demonstrate the difference without ending up in tatters myself when my RT crackled on in the locker room.

"Three-seven come in."

"Three-seven here."

"It's me."

"Know that, don't I? What's on?"

I could almost see him grinning on the other end. "Wondered if you were free for the next hour or so."

"Teaching a class, Ray. 'til six. Check the schedule."

"Need help?"

"You what?"

"I'm bored and going out of my head, that's what. Done everything to be done here and I need to work off some steam."

"Come on over then. Check yourself out a knife from armoury on your way. Something concealable."

“Got it. Should I change?”

“Never, Ray. Love you just the way you are.”

“I meant—”

“Know what you meant, berk. Stay in the suit if you can risk it. Added realism for the kiddies.”

“Right. Four-five out.”

I rubbed my hands together, filled with inspiration now.

I had them lined up at the wall, noting who was looking bright-eyed and who was still sulking from their last lesson. Twelve new agents had made ‘B’ squad and I had an additional two pairs who were ‘B’ but very well might make ‘A’ by the end of the year. There were four women this time out and I had to remind myself not to treat ‘em with any delicacy as I’d been brought down by Smith, the little one, just last week. She reminded me of Ray, quick to anger and fast on her feet. I was hoping she was up to taking Ray on, as I planned to pick her first.

“Lottie, meet Raymond Doyle.”

I nodded to the door where Ray stood casually, his coat slung over his shoulder. He set it down on a hook and strolled in, casual as can be.

“Mr Doyle. Good to meet you sir.”

Ray held out a hand, unsmiling as yet. “Charlotte, isn’t it?”

“Charlotte Smith, actually. Agent 6.3”

Ray turned to me and grinned. “Good to meet you 6.3.” Still gripping her hand gently, Ray did a swift turn and, before I’d blinked, he was behind her, his arm pulling hers back, his other hand at her throat, knife held blade outward at her neck. I couldn’t hear it, but saw him whisper something in her ear that made her eyes go wide. Then she recovered, a small smile touching her lips, and there was a blur that ended suddenly with Ray flat on the mat with her sitting above him, straddling his hips. The knife was a yard away on the floor.

Our audience was quiet for a half second, then someone began to applaud, the rest

following.

I motioned Lottie up and she rose, Ray following. Lottie did a low bow and Ray nodded.

“Nice, 6.3.” She grinned back at me. “But what of the knife?”

“What?” She looked around for it, not seeing it on the floor.

“Lost it, did you?”

“I set it down.”

“Here it is.” I tossed it past her, aiming for Ray, who caught it easily by its handle. “Agents, what’d you learn? Seven-six?”

“Not to fuck with Lottie, sir.”

The class laughed. “Anything else?”

Four-two, a large lad whose hunched shoulders made him seem larger and slower, cleared his throat. “Pocket the weapon or toss it a sufficient distance to prevent recovery by a second assailant.”

“Or the first. Right, 4.2. Lottie, best to pick it up if you can, otherwise get it as far away from both of you as possible. Mr Doyle might’ve got loose and tried again. Might’n he?” I turned to Ray, more than a bit curious about why he’d let Lottie off so easily.

Ray grinned at me. “I’d like to have another try at that.”

“Would you?”

“Just warming up. Think I’m ready now.”

I turned to the class to check that they were paying attention, then turned back to Ray. Eyeing him carefully, I saw when he tensed and took the cue, beginning to circle him. He danced round a bit, putting on a show, then settled in, dashing close to me, blade catching the light as he dove toward me with it. I blocked him and he kept trying, getting close enough so that I heard the tear of cloth as he caught my sleeve.

Raising my voice to be heard over the murmuring, “Keep in mind that you want him down fast and disarmed. Unconscious, if possible, but not if you have questions, right?”

There was silence and more murmured comments and I said it again, “Right?”

“Right. Yeh.” The class responded.

Getting in closer to Ray, still blocking his blade, I said quietly, “Watch it. Might muss up your nice clothes.”

“I’ve got the blade, Bodie. And you should be careful of this tie. Nicked it from your suitcase.”

“It did look familiar. Looks better on me.” I did a quick roll and came up with my own blade in view.

To my side, I heard louder voices remarking on us, some of them laying odds. I noted, with amusement, that most seemed to favour Ray for the likely winner. They’d pay for that later when I sent them running.

“Close one, Ray. Care to try again?”

“Sure, mate. Just lower your arm a bit and—” he lunged and I knocked his arm aside, hard enough for him to lose his grip. The knife clattered to the floor and I kicked it far enough to make the point. He steadied himself, eyeing his knife on the floor and I danced him round so he was moved farther away from it. Whilst he was distracted, I feinted and he took the bait, stepping aside to avoid the wild swing of my arm. I quickly switched the blade to my stronger hand, and lunged forward again, careful to avoid nicking him with my blade. My shoulder caught him in the chest and he went down to the mat. I landed on him with all my momentum, grinning as I heard the whoosh of the air knocking out of him. I tossed my blade away and pinned his arms up above his head, leaning in to leer at him.

“Got you, sunshine.”

He smiled up at me, panting a bit. “Couldn’t beat you in front of your own class, could I? Bad for morale.”

“Sod off. Tryin’ to tell me you made it easy?”

“Dunno. Was it easy?”

“Always, mate. Lightweight like you.”

He bared his teeth and I tensed, waiting for it, but he didn’t try to throw me. I carefully got off him and he got up, dusting off his trousers.

“You leavin’ us Mr Doyle?” O’Leary, a skinny fellow with a mouth on him, called out.

I looked at Ray and he shook his head. “Be back in more suitable attire.” He jogged off to the lockers and returned whilst my students were dissecting our moves.

“He usually win?” O’Leary asked as Ray strode back, this time in a track suit.

“Depends on whether he’s tellin’ the story, doesn’t it?” Ray smirked.

“Want to give it another try?” I answered the challenge.

“Nah. I’ll watch you this time.”

I shrugged, noticing Ray take a spot in the corner and start stretching out. It was probably true that I’d had an advantage with him comin’ in cold, and he’d probably pay me back for it later.

I considered the pack of ’em and picked on O’Leary, waving him forward. He made a “who, me?” expression, elbowing his new partner, a morose bloke whose name I kept forgetting. Tom or Tim. Agent 9.2, at any rate. Nine-two elbowed him back in the gut and I noticed O’Leary wince and I grinned, liking 9.2 more each minute.

O’Leary made his mistakes early and often and it didn’t take much to get him down. I let him up after a short lecture to the class on the inadvisability of assuming that a larger man is slower on his feet.

“Oi.”

I turned to Ray and it seemed he was ready for another go. Seeing that the mob was shifting and eager, I dispatched them with their partners, each of ’em armed with a wood blade that was too dull to damage ’em with more than bruises. They scattered about the floor and I called out brief instructions and warnings and then promptly ignored them, focusing on Ray, who was starting to dance around me.

“Save yer strength Bodie. Got to unpack tonight.”

I sighed, staying relaxed, letting Ray be the first to make a move. “Loser makes supper.”

“Loser makes supper and buys wine.”

“Good stuff?”

“Champers. Toast the new flat.”

“Fine. Well, get on with it.”

Ray smiled, baring his teeth. “I like it dry, remember.”

“Keep that in mind, then, when you shop tonight.”

He danced around a bit but soon got impatient, as I’d expected, and began making quick and fast jabs at me, his blade cutting through the air but missing me by a safe margin. I probably should’ve switched us to dummies but we were cocky enough and experienced enough to handle the real thing and not kill each other. Macklin liked to take on the A squad fully armed, but I preferred not to risk it with an adventurous and overeager agent until after I had trained them myself. Valued me own fair skin too much. Had enough scars as it was.

I kept back, letting Ray push us forward ’til he’d tired himself out a bit. Then I took the offensive, aiming low and nearly getting him in the gut. It was close enough to worry me and I backed off a bit, about to suggest we switch weapons and begin again. But he saw my retreat as an opening and knocked me down before I’d got the words out and I had me arms full of a sweat-slippery Doyle. He closed his blade with one hand and I set my own to the side, continuing my efforts to buck him off me and get on top of the situation. He was all knees and elbows, catching me once in the groin and baring his teeth at me when I responded in kind, heaving him off of me and rolling on him. Peripherally, I could see a few of the agents stop their own motions to watch us grappling about on the floor.

“Beautiful when you’re angry.” Ray taunted, his voice close to my ear.

“Shame the same can’t be said of you, mate,” I answered, earning myself a scratched wrist. I’d have to remind him to cut his nails. He wasn’t above fightin’ like a bird if it’d get him out of buying the wine. He was still a

cheap bastard, despite the pay rise in his new office. I threw him off and rolled to my feet again, assuming a defensive posture, waiting for him to attack again. It wouldn’t be over ’til the one of us immobilized the other, I’d decided. Or ’til one of us knocked the other out, a distinct possibility as I could see the fire in his expression, hear it in his voice. He wanted it out, wanted to test us, probably still worried that we *would* be at each other’s throats living together. And maybe this was good, work it out before we brought the tension of the job home again.

His hands became fists, then unclenched, his body loosening, his posture beautifully supple. I loved to watch him fight. Loved to take him on. I knew we still looked brilliant on the mat. Even Cowley wasn’t above recognising that.

“Loser unpacks the books. All of ’em.”

“Loser paints the bath.” I upped the ante. The bath was bright orange, accented with avocado, and I’d decided it would be done over first, but not by my own hand.

“Show us some action, then,” he answered, nodding.

“Lettin’ you have a chance t’catch yer breath.” I answered, not above taking the chance myself. “Besides, age before beauty, love.”

“Shame beauty has to fade with age, innit?”

“Does it now? Lucky you never had it to lose, then.”

“Your eyes going already old man?”

“Somethin’ to see, is there?” I said, charging him without warning and using brute force to knock him to the floor and under me again. But I couldn’t get a good enough hold and he maneuvered out and to his feet again. We were both breathing hard now but neither ready to give up. The room had gone quiet as the other fights found their ends and they turned their attentions to our battle. “You’ve got a face like a battered pug, Doyle,” I taunted, not meaning it, quite. He *did*, but I’d always

had a fondness for pugs. They were cute in a big-eyed way.

That got him going and he let out a low kick. I went with it, feinting a fall and pulling him down beneath me, tired of chatting and eager to finish him off. He fought hard, responding to each close blow with one of his own. I'd taken on four agents already and he was relatively fresh, warmed up now. Still, books and the bath, not to mention wine and supper were hanging over me, and I grabbed hold of some of his hair and the back of his head hit the mat hard enough to make him blink, but he held on, bringing his arms down suddenly, catching me where I'd bruised my shoulders hauling his bloody books into the new flat. Before I could recover, he'd reversed us and had me pinned beneath him, his arm across my throat in the position to break my neck with a bit of pressure. I looked up at him and said, "Surrender," and he got up off of me, giving me a hand to help me to my feet again.

The agents, gathered in a circle around us, started to applaud and whistle and I turned to glare at them, bellowing, "All of you experts still have four turns round the lot, or have you forgotten?"

The applause cut off and turned to moans and bitter curses, but they didn't have to be told twice, breaking up and filing out to do their run.

Ray looked over at me and laughed suddenly. "Worse than Macklin, you are."

"Nostalgia talking. I'm a teddy bear next to that bastard. He made us run six, or have you forgot."

Ray groaned. "Can't forget that. Still have bruises ten years old from his hand." He cocked his head to the side, running a hand through his damp hair and untidying it further. "Some teddy bear you are. A teddy who'll be holding a paint brush this weekend."

"This why you came down here? T'get me to paint the bath?" I steered us to the showers, wanting to clean up before the class returned and used up the hot water.

Ray followed me, already beginning to strip off his shirt. "Nah. Was this or say somethin' to the Cow I'd only regret later."

Both of us showered and dressed quickly, me to get back in time to demoralise the children who dragged back winded, and Ray to return to whatever he'd been up to before our games.

Hours later, I was back to the task of reordering the schedule for the final, I hoped, time that week. Ray appeared at my door, coat and case in hand and I looked at the time, surprised that it was four already. We'd both arranged to leave early, planning on staying late at the week's end.

"Don't forget to swing by the off-license. I was thinking of stir-fry tonight."

"Yeh, yeah. Stir-fry, dry wine, and me up to my eyeballs in books. Rather stay here for the night."

"Stop yer moaning. I'll hold a brush this weekend as well if it'll help."

Imagining the two of us together trying to fit in the bath, I had my doubts but I smiled at him, appreciating the offer.

He grinned, likely thinking the same thing, and waved as he left. I sat back a minute, wondering whether it was possible to get him drunk enough to not notice whether the record albums were in order. Best not to risk it, I decided, heading to the carpark. Might get him to rub liniment on me if I moaned long enough. Might even get a massage if I played my cards right.

∞ **CI5** ∞

"To two-bedroom flats." Ray had his glass in the air, sloshing wine on the wood floors.

"To hiring hands next time."

"Won't be a next time."

"Retiring here, are we?"

"And why not? Nice place, innit?"

I clinked his glass and took a sip, looking round. With the furniture in, most of the books on the shelves, and the rest of the boxes stashed away to worry about on the weekend,

it really did look liveable. Better than the last few flats, anyway. "Not bad." I agreed. "Could even get used to the walls."

Ray nodded, setting his glass down and circling around the room, straightening a picture, dusting his hand over the shelves, then stopping and taking up his glass again. "Pour us another."

I refilled our glasses, waiting for him to think up another toast.

"To marriage." He raised his glass and I raised an eyebrow. He grinned, adding, "May we never."

"Ah. To marriage, then." I agreed, our glasses meeting. "To Cowley's holiday in Scotland."

"To Scotland. And to Ireland."

"Cowley going to Ireland?" I asked, clinking his glass.

"Nah. Like it though. We should take a holiday there. Like to see the Mackintosh house."

"Right. To Ireland, North and South."

"To Wales."

"To the bloody British Empire."

"God save the Queen," I added, and we drank another glass to Her Majesty, filled with the joy of expensive champagne and my not half-arsed attempt at stir-fry. Ray opened the second bottle and refilled our glasses.

"Speaking of queens, mate."

"Yeah?" I asked, waiting for another toast.

"I think that Liston's a poofter."

"Who? Oh, 8.4?" Easier to keep 'em straight by numbers.

"Yeah. Caught him gazing admiringly at your backside."

I shrugged. "He has taste."

Ray grinned, walking 'round me in a circle before swaying before me again. He was already nearly drunk, having had several drinks before, during and after dinner. Another few glasses and I'd have to lead him to his bed. "Not bad at that. Think he'll get anywhere with it?"

"Who, Liston?" I tried to remember him,

finally recalling his interview. He'd been a bit too butch, and his attitude had put me right off. I'd dismissed him as unsuitable but the Cow'd overridden me and said his file pegged him as hard as he looked. He'd proven himself in his first exercises and I'd since had good reports on him in the field.

"Yeah. Not bad lookin', is he? For a bloke, that is," Ray added. He liked to speculate on my tastes and I let him, figuring it was harmless enough.

"Handsome enough. Overcompensates a bit too much."

"Ah. Gotcha. Like 'em fey, do you?"

"Yeah, petal. Coy and sweet, that's me in a nutshell."

"'m drunk, you know," Ray said, switching gears and taking another large sip of champers.

"Figured that."

"You drunk yet?"

"Nah. You're ahead of me."

"Shouldn'a' drunk so much." He raised his glass, watching it for a second before speaking again, his voice definitely slurring a bit. "To chocolate." He toasted, not waiting for me to follow him.

"Got some somewhere. Want it?"

"Nah." He shook his head, taking another drink. "Shouldn'."

I walked over to the window and looked out, seeing nothing but dark sky and the few cars that were still out this late. We'd only just finished up and it had taken most of the night to do it. Another hour and I'd turn in, needing at least five hours sleep if I was to be any use tomorrow.

"Changed me mind."

"What?" I turned round and bumped into Ray, spilling his drink on his shirt. He stared down at the wet spot and shrugged, unbuttoning it with one hand whilst continuing to sip his now-depleted drink.

"Ray."

"Hmm?" He looked up at me and blinked drunkenly.

“What’d you change your mind on?” I prompted him.

“Oh. Chocolate.”

Given how much he used to natter on against swiss rolls, he’d of late developed a taste for chocolates. A very expensive taste, naturally, in which he expect me to indulge him, in keeping with his tight-fisted habits. I had, on impulse and for my own pleasure, bought a box of quality cherry liqueur chocolates, and now I brushed past him to figure out where I’d stored them. The kitchen was still in disarray.

Ray was still staring out the window when I returned, chocolate in hand. Ray examined it and I could tell he’d already forgot he’d asked for it, but he smiled and opened his mouth.

Sighing, I popped one in his mouth, trying to ignore the way he looked right now, all loose-limbed with drink, eyes heavy-lidded, body swaying in time to music only he could hear. Most of the time, his charms suffered from overexposure, but sometimes, especially when he wasn’t trying, he got to me a little.

When it happened, he usually broke the spell by saying something idiotic or getting stroppy with me and I’d end up amused and turn my attentions elsewhere. He was hardest to deal with when he was like this, warm and half-undressed.

“’nother?”

“Box is over there. Get it yourself.” I pointed but his eyes didn’t follow my arm.

“Shouldn’t anyway.” He heaved a sigh, seemingly still intent on making me his slave for the evening. I’d hung the artwork, cooked the meal, cleaned up and washed the plates, unpacked, and was now realising that a liniment massage was highly unlikely. I’d be lucky if I didn’t have to pour him in bed.

“Christ, Ray.” I got him another cherry liqueur and set it in his open mouth. This time, I didn’t pull my fingers out before he’d caught them and had licked them gently. I must’ve moaned because he opened his eyes wide and

smiled at me from over his champagne glass, washing down the chocolate with the last of his wine.

The drunk bastard was playing with me now and I’d be damned if I got trapped into playing along any farther. I hadn’t been exaggerating. I’d not had a decent date in four months, not counting an unfortunate evening with a young lady who was embracing celibacy and hadn’t thought it necessary to tell me ’til after dinner and a film.

Knowing that Ray didn’t mean any of it didn’t make my prick subside any, and I knew that he’d be embarrassed as hell if he were sober. Reminding him of this tomorrow might even get me out of painting the bath. But revenge or blackmail wouldn’t be as sweet as kissing him might be. Not that I would.

“Time for bed, Raymond.”

He fluttered his eyes at me, camping madly, and I grinned, despite my irritation. “Ooh, luv, I’d thought we might ’ave a dance first.” He did a drunken twirl in place and I took his arm, steering him to his room before he could get in any more trouble. He didn’t fight, but his own lack of coordination hindered our progress and it was with effort that I got him to sit on his bed and set his glass down.

I removed his wet shirt and pulled his shoes off then, struggling a bit until he lay back and stopped trying to help. After that, he lay back quietly until I pulled him to his feet, turning back the duvet and settling him under it. He looked up at me, already half-asleep, and forced his eyes to focus on me. “Sorry, Bodie.”

“All right, Ray. Sleep it off. If you’re hung over tomorrow—”

“Won’ be. Ni’ Bodie.”

I brought back two full glasses of water and left them by his bedside. When he woke up again, as he always did with this much drink in him, he could drink them down and hopefully not be too ill in the morning.

Wiping up the spills from the floor and pouring the champagne down the drain, I

vowed to bed the first available body I could find.

∞ **CI5** ∞

“Christ,” Ray moaned as I pulled fast round a corner.

At breakfast, he’d hardly been able to look at me as I set some toast before him, confirming that he had a clear recollection of his behaviour by wincing as I made a show of putting away the chocolates I’d left out the night before.

Ray’s moans continued all the way to HQ, getting softer as he sank down in his seat. I pulled into the carpark and he rubbed at his eyes as he slid out of the car and headed for the lift.

“How bad was it?” he asked, wincing when I didn’t answer straight away.

“Hmm?”

“Last night.”

“You mean how much will it cost you?”

He nodded, holding his head on as the lift rose.

“Haven’t decided.”

“Lovely.”

We reached our floor and I watched him drag off to work, glad I’d had less to drink myself. The day was an easy one, with only the ‘C’ squad to take through the basics.

After lunch, I met with met with Cowley, waiting with Christine and catching up on the relevant gossip.

“Send Bodie in.” Cowley’s voice was mild on the intercom and I rubbed my hands together, observing that I had a name this time.

“Was lovely as always, Chris.”

She smiled and shooed me off, picking up her phone to resume the work I’d kept her from.

“Sir?”

He looked up from his printouts and waved at the chair. I sat down and waited, in no hurry and with no idea what was on the agenda for the morning.

“Are your new accommodations satisfactory?”

“What? Oh. Yes, thank you sir.” I had been expecting to discuss his departure, not our flat, but was amused that he’d bother to ask about it. I’d decided that it was very likely the paint job had been his doing, but I was not about to be the one to refer to it.

“Aye, good.” He nodded, scribbling something then closing a folder and turning to focus fully on me. I sat up a bit straighter in my chair and he smiled at me, nodding in the direction of his whiskey. Taking that as a sign, I poured out two glasses, waiting ’til he’d tasted his before taking a drink myself. “How is 4.5?”

“Fine.”

“Don’t be difficult, Bodie.”

I smiled. “Perhaps you could be more specific, then?”

He shook his head, taking off his glasses and pinching his nose, then putting them on again. “Specifically, I had noticed he seemed a bit worn this week.”

“Stress of the move, sir. We made short work of it so as to be able to focus on the job.”

“That would explain some of it, then. And the hangover?”

“That would also be the move.”

“Ach, the man should know better than that.”

“Yes sir. So should we all, I expect.”

“You hung over as well, 3.7?”

“No, sir. And I expect Ray’s over it as well by now.”

“I should hope so. We shall see. He’s to meet with me this afternoon to settle the arrangements for whilst I’m on holiday.”

“Yes, I had heard you were leaving, sir.”

He snorted, standing up and walking around his desk. Stopping behind me, he put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “I expect you’ve a bit of resentment on that front, eh?”

“Sir?”

“You don’t have to be coy wi’ me, laddie. I know you’ve got your own eye on the future.”

“Yes sir...”

“Come on, 3.7. You can do better than that.”

I wished I could see his face, but he remained behind me, letting me take my chances I was reading him correctly, knowing it'd be a bad scene if I wasn't. "I've learned to be flexible, sir. My loyalties have always been to CI5."

"Right, Bodie. I've no doubt of that. And this flexibility...does it extend to where I place you when I retire?"

"Retire, sir?"

He sighed, loudly, and stepped around so I could see him, finally. He was smiling, as I'd thought he was, and I took another sip of my drink, remaining cool. "It *did* occur to you that I might wish to do so, or did you expect me to die in this office?"

"I'd rather you didn't, sir. Might give the ladies a bit of a shock."

His smile broadened and he chuckled at that. "Yes, I had thought it might. And I expect that you've imagined yourself in this chair before long."

He sat back down in it, leaving me to guess whether I should answer with the truth. I didn't consider for long. The truth was always advisable. He was too likely to get to it eventually. "Yes, sir. If you believe it's in the best interests of the organisation, I would consider taking on the position of Controller should you offer it to me." There. Both honest and tactful.

He laughed and nodded. "Admirably open-minded of ye. And suppose I should offer the position to your partner?" He still referred to Ray as my partner, and I understood the impulse. I rather thought of him that way myself.

"Doyle would accept, I imagine."

"With your blessing, I suppose."

"Of course, sir."

"And you with his."

"Yes, sir."

"Ach. Enough of this speculating. I've work to do and no doubt you do as well."

"Yes sir. Taking the 'C' squad through their paces."

"Yes." He turned back to his computer and then looked up sharply as I opened the door. "Wait please, Bodie."

I halted, shutting the door again. "Sir?"

"Enough of that, Bodie. You've called me the Cow out of school for too long as it is."

I had no answer to that so I kept quiet.

"From now on George will do. And I'll thank you to tell Raymond of that as well."

I nodded. "I think he'd appreciate hearing that from you personally."

"Yes, of course. Dismissed, Bodie."

I left and went to the gymnasium, realising only as I stripped and changed into a track suit that I'd left our interview without having a chance to test his name out.

∞ **CI5** ∞

"George." Ray muttered under his breath as we pulled out and rode home. "Did George happen to mention he was planning to retire?"

"Yes. We did have a brief chat about that, George and I."

"And?"

Ray sounded irritable and I looked sharply at him. "And *what*?"

"Nothing. Just fucking with our heads, he is."

"That was my impression of it, yes. Seems he got to you, old son."

Ray scowled, sliding further into his seat. "Yeah, well, you might've warned me."

"Might've." I agreed. "Head still hurt?" I asked, gently.

"Yeah. A bit."

"Hang on. We get home, you can have a chocolate. Work wonders, they do."

He blinked at me and I laughed at his horrified expression.

"Ha bloody ha. Apologized already, didn't I?" Ray said.

"Keep at it, mate."

"Lovely. You and him both. No wonder my head's pounding."

I looked over and noticed that he was a bit drawn still. Feeling a bit guilty, I softened.

"I'll make us some dinner and you can tell me all about the pain."

"Right. Likely poison me. I'll cook and at least I'll be sure I can eat it."

"Your wish, mate."

We were silent the rest of the ride, Ray turning on some music and shutting his eyes against the setting sun. By the time we pulled up to the flat, he was snoring softly.

"Oi. Home, Ray."

"Hmm?" He blinked and sat up, rubbing at his eyes. "Home. Right."

He had a pot of tea on when I came out of the shower and we sat quietly for a few minutes, both of us admiring the new flat.

"Hungry?" Ray asked. I looked at him and he grinned, adding, "Course you are."

"Silly question, then," I agreed. "I'll shall cook if you're still—"

"Nah. Head's better, mostly. And it's the least I can do after last night."

He fussed about in the kitchen, banging pots and reorganising as he went until he quieted down to the task of cooking.

I occupied myself with the remaining boxes, slowly making progress until the flat was filled with the appalling number of *objet d'art* Ray'd purchased in the last year.

"Clean up. Food's on the table."

He was already digging into a plate of mushroom risotto and I grabbed a beer, noticing he had poured himself a glass of orange juice. His colour was back and he seemed relaxed as we chatted about the new agents and discussed the three ops that had cleaned up in the past two weeks. Four more were underway, one of which looked about to break before next week was out and Ray'd already made plans to be there for the final cleanup. I would be there as well. The days of my feeling comfortable leaving him without backup were long past. I had put too much effort into keeping him alive thus far to risk him in the streets now that we'd graduated off of active duty. Still, it was a bit of fun to get our hands dirty now and again and I could

see now why Cowley—George, I reminded myself again for the fifth time that day—had been so keen to ride along in the middle of gun battles. We were all of us boys with our guns and fast cars, and the best of us knew it.

"...antique."

"What?"

"I said antique."

"Antique what?"

"Nevermind. You'll see it when it arrives."

"What does?"

"What— For god's sake, Bodie, if you're not listening, don't bloody well expect me to repeat everything twice over."

"Sorry. Try again. I'm paying attention now. Honest."

He sighed. "I bought a desk at auction and it'll be here Saturday afternoon. You're to help me bring it up and—" he stopped and stared at me.

"What?"

"Just checking. You're to help me bring it up and empty out the old one tonight as we're getting rid of it."

"I like that desk." It was the one piece of furniture I'd purchased in the last five years. It wasn't an antique, but it had served me well, and I'd hauled it up the stairs of three flats now, none of which had been furnished with a proper desk.

"Only room for one."

Seeing the decision had already been made, I agreed, wondering how it'd become my duty to empty the old one out. "Fine, then. Wasn't expensive, was it?"

He shrugged. "Paid for it, didn't I?"

"Must've been a bargain," I said, knowing that Ray wasn't prone to luxuries.

"Fair price, anyway. Needed a bigger desk if we're to share it."

"Need new curtains."

"Nothing wrong with—" Ray began, but I raised my eyebrows and he sighed, unable to argue. "Right. Put it on the list."

"What list?"

"The one I left on the desk. The old one."

Says 'Need To Do' on it."

"Oh. What's on it now?"

"This 'n' that."

I sighed. Ray's lists, like his temper, tended to be short but deadly. "There's that film on ITV tonight," I offered.

"Seen it," he shot back.

"I haven't."

"s not very good."

"Bloody hell, Doyle. You're in a right mood, aren't you?"

"I was in a fine mood 'til you—fuck. I've got a headache. I'm going to lie down." He pushed away his plate, still half full, and waved at the table. "Leave it. I'll clean up later."

He stomped off to bed without looking back and I finished my plate and took care of the remains, not wanting to leave it to stick to the plates. I did the dishes and turned on the telly in time for the film, watching it with half my attention, the rest thinking about Ray and his bloody moods.

"Sorry, mate." Ray was back, clad in only his pyjama bottoms and leaning against the table like it was his only support.

The station had broken for the news at ten and, feeling hungry still, I'd made a plate of cheese and biscuits. Ray walked over and picked up a few, sitting down beside me on the sofa.

"Feeling better?"

He nodded, setting the biscuit down on the plate, untasted and looking curiously over at the table where sat the infamous box of chocolates. He glanced over at me and then back at the box. "Left any?"

"See for yourself."

He opened the box and took one out, eyeing it critically before putting it in his mouth. He reached back into the box and took another out, holding it in front of me. I reached out to take it from him but he shook his head.

"Ray, I—"

I'd already eaten three and grown tired of them. He shrugged and popped it in his own mouth. Still chewing, Ray reached into the box

for another. I was about to comment on his slimming efforts when I saw that he made no move to consume the one he was holding.

Realising what he was after, I felt myself tense up. "Don't," I said, hoping to leave it at that.

He blinked innocently at me and ate the chocolate himself, casually, as if he'd intended to all along.

I shrugged and turned back to the news.

"Bodie?"

"Yeah?"

"Bodie."

I turned back to look at him, and he was holding another chocolate, looking at me expectantly. "What is it, Ray?"

"I— Dunno. Nothing." He ate the chocolate and I sighed, feeling the tension set in again. This was edging on ridiculous and it looked like we were going to have a fight over it.

"Doyle, whatever you're thinking, don't."

"Not thinking anything."

"Then don't." It didn't make sense and he grinned at me. I didn't smile back.

He got up and poured us both a drink, sitting back down and sipping at his, watching me try to watch the news.

Finally, I snapped, turning back to him. He didn't even make the effort to pretend to be doing something other than staring at me.

"You lost your mind?"

"No."

"Gone deaf suddenly?"

"No."

"Then listen carefully, Doyle, because I shall only say this once."

I waited, trying to decide exactly what to say only once. I wasn't even sure what I was angry about, although it had everything to do with the damned cherry liqueurs. Their sweetness was cloying now, and I drank down the whiskey to give myself time to think and to get rid of the taste of them.

When I didn't say anything more, he drank down his own glass and got up, looking

like he was headed off to bed again. Glad of that, I leaned back into the sofa, feeling disaster averted and not willing yet to question it.

He disappeared and then reappeared at the doorway again, leaning against it, his arms crossed over his bare chest. I glanced over at him and looked away. The news finished, the movie started again, and I knew he was still standing there, watching me, and I really tried not to look at him, but I could feel the hair on the back of my neck standing on end and I turned, prepared to tell him to fuck off and leave me alone. Two days of cohabitation and I was reevaluating my belief that we wouldn't kill one another. As far as I was concerned, George could appoint whomever survived to rule CI5 for all that I cared.

It helped that I assumed I would be the one left standing.

I looked again and Ray was still there. He met my look, his stance still relaxed, his eyes unchallenging.

And suddenly I was swept with a wave of paranoia. Was I being irrational? Was I about to take his head off for looking at me? We'd been together for twelve bloody years, and I couldn't imagine why it was so awful to have him look at me, but, and I peered over at him to check, it was awful and I got up, knocking into the table and spilling the box of chocolates off it and onto the floor.

Neither of us broke off our staring match to glance at it, and I walked over to the doorway and got right up into Ray's face, waiting for him to get wise and back off. But he simply blinked lazily at me and then had the nerve to smile. I opened my mouth to say something then had to shut it again, rendered speechless by the way he was looking at me.

Like I was a cherry liqueur and he was trying to decide whether to bite me and suck out the juices or just pop the whole thing, cherry and all, into his mouth. My knees nearly gave out at the thought and I stepped back, blindly, trying to look away and failing miserably. He was still looking at me and I

wanted to hit him but he was being intentionally unaggressive. Not that I couldn't hit him still, but it was a little hard to justify until he said or did something more provocative than just standing there. Provocatively.

"Bodie." He leaned towards me, and put his hand on my shoulder to pull me in toward him. I took a step forward again, unable to resist and telling myself that he hadn't done anything provocative enough, not for how hard I was going to hit him.

His hand was warm and I reached out to steady myself, putting my hands on his shoulders, the shock of touching his bare skin something it shouldn't be. I'd tended to his bruises and cuts, slept in the same bloody bed together often enough, it shouldn't have touched me. But I felt warm all over, helpless against it, enough energy crackling between us to light whole cities or start a person's heart up again. Then his mouth was so warm, so soft, tentative at first, and I didn't dare breathe or do more than accept his lips, afraid to even return the pressure of his mouth against mine.

He pulled away, breathing unsteadily, and his hands came up on either side of me, and he inhaled, smiling that odd smile, and then did it again, kissing me, this time pressing hard enough that my lips opened under his pressure, forced to as his tongue swiped wet against my mouth. I moaned, desperate, never this passive with anyone, never one to stand back and be taken like a startled virgin. Far too old for that, but I felt it, the weak panic of it. The sharp edge of his broken tooth scraped against my lips.

And I still hadn't hit him. He tasted like chocolate and whiskey.

"Hmm." He pulled back again, blinking up at me with a lazy grin. "Nice, wasn't it?"

I found it impossible to say anything, standing there with my jaw unhinged for a moment. Finally, I found my tongue again. "Nice? Christ, Doyle, what the..."

He cocked his head to the side and I gave

up arguing, bringing my hands up and holding his chin, tracing the broken and the perfect cheekbones with my thumbs, trying to convince myself out of this before I was too far gone to be the smart and cautious one. “You’re not...drunk.” I finished, not meaning to choose that word at all but unable to even imagine what else he wasn’t. Innocent? Sane? “Look, you don’t—you’re not—”

“Queer? Bisexual?” he asked, enunciating the words carefully, then smiling like it was a bloody hysterical joke. “Bisexual,” he repeated. “Publish and be damned, eh? Not sure the restaurant manager on Lisle street knows it, though, so we’re probably not fully covered against blackmail.” And he had the nerve to giggle at that, not a bit nervous about this, but laughing—laughing at me.

I dropped my hands from him, balling them into fists I’d every intention to use, should it become necessary. I should’ve trusted my instincts. This’d been a mistake from the start.

He’d stopped laughing but was still staring at me and I knew I must look a sight, hard as a rock and not having a clue what to do about it, having already dismissed the obvious out of hand. Insane. The pressure of command had got to him already, and Cowley was hardly out of England.

Then a second thought.

Cowley was going to kill me. Kill us both, but me first, and with greater pleasure. He would know because we’d asked for the flat together. He’d *know* it. The old man—and I stopped myself, suddenly realising that he was an old man, but we weren’t kids anymore, and that was at least half of the problem with this.

“Doyle, you can’t mean to do this.”

“I certainly can,” he said, as if I’d told him he couldn’t shoot a gun or drive a car.

“No. No, Doyle, you—we—certainly cannot.” There. I’d said it. Made the decision. I found that, not locked anymore in his sight, I *could* move, could slip past him, and I did,

moving to the middle of the room, then not feeling as if that were nearly enough space between us, stepping past him again to walk to my bedroom, thinking this would be over as soon as I was alone, the door firmly shut—and locked—behind me. Only when he moved to follow me did I realise my tactical error. “Doyle, now stay where you are.”

He ignored me, following me into the bedroom, his pursuit forcing me into the room when I should’ve thought to turn and walk past him and back into the lounge or to his bedroom. Both had locks. But now I was standing over my bed in a flat that was still unfamiliar to me, still not yet home, and Doyle—Ray—was standing in the doorway, too far in to close him out, leaning against the frame and looking so...fuckable was one word for it. Completely and wildly unbalanced were others, equally good.

“Look, you have to understand that I’ve considered this carefully.” He crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes seeming to take in me and the bed at once.

I leaned over and turned on the standard lamp, needing to be able to see him better, as if seeing him would make it easier to make him go away, something closing my eyes and praying hadn’t accomplished. “You’ve considered it? What the hell does that mean?”

“Yes. It’s—listen, it makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“Ah, no. This makes no sense at all. Ray, listen to what you’re saying. You’re not bisexual. You’re no more bisexual than Cowley is.”

“Won’t speak for Cowley, mate, but what do you call this, then?” He glanced down at his own body, not needing to point out the clear outline of his cock pressing out against his pyjama leg. He looked hard enough to break the drawstring open and I drew in a shuddering breath, looking away.

“Adrenaline. You’re scared out of your bloody mind and it’s—”

“Making me want you?”

“Making you *think* you want me,” I said, firmly, not really believing we were having this conversation, somehow sure that if I blinked hard enough, we’d be back to normal, still on normal, safe, platonic ground.

“And what *do* I want?”

A woman seemed, at the moment, to be the wrong answer. I tried again, hoping to reason with him. “If I’m the only bloke you find attractive—”

“If you’re the only—” He laughed, standing up straighter and uncrossing his arms so he could hold his belly as he laughed, harder and harder until I started to wonder if he *had* cracked up.

Finally, gasping, he seemed to calm a bit, wiping his eyes and still letting go the odd chuckle. “Only you— Only you would have the balls to think it was only you. Christ, you’re arrogant, mate.”

“I—”

But he interrupted my self-defense. “No, you’re right. If it were only you—there’s probably another term for *that* particular perversion, or should be: Previously heterosexual men who are plagued with a singular attraction to one man, William Andrew Phillip Bodie. We could all of us form a therapy group together and publish a paper on the phenomenon.”

The sarcasm was laced with more humour than bite, and I finally had to smile, wondering if the insanity was a communicable disease.

“Book you a spot at the music hall, Doyle.”

“I can hardly handle one career, let alone two. Besides, can’t work without a *straight* man, can I? And I see none handy.” And then he was off in another fit of laughter, though it had hardly been all that funny the first time he said it.

It was quite a lot to take in one evening, in a week of moving and unmoving and moving again. A man, even a remarkably patient man such as myself, has his limits. It was one thing to have to worry about keeping

Ray out of my bed, but quite another thing to then have him laughing at the whole prospect.

“Look, mate. You get this—whatever this is—out of your system. I’m knackered. You know the way out.”

“Oi, Bo-die. Hang on. Don’t let’s be stupid about this.”

“Not being stupid. It’s late and I’m tired. I have to move a desk tomorrow.” I started to undress, ignoring him pointedly, hoping he’d leave without any further discussion.

“Christ, this is— Just—turn around and look at me.”

I did, still holding onto my anger, wondering at how I could be thinking about the damned desk when he was trying it on with me.

“Could we just start this again?” He was smiling, his hands spread out, palms up, no longer seeming hysterical, but I still saw no indication he realised what the hell he was doing.

“What, start over the last ten years or just this evening?”

“Just the part after you kissed me.”

“You kissed me.” I said, unable to stop myself from sounding irritable and childish and as miserable as I felt. Only Raymond Doyle could do this to me. Only Doyle would choose now to fuck up a perfect working relationship.

“Yeah, but as we’re starting over, anyway. This time, you kiss me. You like being in charge so bloody much...”

He moved over by the bed, and stood there, waiting. I took a good five minutes to think about it. Might as well let him stew a bit whilst I worked this out. It served him well to have to wait for me to decide. God knows how long he’d been planning this attack in the first place.

Finally, unable, despite some effort, to convince myself out of it, I grabbed hold of him and pulled him toward me, kissing him harder than he’d done me earlier, and making an effort to prove a point, not entirely sure what point that was, but knowing it was

important to get it clear from the outset.

“Hmm. Nice, wasn’t it?” he said again.

He responded with enthusiasm and I held onto his arms hard enough to leave bruises on his biceps. He kissed so fucking well, as well as he did everything else. “Yes. It was. Could be better, still.” I could barely whisper, my body too turned on to generate speech. Thoughts of knocking sense into him seemed out of my range now. It was like being a kid at the beach and sitting still in the water as a wave rode over you. First you thought you were drowning, then you realised you were riding it, bobbing along safely enough as long as you didn’t let it pull you out too far from shore. I realised I trusted Ray enough to know he wouldn’t, not intentionally, anyway.

“Could it?”

“Yeah. You could take that off.” I pulled at his drawstring, opening it.

“Thought you’d want to do that for me.”

“I’ll watch.”

I held off touching him, wanting to stand back and watch this before committing myself any farther. He hooked his fingers in his pyjama bottoms, easing them off over his cock, which was gorgeously, convincingly erect.

I’d seen him naked often enough, but never had seen it—him—like this. It pretty well shattered me. He seemed nearly a stranger to me, exotic and a bit too cool, too calm, too contained. Damned sure of his own attractiveness, wasn’t he. Until I looked at his eyes, which were a bit too wide, and noticed that his hands were trembling a bit until he rested them almost defiantly on his hips.

“Go on, then.”

“What?”

“Kiss me or take your clothes off or whatever you have in mind.” His voice was low and rough and damned sexy.

“Pushy in bed, aren’t you.”

“Not in bed yet, am I? Never going to get there if you don’t do something.”

“I am doing something. Looking at you.”

“Oh.”

“You’re—lovely.” It was weak, but the only thing that fit. Never wanted him this much before. Couldn’t afford to. Now, he was there, desirable, touchable if I wanted to. Fuckable.

He was...perfect. Or as close as I wanted him to be—because he was Doyle, and I’d had this image of him standing like this, or about like this, locked away like some secret pornographic fantasy for years. And somehow, I’d managed to keep the friendship and that separate. It had got easier over time. I found it worked well, in fact, looking to others for sex and Ray for most everything else. I knew early on I wasn’t the marrying kind, and Ray had made that decision all the easier. Who needed a wife when I had him to cook for me, boss me around, and drive me round the twist?

Sex was just...separate from that. Didn’t mean I was loving him any less not to touch him that way. I hadn’t been pining for years, either. I’m not a masochist, am I? Nah, not even unrequited love, as I knew he returned it, as much as he was able to. Damned sight more than most men ever got—I’d seen blokes who married for less, settled for less, and still had to get their pleasure on the side, or their friendship, or just the oblivion of the bottle away from home.

Ah, but *this* was something else, and the sight of Raymond Doyle naked before me could make a man reevaluate his priorities.

He’d aged well for a battered pug, still a looker in that odd mismatched way that was just shy of unattractive and bled into exotic in the right light, truth be told. Maybe it was love, as most light seemed right of late. His hair had darkened over the years I’d watched it, touched it, streaked through with grey now, the red mostly gone out of it. And his body was still somehow on the delicate side, slight-framed, broad shoulders with a strongly built upper body tapering to narrow hips.

I let my eye wander, unhurried now that I’d made a decision to have him, let myself imagine touching over the path of his hair, greying swirls of it over his chest, not quite

covering the bullet scars that had faded to white, a finer line of hair patterned over his belly. He was slightly thicker there, no longer flat or hollow, which was a bit of a relief. Tough as he was, he'd always made me nervous, too slight a figure beside me and each time a bullet missed him, or worse, found him, I had this image of him disappearing, fading away like a dream. He'd laugh to hear that, but it was true. He used it to his advantage, though, probably not even aware of it. Like a cat, curled up and letting people get close enough to scratch their eyes out.

Not that I was worried, now. He was waiting for me, and let him wait, as I'd waited. Longest seduction on record. Not to mention the least skillful, and I wasn't sure if it was him or me that failed at this. I should've taken him from the start, probably, just thrown him down the day we met.

I should throw him down on the bed now, get it over with. But something held me back. This was too easy, too sudden. I'd wake up hungover and cotton mouthed, alone after a drunken wet dream. Or he'd say my name and I'd look up and he'd still be eating his risotto, giving me his patented "Bodie, you berk" look.

Just to test his reality, and his plan, I reached out and touched him again, pulling him close, feeling his nakedness against my clothes, the taste of him as we kissed confirming that this was real, however unlikely.

"Why'd you wait so long?"

"I had to be sure," he said, kissing me still, his hands making steady work to get me undressed. I stood there passive, watching him undress me.

"Of what?"

He didn't answer and I kicked off my shoes, not bothering to remove my socks. Men looked ridiculous naked with only their socks on, but I couldn't be bothered to worry. If Ray hadn't seen me look more ridiculous than this before, and this alone put him off, well...

"Sure of what?" I repeated but he only

shrugged, his eyes down at the buttons of my shirt, his fingers stripping off my belt, unzipping my trousers, taking my pants down.

Finally he looked back up at me, my body, such as it was, apparently inspected for long enough. "Sure of *what*?" I asked again, wanting to know and frustrated because he hadn't said.

But he just grinned at me, and said, "Socks?"

"Sod off, Doyle. Sure of bloody what?" I answered, and pushed him to the bed, climbing on top of him and kissing him again before he could answer.

He broke free and I reached for him again, but he shook me off. "Bodie, 'm not fucking a man wearing socks."

"You're not fucking anyone 'til you tell me why it took you this many years to make up your bloody mind."

He knelt down at my feet, pulling off my socks and tossing them to the floor. "Does it really matter?" he asked, seriously.

"Yeah. It does." And, 'til I said it, I hadn't been sure it mattered. Not that if it would change anything.

He drew his hand through his hair and I waited, noting that his arousal seemed to be holding steady. Mine was flagging somewhat, nerves and shock making it hard to concentrate. "It's...have you ever wanted something so much that you didn't want it at all?"

He looked at me intensely and I hesitated before answering. So much that I didn't want it? "You saying you don't want me? 'Cause it's a bit late, don't you think?"

He looked down at himself, as if just then noticing his cock was still at attention. I wondered about that, how he could even think of having a discussion in that state. But then Doyle'd always been a bit quick at the gate. Back when we were first partnered, he used to walk around half-hard for hours on end, and it was a painful pleasure to watch him posing around in his tight jeans.

"'s complicated. It's—can't we fuck now

and hash this out later?”

He shoved me over on the bed a bit and stretched out beside me, setting his hand on my chest and moving it slowly down to rest on my cock, his touch bringing me back up again. I saw through his manipulation and put my hand down to still his movements, lovely as they were.

“No. Talk first. Fuck after.” To my own ears, I didn’t sound convinced. But he stilled his urging movements over my cock and, instead, laced his fingers with mine, bringing my hand back up to my chest again. I got more comfortable, propping myself up on the pillows and he waited a bit before clearing his throat and speaking again.

“Fine, ’ave it your way. Talk first.” He sighed, then shook his head, running a hand through his hair. “First—first was the squad...3.7 and 4.5...partners. Then...mates. Then...then well, it just took me some time to figure it out. Late bloomer, I guess. I hadn’t—look I *had*, but...it was kid’s games, wasn’t it? Not the stuff on which to fuck up a perfectly functional relationship, was it?”

I didn’t say yes, as I had, up ’til this night, been in full agreement with that.

He continued, his voice low and pleasant in my ears, my body still trapped in a state of low-level humming arousal that felt good, because I knew it would end. He looked up from examining the duvet, meeting my eyes. “I figured it out, finally. Bisexual. Didn’t help much to have a word for it, and it didn’t mean I needed—this was—was your fault, you know.”

He took his hand out of mine and scowled at me.

“What? Mine? How’d you figure that?”

“‘Talk first, fuck later,’ he says. Not in the mood anymore, am I?” Doyle muttered.

I looked down and he wasn’t, but I knew I could fix that. “You won’t distract me. How’s it my fault?”

“You had to be so bloody comfortable with this. Let me do everything *but* fuck you, didn’t

you. Easiest bloke on earth, you are.”

“Not following you, Doyle.” I said, but I was, or starting to. Though I’d hardly say any of this was comfortable.

“You just drew some sort of...I dunno, a line. An ultimatum, unofficial... Like a D-notice. Said—no, you *didn’t* say anything, did you—it just...just *was*. Fucking was the only thing outside and everything else was just us. Was...platonic? Yes, perhaps, but that’s a lie and we lived it for so long it was—*odd*. Mobile ghettos,” Doyle snorted, shaking his head. “What the bloody hell is a mobile ghetto of two? Not mates—not *just* mates, anyway. Not lovers—no, not *that*. Never *that*. Not married. Not queer. Not partners even, anymore, are we? Not—stupid, stupid. But I didn’t—wasn’t sure just *how* it was—*odd*—*wrong*—’til I had to push it and you bloody well *let* me, and said, ‘Oh, yes, let’s *do* move in together.’ We could play bloody house as well, and you were keen enough on *that* and *still* we didn’t have to fuck, did we?”

“No. I—” But he was building up a head of steam, the words tumbling out fast, disordered but I could follow them anyway, knowing the story well enough as I’d done it, just as he said, not quite a D-notice, not that organized, was I? And I had an idea he was just working this out for himself for the first time.

“Why buy the cow when you can—”

To myself, I finished, “—shut the barn door after,” having more sense than to say it aloud.

But Ray was still going on, his voice rough and deep. “—but fuck it, I *wanted* you. And I got the idea that you might want me, though you certainly aren’t the flattering kind, are you?”

“I think you’re beautiful, Ray.” I rolled onto my side, propping myself up on an elbow and facing him.

“You said it often enough, didn’t you.”

Ray’s voice was hard and biting and so I kept my mouth shut after that, thinking that

flattery was both too late and a bit ridiculous, all told. And I let him go on, feeling suddenly like the evening would've worked more smoothly had I just went by instinct and hit him.

"Yeah, well, I knew that. Knew it from the number of times you groped me arse. And last night I thought, bloody hell. I did it. Got you to move in, and that was as far as I could reasonably take this, right? What more—buy you a gold band? So I decided and—but—I was nervous and had too much to drink and tried it on and you fucking *turned me down*."

He sounded more surprised than angry, saying it, and I blushed, remembering exactly how easily I'd turned him down.

"You were drunk. I didn't know you meant it," I mumbled, feeling like a right idiot in light of what I knew he'd been going after.

"Yeah. Nice of you. Always knew you were a gentleman." He turned and looked at me and grinned slightly. I blushed a bit harder, wishing I could stop, but he ignored it and reached around, patting my arse affectionately, but not with any passion. "Right. Done talking. Said all that needs saying, didn't I. So...we move on to fucking, at last...or 'ave you decided to pretend that mates lie around naked in the same bed?"

"Done it before, haven't we. At the Dorchester on the McNeil bust."

He sat up and slapped my arse hard enough to leave a handprint.

"Doyle!" I shook my head, amazed at his moods.

"You deserved that. And I deserved it for asking for your input. My mistake to start with. I'm not asking anymore. I'm *fucking* you now, jus' so we're clear, so say whatever you've got to say—get it out of your system, and then shut the hell up so I don't lose the mood."

"Oh, Raymond, you're so sexy when you're dominating," I camped, though it was true. There was something strangely sexy about a naked Doyle commanding me to shut up and be fucked.

That decided, he drew away from me and looking round the room. "Right. Where's the lube?"

"Fuck. Packed away still, I think."

He sighed. "Story of my life. Wait here."

I heard him padding off and rolled over onto my front, getting comfortable waiting, starting to wonder about what we'd do with the second bedroom. If we got rid of the other bed, we could make it an office and have room to keep my desk, which I rather liked. I'd had it for nearly as long as I'd had Ray.

"Back. Found this. You're going to be fucked so hard I'll 'ave to move the desk meself."

I peered over my shoulder and saw it was hand lotion, wondering what it meant that we were still both thinking about the bloody desk at a time like this. "Should do." I nodded as he sat on the edge of the bed, dropping the bottle onto the pillow.

"You done this before, right?" he asked, casually.

"No, Ray. Kept me virtue intact for forty-two years."

Ray laughed, the dirty laugh he reserved for the jokes I told him. Made me hard again just hearing it.

"Roll over. Want to watch your face whilst I come."

I rolled back over and he kissed me hard and long and thoroughly. By the time he finished, we were both out of breath and a bit flushed.

I spread my legs for him, watching him move down my body, kissing me here and there with no clear pattern to it. It was sexy and strange to see him touching me like that, but sexy won out when he reached my cock and took the tip of it in his mouth, sucking gently and sliding his tongue against my slit. I moaned, my eyes shutting even though I wanted to watch him. He released me, staring up at me with dark eyes and a grin that made me gasp. He leaned over me and kissed me, letting me taste myself on his lips. We kissed

and tongue fucked until I was having to make the effort not to come, and I could see him start to tremble with it as well.

“Go on. Get on with it.”

“Right.” He nodded, taking the bottle of lotion and moving down to the end of the bed. I drew my legs up and tried to relax. I’d done this before, but not in a while. When his finger stroked over my arsehole I jumped and he laughed, low and deep in his chest. “Lovely,” I heard him say, and I felt his fingers enter me, surprised at how good it felt, no pain at all. When he pushed into me, it hurt a bit, but I had a pretty high threshold for pain, had to in our line, and the pleasure was there too, intense and perfect.

“Before I’m old, Ray,” I said, feeling on edge, hovering near orgasm and only with effort holding back.

“Too late for that, Bodie.”

But he moved between my legs, entering me slowly, then, when I’d voiced no objections, pushing into me in one long brilliant thrust. “You’re fucking beautiful” he said, quickly, thrusting into me again.

“Been telling you—ah.” He hit my prostate and I bit my lip hard enough to taste my own blood. “Fuck. Again.”

I got hold of myself, pumping in time with his thrusts, the two of us like always, in rhythm like pornographic poetry. He pulled back and thrust hard again, and this time I was prepared for it, the low-level hum turned up to a heat and warm pleasure that sent me off, unable to wait for his joy. Nearly faint with pleasure, I could still feel him pushing into me, then felt him stop, stilling and tensing against me, his fingers gripping my hips hard enough to hurt a little, and he opened his mouth in an “oh” and tipped his head back, gasping. I was coming back down again enough to watch him come, see the shock of it hit him and the smile that spread over his face, touching his eyes as he opened them and looked down at me.

“Fucking miraculous, that was. Wasn’t

sure.”

“Yeah.” I agreed, as he pulled out of me and I stretched out, pulling him close on top of me.

“We should talk more often,” he said, curling up on top of me.

I was too tired to protest that he was *not* going to fall asleep on me. I’d be in agony by morning. Muscles everywhere were already protesting their misuse. “We talk all the time, Ray.”

He nodded, sliding off me enough so I could breathe again, and flinging one leg over me. “Should fuck more often, then. After talking.”

“Yeah. After. Before. Often,” I agreed.

“Tomorrow,” Ray added. “Fuck tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” I agreed, not sure if he was cursing or planning.

“Bodie?” He picked his head up, blinking sleepily at me.

“Hmm?”

“Turn off the lamp.”

I reached over and turned it off, putting the room into darkness. I pulled him tight against me, liking the slick sweaty feel of him in my arms.

“Bodie?”

“Hmm?” I was almost asleep.

“We haven’t left anything out, have we?”

I opened my eyes, sleep and post-coital bliss fading as I wondered what we might’ve left out. I’d left the cheese and biscuits, and they’d go stale, but I wasn’t about to get up and put them away. Then I started to wonder what I’d left on. The oven? Had I keyed in the locks?

“I get the locks?” I asked him, suddenly worried.

“What? Yeah.”

“Oh. Everything’s fine then,” I said, settling in and grabbing the duvet to draw it over us.

“What? Oh. I meant left out like—the line. Crossed it, haven’t we. Nothing left to do.

Partners, mates, housemates, lovers.” His voice was trailing off, fading into sleep. “Lef anythin’ undone.”

“Nothing that won’t keep ’til morning, Ray.”

“Ah...good.” He snuggled up against me, pressing his nose against my chest, and I drew my arm round him, rubbing his back. “Love you, Bodie.”

“Love you, Ray,” I said, not for the first time, but for the first time meaning it like this.

“Yeah. Thought so. Thought we’d left something.”

And my reply was lost to him as he finally shut off to sleep, satisfied at last.

But I stayed awake for the rest of the night, too caught up in thinking about the past and busy making lists, needing to reassure myself that this was not, as he’d suggested, the end.

Still had to paint the bath, sort the books, move the new desk. We had to run CI5, when

it came to that. I was getting tired just thinking about all there was to do.

Drifting off a bit, I struck on a fantasy I’d had to take Doyle across the Cow’s desk. With the Cow on holiday... Course, it seemed unlikely Ray’d agree to it, but it was nice enough to think about. Fucking him in the chair, on the desk, on the floor...give Christine a real show. In the breakroom, if he were willing. In the gymnasium. Ray’s office. My office. Yeah, still plenty to do and do again.

It was too easy to forget that the torch was the beginning of the thing, and not the end. The small fire lit the bigger one. Caught up in the image of us together, still wrapped up in Ray’s warmth, I chuckled, realising I wasn’t very likely to get a medal for any of this. He stirred and mumbled, settling down again and drawing closer and I held onto him, not a bit afraid now of getting burned. ∞

