

Tailor-Made

by Helen Raven

“These places give me the creeps,” said Murphy.

His partner, Doyle, looked up from his photo-multiplier binoculars, and glanced around the graveyard. There were more comfortable situations for a stake-out than being flat on your stomach in a trench behind a tombstone, under a matt-green covering, during the middle of the night. He would certainly rather be asleep in bed, but he was bothered by nothing more than the cold, the hardness of the ground, and the boredom.

“Why, Murph? It’s just a bunch of corpses, of varying ages, buried two metres under the ground, with lumps of rock stuck on top of them. Surely you’ve seen enough corpses by now to know they’re the most harmless creatures going...or rather, not going.”

“Thank you, Mr. Rationality,” replied Murphy, in the crisp tones of the patronised.

Silence fell again. It was their third session on this surveillance. Several months of detective work had led to the conclusion that the crypt of the local church was being used to store arms. The church was in the countryside, overlooked by no tall buildings, or even trees. The graveyard offered the only cover, but agents could be moved into position only during the hours of darkness, making a 24-hour shift necessary. 4.5 and 6.2 were two hours into theirs. Doyle was bored stupid already. He decided to make his own entertainment: “So you’re frightened of ghosts and ghouls then, are you, Murph?”

“Leave it out, Ray.”

“C’mon. I’m interested. I know lots of people are spooked by graveyards, but I’ve never understood why. You’re the first person I’ve met who admits to it. So, tell me what it’s all about.”

“So you can study me as a specimen of primitive humanity? No thanks.”

“Don’t be like that, Murph. I’ve got plenty of irrational fears of my own; you just haven’t come across them yet. You can get your own back when we meet some woodlice. Besides, I think I might have some idea why these places bother you; I was more scared of turning out the lights after I’d read Clive Barker’s ‘Books of Blood’ than I’ve ever been of facing some lunatic with a gun. Things look different at night.”

Murphy seemed mollified by this offering of his partner’s. “I’m not sure I’m the best person for you to study. I’m probably not a classic case. Two years ago I could have sat here on Halloween without a flicker of unease.”

“So what happened?”

Murphy frowned, though there was too little light for the other man to have seen, even if he had not resumed his study of the church. In the green image provided by the binoculars the gargoyles seemed to be looking straight at them.

“I don’t know that I want to tell you, Ray. It’s going to sound so bloody stupid. Well, more than stupid.”

“Are you trying to tell me you saw a ghost?” Doyle’s voice was as free of mockery as he could make it, which was not very. He heard his partner swallow, and then exhale loudly.

“I think I fucked one.”

“What!” Had Doyle been less of a professional, with a large portion of his mind always on the job he was being paid to do, he would have woken Cowley in London with the force of his astonishment.

“Fine,” said Murphy between gritted teeth, “I’m not going to tell you.”

“Oh, Murph! You can’t blame me for being a tad surprised. You can’t just leave it like that! Look, I don’t think you’re cracking up or anything. I mean, I’d have noticed. I’m sure you’ve got very good reasons for thinking that it...that it was a ghost. Tell me. I’m not going to laugh. I’m not going to drag you to Ross. Tell me.”

Even though Doyle’s interrogation tactics were well below standard, Murphy knew he was going to tell the story, tell it to the darkness and the quiet and the clear, starry sky if not to Doyle. He had known that when he had mentioned his ‘creeps’ half an hour past. The burden had become too much.

“I don’t know that it was a ghost, exactly, but it was something. He said his name was William Bodie.” Murphy listened for a start of reaction to the male gender, but there was none. “I met him a couple of months before I climbed up that chimney stack, and, yes, Ray, I have got the message by now that it was a fucking stupid thing to do, so you needn’t tell me again.

“I met him at an archery club in Hayes I used to go to. He was introduced as a new member, and put on my team. He was good. I was crap, because I was staring at him all the time. It was lust at first sight, which is unusual for me, and had never happened with a man before. He was staggering. He had classic Snow White colouring, you know, black hair, blue eyes, red lips, set against skin so white it seemed almost transparent. He was dressed in black, which made it even worse. He had on a tight, black vest top, so I could see how powerful his arms and shoulders were, and when he pulled the bow, the ridge of muscle on his back, and the jet-black hair in his armpits, and the smell of his sweat. Christ!” He stopped for several seconds to force his breathing to steady.

“He was aware of me, too. Well, I was too stunned to be subtle, though he was. He just looked at me a few times, and smiled, half-smug, half...promising. After the match we all went to the club-house for a drink. We talked, about how we’d got into archery, I think, but he kept looking at his watch. I asked if he had someplace to get to, and he said he had to get the train back to town, and something about his car being in for service. So, of course, I offered him a lift. As we were approaching central London, I invited him back to my place for a drink. We didn’t get around to the drink that time; he started stripping me as soon as we got through the door. It was amazing. He was amazing.”

Murphy stopped again. Doyle, blood surging in sympathy with the passion of the narrative, said seriously, "He doesn't sound much like a ghost to me. Unless the afterlife is more fun than I'd thought."

Murphy, sensing he was not being mocked, replied equally seriously, "Well, I did say I didn't think he was actually a ghost. Maybe an incubus, or a succubus - I can never remember which is male, and which is female." A slight pause. "This sounds mad."

"Well, strange, certainly. Carry on, mate. What happened?"

"We saw a lot of each other - as much as possible, really. We always met at my place, or at places in the West End. He gave me his address and phone number, but I never went round or tried to phone. He always contacted me. He seemed to sense when I was free. Several times a job finished sooner than I'd expected, and I'd go home and shower and change and go to call him, and the phone would ring as I was reaching for it, and it would be him. I didn't think it was strange then, I thought it was marvellous, a sign that we were meant for each other. I'd fallen in love with him from the first kiss.

"Sometimes, when I was away from him I'd think: 'This is bizarre.' I mean, I hadn't been bothered when I discovered that I was bisexual, I mean, that I could enjoy having it off with a man, but I never expected to fall in love with a man. He said he loved me too. I would have done anything for him. I wanted to leave CI5 so I could live with him."

He paused, then continued in a challenging tone, "What do you think of that, then, Ray?"

Doyle replied slowly, "I think I'd have missed you; I enjoy working with you. I'd have hoped that you'd be happy together, and that you'd invite me round for dinner occasionally."

Murphy turned his head towards his partner, needing to see the expression on his face, but there was only the glint of the binoculars in the moonlight. Finally he decided that the other man's acceptance was genuine, and he turned away again.

"Anyway, the climb up the chimney stack. I was in the warehouse, and Cowley was speaking, and I looked up, out of the door, and he was there beckoning to me, so I went to him."

"But, how...", began Doyle, and was interrupted.

"I know, Ray, how did he get there? It just didn't occur to me at the time. It was like a dream, where

everything makes sense at the time, I mean, you can cope with saucepans turning into elephants, but when you wake up you realize it's crazy. He just pointed at the chimney stack, and looked into my eyes, and talked about us climbing it together. So we did."

Doyle swallowed audibly. "But, Murph, you were on your own."

"I know. I've seen the news films. But I also know that he was with me. I passed out when I was shot, so I don't know when he left. As soon as I got out of hospital I tried to find him. I went to the address he'd given me; it was a disused fever hospital in Fulham. The phone number was an undertakers, also in Fulham. Previously I'd enjoyed his grim sense of humour. From the lectures you and Cowley gave me I knew even before I saw the film that

I'd been alone on the climb, so I knew to keep my mouth shut about him. I've never seen him again."

Both men were silent for several minutes. Finally Doyle spoke: "I hate to say this, Murph, but that's impossible. Look, I know you believe what you're telling me, and I know you're not off your rocker...now. But love can be a sort of form of temporary insanity; maybe subconsciously you were frightened of what you felt for him, and knew subconsciously that he was untrustworthy, and so your mind figured out some way of blaming your actions on him. Come on, we both know the mind can do...strange things. He was a lying bastard who was amazing in bed; that doesn't make him a ghost, or a...or a Demon Lover or anything."

"I didn't think you'd believe me, and I suppose I don't blame you. But I know that he was there, and that he was trying to get me killed. He'd probably have tried again, but his cover was blown, so he had to disappear. A Demon Lover was exactly what he was. Or is, because I think he's still around."

"Oh?" said Doyle quietly, feeling colder by the minute, though whether from fear for his partner's sanity, or from fear for the boundaries of the rational world he thought he knew, he could not have said.

"You remember Keller, that SAS man who'd turned bad while undercover?" He waited for a grunt of acknowledgement. "Well, I sat in the ambulance with him after he'd been shot, and just before he died he looked past me with a look of, well, hurt realisation is the best I can do, and he said, "Bodie." Later, I was looking through his possessions, and there was a photograph. The second I took it out of the wallet a gust of wind tore it from my hand and blew it out of the window, but I could never forget that face.

"I think he lured Keller to his death. I think he's a Demon Lover who collects souls. What's more, I think he specializes in men in the security professions. He's tailor-made for it. He's beautiful, in the most macho way imaginable, and we're all fascinated by machismo, Ray, though we daren't admit it. An affair with him offers danger and intrigue, which we're addicted to, or we wouldn't do this job. And in bed, he's like an angel. He's an angel of death. He came looking for me. I was lucky; he didn't get me. But he's got others in the past, and he'll get them in the future."

There was another long silence.

"So. Are you going to report me to Ross?"

"No."

Five minutes passed.

"I don't know what to make of this, Murph. How can I believe it? But...I guess...it's real to you, and I trust you, and you're my partner, so...it's real to me. Christ, it's incredible that you managed to function while all this was happening." He reached over in the darkness to squeeze his friend's arm briefly. "Thanks for telling me."

"You're welcome." Murphy no longer wanted to talk. "Do you mind taking this watch, Ray? I want to get some kip."

“Fine,” said Doyle, so his partner settled down with his back towards him, and, to the surprise of both, was asleep within minutes.

Doyle continued his study of the church, but his mind was not on the terrorists who might be inside. He was thinking of his lover, Andrew Phillips, to whom he had been devoted since the day Phillips’ Harley Davidson had broken down in the road outside his flat, and he had gone out to offer help. He was thinking of how that Snow White colouring seemed specially designed to send the blood rushing to his groin. He was thinking of the times a job had finished early, and his lover had phoned, or appeared at the door, in seeming telepathy. He was thinking of how often since they’d met he’d neglected setting the locks in his urgency to fall into bed with this beautiful man who fucked like an angel. And he was afraid. He was very afraid.

Quantum Mechanics

by Helen Raven

It was one of those boring Sunday afternoons which can be either infinitely irritating or infinitely relaxing, depending on the nature of the week just gone. For Doyle it was a balm after many frantic sleepless nights, and at 3pm he was happily working on his Norton in the courtyard, sleeves of his overalls rolled up, hands covered in oil, pausing occasionally to sip from his can of beer.

Suddenly the quiet of the mews was broken by the sound of a motorbike with a failing engine, followed by the silence of a motorbike with a failed engine, followed by a male voice saying clearly on the other side of Doyle's wall, "Oh shit. Shit. Shit. Shit." Doyle smiled at this free radio drama, and, feeling in a generous mood, got up and opened the door to the street.

"Having problems?" he asked, and the leather-clad figure looked up in the act of removing his helmet.

"Second time this week. Dunno why these things have got such a great reputation - must have cost them a fortune in bribes."

Doyle moved closer and saw that it was a Harley-Davidson that was being maligned. He was impressed, and envious. Maybe if this bloke was really fed up with the machine he would let it go cheap. Doyle was sure it would respond to his care if he could get his hands on it.

"Look," he said, "my garage is just in here. Why not let me take a look at it?"

"Are you sure?" The man was surprised. "I don't want to put you out."

"It's no problem. It'll be a pleasure to work on one of these."

"Let's see if you say that in three hours' time." He seemed suddenly to realise how ungracious he was being, and smiled warmly at Doyle. "Thanks. I do appreciate this. Really."

Doyle was revising his impressions swiftly as a result of that smile, the aggressive hard-case having become ... well, a likeable hard-case, with unusual reserves of charm. Doyle smiled back, and led the way into the courtyard.

As he watched the man push the heavy machine across the cobbles, he thought that he was finally starting to see the appeal of black leather. He usually noticed the appearance of other men only in order to collect the identifying details that would be required in a report, but this one really was striking. The black leather and the short, ruffled black hair were a perfect frame for the pale, finely-moulded face and the vivid colour of the lips and eyes. He wouldn't quite have described his interest as sexual, but he suspected that with practise it might become so, and he was surprised.

"Just here will be fine," he said, and the other man stopped. "Oh, I'm Ray Doyle, by the way."

“Andrew Phillips.” Mr Phillips removed his gauntlets, and they shook hands. The hand was dry, strong and callused in places, and to Doyle the feeling of the contact seemed to linger along his nerves. His body was trying to tell him something, and he wondered only why it had waited so long before feeling such attraction towards a man. Not that he’s act on it, of course, but it was interesting, and exciting, nonetheless.

They worked together on the machine, kneeling side by side. Occasionally their arms or hands would brush together and Doyle’s pulse would quicken, and he would still, concentrating on the fleeting sensations of strength, smoothness, and heat. He couldn’t tell if the other man noticed.

After half an hour they decided that a new part was needed. “I don’t suppose you’ve got one in that well-equipped garage.”

“Fraid not. Why don’t you leave it here until you manage to buy one?”

“Thanks, Ray.”

Doyle turned to suggest they go inside to clean up and have a beer, then stopped and grinned.

“You’ve got engine oil on your nose. Looks like warpaint.”

Phillips looked at him, then reached out slowly and deliberately to run his middle finger down Doyle’s nose and out across his cheek. It was unmistakably a caress.

“So have you, now.”

Doyle stared, heart thumping, breath quickening, and seconds later was pulled into the most passionate kiss of his life. They clutched at each other, moaning. Doyle felt, as never before, the desire to merge completely with another person’s body.

After several minutes Phillips drew away and moved to kneel behind Doyle. The instant that Doyle felt the man’s hands reach around him to the zipper of his overalls, he knew that Phillips was going to fuck him, here in the courtyard, and the blood rushed to his cock so quickly that he cried out at the ache from his surprised arteries.

Swiftly the thin overalls were pulled down to his thighs, and the hands moved to his flies. The fleeting touch on his erection caused his to judder and gasp, and by the time Phillips cupped his buttocks and slid his fingers into the crease to play with his anus he was panting rapidly and shallowly.

The hands left him, though he could feel their trail, still, on his body. Behind him there was the rasp of a zip being undone, and the slide of clothing on flesh. He did not turn round, but imagined what the cock must look like, rosy as those pink sculpted lips, arching above pale, smooth thighs, framed by the black jacket above and the bunched trousers below. He groaned as his cock felt another impossible surge, and his anus and rectum seemed to gape, begging for this experience as if he had been wilfully depriving them of it all his life.

He heard a clatter of metal on cobblestones, and realised that Phillips was reaching for the small can of oil. Seconds later, firm hands grasped his hips and gently pushed him so that

he was kneeling up. He braced himself against the saddle of the motorbike, staring unseeing at a patch of grass growing between the stones.

The hands left him, there was the sound of squirting oil, and then a slick finger pressed slowly through his anus and deep inside him. The contrast between the roughness of the calluses on the fingerpad, and the smooth glide of the knuckles seemed suddenly more beautiful than any painting he had seen or could imagine, and he thought crazily, "It's for me. He worked to get his hands like this so that it would feel like this for me." He closed his eyes. Phillips twisted his finger, apparently testing the readiness and openness of the hole, and, apparently satisfied, withdrew and moved into position. The penetration was completely painless, which did not occur to Doyle as miraculous until much, much later. He felt stretched to his limits, certainly, but that had always been his definition of excitement. He was in a state well beyond excitement now.

When the cock was fully inserted it stilled, enabling Doyle to savour the quick, strong beat of the pulse inside it, and the pressure of hipbones against his buttocks. His breathing had slowed and deepened until it was a continuous moan of wonder, which acquired a warmer note as an arm reached around to gather him back against a heaving chest.

There were a few moments of rest, ended when Phillips' free hand grasped Doyle's erection, and his cock began to move in long, strong thrusts. Immediately Doyle started to shake violently and to emit frantic gasps. Seconds later he came, throwing his head back with a hoarse, almost-agonized moan, and then slumping forward, mindless, saliva trickling from the corner of his mouth in time with the thrusts still shaking his body.

Afterwards he was glad he came first, so that he could experience Phillips' build towards orgasm without the urgent distraction of his own. This way he had relatively clear memories of the feel of the accelerating thrusts, with their slippery sound, and the slap of the hipbones against his oily buttocks, and he was able to treasure them later, to tide him over the times when they could not be together. Utterly clear was the surge of joy and pride that came over him when the man inside him whimpered helplessly, tightened his arms convulsively, and came.

They sat in silence, propping each other up, until the softened cock slipped out with a sucking noise, and Doyle gave a low "Oh" of regret. Then Phillips released his grip on Doyle's waist in order to take his hand and stroke it. He kissed the back of Doyle's neck, and slowly worked his way round to the earlobe, which he kissed and nibbled gently.

"I want you to hold me," he breathed, and added ruefully, "but I don't want to move."

Doyle smiled, and bent his head back so they could kiss, but the position was awkward, and the strain soon showed, so Phillips drew his head back, "And I want to be able to kiss you for hours."

"For days."

"For weeks."

They both laughed.

Doyle said, "Let's go indoors," and felt the other man nod and then reach around to help him haul up his trousers. Doyle stood up, kicking off his overalls, and when he turned around the other man was dressed again. They looked at each other for long seconds, smiling in satisfaction and anticipation, then Doyle took him by the hand and started to lead him to the house.

They had moved only a few paces when Phillips stopped, and knelt by the motorbike, still holding Doyle's hand. As Doyle watched, he bent his head to the machine and slowly licked the cold drops of the other man's semen from the chrome and leather. The action seemed completely unselfconscious, as if he would have done the same even if Doyle had not been watching.

By the time Phillips got to his feet again, Doyle knew that he would do anything for this man; he would die for him, willingly. The worshipful stupefaction showed clearly on his face. Phillips smiled serenely, squeezed his hand, and guided him towards the front door.

The Rewards of Patience

by Helen Raven

Murphy slept until near dawn. He woke with his usual fuss and scalp-scratching. Doyle, expressionless, handed him their small sack of food and said, "This watch's your, mate. Give me a good eight hours, will you?" Then he turned his back, burrowed down in his sleeping-bag and was breathing slow and deep within minutes.

Murphy made no attempt to wake his partner when the eight hours were up. He would be happy to postpone their next conversation indefinitely. His own sleep had been peaceful, but the appalled tension had gripped him from the first whisperings of consciousness. He'd told Ray about Bodie. He'd actually done it. Ray would get him locked away. That was if he was lucky. Otherwise he would have to work with the man, knowing all the time that Ray knew - *Oh, God*. His larynx shifted with the unvoiced plea.

He trusted Ray. Of course. And liked him. But he wished it had been... almost anyone else on duty with him during the night. For all Ray's proclaimed sympathy with the common man, Murphy had sometimes felt that Doyle's spirit prowled a place from which the life of the streets was not even visible, and there it judged and assessed by its own standards, that had not been set by any parents or school or church. Usually this notion was interesting. Now it was frightening. Where had the story gone when it entered that brain? He felt completely out of control.

In the early afternoon Doyle suddenly shifted onto his back. "Nothing going on, I suppose?"

"Not a sausage."

A twist of the mouth, then, "When do you reckon this is gonna break?"

Murphy shrugged but proffered his best guess, and then they roamed over their usual stake-out topics until night fell, and they were relieved. Murphy drove them to the motorway, and then the twenty minutes to the airport and the characterless airport hotel, with its conveniently uninquisitive staff.

Over dinner Murphy's residual worry finally retreated to a point whence he could ignore it. Ray couldn't have forgotten, but he might as well have done. There was going to be no awkwardness, no confrontation. And in future he wasn't going to indulge himself in any speculations about the mysteries of the Doyle brain. *Down-to-earth bloke. Stupid to think anything else.*

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After the meal they returned to their room and watched TV until it got so late that the sound would be anti-social, and then they started on the quieter time-killers that would get them through the rest of the night. They were starting their fifth round of "Mastermind" when Doyle's R/T sounded. They were needed at the church.

They raced out of the room. Lucas and MacCabe caught up with them in the car-park. The drive, the shoot-out, the capture of the survivors - it was all over in half-an-hour after days of waiting. They went back to the hotel to shower and collect their gear, and then they were in Murphy's car again and on the way back to London.

Murphy dropped Doyle off in the car-park at HQ, saying, “D’you want to come round to my local for a pie and a pint? Dunno about you, but I need some booze after that sort of time on standby. Just to make sure it still exists, you know.”

Doyle smiled briefly, then looked away, suddenly serious, then shook his head, smiling again. “Not this time. Got stuff to do at home.”

“OK. See you Thursday.” They had been given two days off.

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Shortly after Doyle let himself into the house, the ’phone rang, as he’d known it would. Andrew Phillips always knew when he was home. He’d used to think it was marvellous, a sign they were made for each other.

The voice was deep, and intimate. “Oh... Ray. God, have I missed you? I’ve been ’phoning all hours, just in case you were back.”

“I’ve just got in.”

“I’ll come round, then. Know how wired up you get with these jobs. Wanna help you... relieve all that tension.”

Doyle closed his eyes, and clamped his hand over the mouth-piece while he reasoned with his erection and his breathing. Then he attempted an amused snort, and said, “You’d be disappointed. I’m out on my feet. Gimme till... eight, or so, and then I’ll be... tense enough to do you justice.”

“Sure I can’t change your mind?”

“Sure.”

“OK. Eight, then. See you, love.”

“See you.”

* * * * *

At exactly eight o’clock Phillips was at the door to the courtyard. Doyle buzzed him in. When he heard the footsteps approach the door of the house, he called, “It’s not locked.”

He was standing on the far side of the sitting room when Phillips entered. The dark man walked towards him smiling, then stopped a few feet away, and looked concerned.

“Are you OK, Ray? You look... wiped out. Did you get any sleep?”

Doyle looked at him with no expression except the determination around his mouth. After two slow breaths, he said, “Do you love us?”

Without hesitation: “You know I do.” A clear-eyed, wondering smile, and a swift survey of Doyle’s body in its tee-shirt, jacket, and jeans. “How could I do anything else? I can’t think about anything but you. Nothing else seems -”

“Not me. Not just me. All of us. Murphy. Keller. Did you love them? *Can* you love? Can you feel anything at all?”

No smile now. As intent as Doyle himself. “Yes, I did love them. I love them still. I will always love all of you. It never fades.”

They stared into each other’s eyes for many heartbeats. Then Phillips smiled again, almost a grin. He seemed genuinely amused. “Who spoke first, you or Murph? I thought you might figure it out.”

“Murph.” It was scarcely above a whisper.

A nod, and then he stepped forward, reaching out.

“Stay away from me!”

“Ray, I’m not going to -”

“Stay away, I told you.” Doyle drew the gun from inside his jacket with lightning speed.

Phillips stopped. He looked at the weapon and its bulky silencer. There was a pursing of lips, but no other reaction.

Doyle lost all ability to judge the passage of time. Eventually, Phillips raised his head again, and their eyes met.

Then he moved towards Doyle, and Doyle shot him full in the chest.

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By the time he’d arrived at his own flat, Murphy had abandoned the idea of the pie and the pint. On a weekday his local would be near-empty at lunchtime, and if he went in on his own, Geoff-behind-the-bar would pick up on their last chat, and he wasn’t in the mood to spend his remaining energy on a civilian.

Wish Ray had come along. He usually did. Doing the laundry now, probably. Filling the fridge. Could copy him, I suppose.

When he’d done all the chores he could think of, he sprawled across the settee with a book in his lap and a mug of tea resting warm against his thigh, and fell asleep before he even realised he was tired.

The ’phone woke him. “Bugger!” Cold tea soaking into the carpet. Left shin flaring with pain inflicted by the coffee table. The room had grown dark while he slept.

He picked up the receiver in the middle of the fifth ring. “Si-”

“Murph. Get around here right away. To my place. No danger. Don’t worry. But I need you here now. Can you get here?”

“Yeah, but -”

“Now, Murph. Please.”

He stood for just a second holding the buzzing 'phone to his ear. *No danger*. He left the flat mentally prepared for anything up to a tank battle.

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The door to Doyle's courtyard was open, and lights were on downstairs. Murphy could hear no sound at all. *Go over the wall on the far side, or through the gate?* He paused, listening, then turned to make another pass of the front of the house.

"Murph? Is that you? Thank God."

Murphy still hesitated outside the walls, not even stepping in front of the doorway in the wall. "Come out here where I can see you."

Quick footsteps on wood, then on stone. "You've seen me. Now come *on*." Doyle was dragging him across the courtyard by the lapel.

"Look, Ray, what is -" And then he knew.

A few steps inside the door, thrown backwards along the length of a once-cream cotton rug. The eyes were open, and they flicked towards Murphy as he walked slowly into the room. Murphy had realised at once who it was, from that first glimpse of cropped hair.

Murphy had seen many men die. But now he didn't know what to do, what to think, what to feel. *Shock. Gets us all sometimes*. Like Ray, now, who was showing no trace of his earlier urgency; he was just staring down, looking into the eyes of the man he'd shot. *He'll've kept it together long enough to call for help and wait for it to come, and then...* At the idea of "help", Murphy started trying to coax his brain back into action. Ray was counting on him.

Every hard-fought breath seemed to ricochet around the room, impossibly loud. Irregular, and full of the clicking sounds of bursting bubbles, the inhalations spoke of pain more eloquently than any scream. But the face was calm, all attention fixed on Doyle. Which meant that all three of them were in shock, of course.

Pity was the first emotion to get through to Murphy, followed quickly by amazement that he could feel it for this man. But there had been something magnificent about him. Elemental. So that even a man with little imagination found himself thinking of ghosts, and vampires, and malignant angels. But not now, when it was clear that he was as mortal as the men he'd hunted.

Ray had brought him down, brought him to this. A flare of anger, because Ray had destroyed something beautiful, and never mind that it had been dangerous too. He shouldn't be allowed to retreat into some dreamworld. He should be right here, facing what he had done.

"He found you too, then." Murphy had meant his voice to be cold and harsh, and winced when he heard only sadness.

Doyle did not react at all. But Bodie did. After an instant's glance at Murphy's face, he smiled at Doyle, a slow, sweet smile that turned suddenly into a grin.

And then the dominant sound in the room was the ticking of the kitchen clock.

“Sorry, Murph. Should’ve warned you. All happened so quick, you see.”

Murphy wasn’t sure he *did* see. His partner had come back, in the space of a few seconds.

“D’he just appear on your doorstep, then? You recognise him from what I’d said?”

“Yeah. Put these on. We’ve got work to do.”

Murphy caught the packet of surgical gloves, but didn’t copy Doyle, who was stretching them expertly onto his lean hands. “What do you think he was? What did he say to you?”

“No idea. But now he’s a lump of meat. And this *isn’t* a butcher’s shop. Come on.”

“What’re you going to do?”

“Get rid of him. And then make sure he comes back.”

“Eh?”

“We’re going to dump him in Essex. But make it look like a gang-killing. Like that one near Braintree the other week. So the case comes to CI5. Safer that way. ’n’ we can maybe find out who he was.”

“William Bodie.”

“Andrew Phillips. See? I want to *know*. Don’t you?”

In reply, Murphy tore open the packet. But Doyle didn’t seem to need much help after all, and there was little to do but stand and watch, impressed and appalled by the man’s efficiency and forethought.

First Doyle searched the pockets, finding nothing, not even a handkerchief. Then he wiped away the trickle of blood from the side of... *Bodie’s? Phillips’s?*... Bodie’s mouth, drying the skin afterwards.

“So it’ll stick properly, of course.”

“It” turned out to be black adhesive tape.

“Same brand as with the other one?”

“No. That was blue, anyway. But can’t be traced. Help me turn him over. Get him trussed up.” There was the bulge of a wallet in the back pocket. It contained thirty five pounds in crisp new notes, and nothing else. As Murphy searched it, he imagined he could feel the heat fading away from the leather, being drawn out into the cold air. Beside him, Doyle was taping Bodie’s wrists together in the small of his back. When he’d finished he moved down to the ankles.

“Can’t you close his eyes?” As they’d rolled the corpse from one position to another, the sightless gaze had seemed to rest on Murphy more frequently than chance should have allowed.

“Great idea, Murph. We make it look like the work of a gang of undertakers. You want to undo his arms and cross them over his chest instead?”

“He might have died... with them closed.”

“Well, he didn’t. Go and make us a coffee. You’re not going to like the next bit.”

And he didn’t. “No, Ray,” he warned, when Doyle reached behind the settee and lifted up his biker’s boots.

“Don’t watch.”

“They’ll know it was done afterwards.”

“Not right away, they won’t. It’ll do to get the case to CI5. And after that *we* can make puzzled noises over the autopsy report.”

After the first kicks landed, Murphy turned away and then went into the kitchen area. Yes, it was the sensible thing to do. And what difference could it make to a corpse? But he didn’t want to see Doyle’s face, whether it was showing exultation, sorrow, or simple determination.

Did I say I stopped loving him when I found out? Did I give you that impression, Ray? Because it’s not true.

He filled the kettle and switched it on, and by the time it boiled Doyle had changed back into his trainers.

“Nearly finished, Murph. Time to wrap it up.” In the cotton rug, Doyle meant. They worked together, Doyle giving directions, and produced a neat parcel held together with six bands of black tape. The contents were unmistakable, as was the enormous bloodstain in the centre of the back. There was no mark on the floorboards, which had been protected by plastic sheet. Now Murphy was certain that he’d never seen that rug before. “*All happened so quick, Murph. He just turned up on the doorstep.*” Like hell.

“Where’s the bullet?”

“Out there, I think.” Doyle was pointing to the courtyard. “Not in here, anyway. No one’ll find it. Nothing to link him to us.”

Us? “What about the rug?”

“Got it in a junk shop years ago. Place’s closed down since. Never used it. Now. Let’s get him in my boot.”

* * * * *

Doyle slammed the boot of his car. “Let’s have that coffee. What’s the time? Can’t be much past nine.”

“’bout ten past.”

“Huh. *Hours* to kill. Set off about two, I reckon. Just as well we’ve got a couple of days off.”

Now Doyle’s living room looked as it had every other time Murphy had visited. Except that Murphy would never be able to see it like that again. Bodie would always be there now.

He sat down at the dining table, his back to the room. Doyle was moving around in the kitchen: doors opening and closing, dull chimes of glass and china and metal.

“Something to eat?” Doyle’s voice had the lightness and bounce of a spring morning.

“No.”

“Sure? I’m making m’self a sandwich.”

Murphy didn’t reply. The clattering continued.

“There you go.” Doyle sat down on the other side of the table and ate with great speed and concentration. Through a mouthful of lettuce and cheese: “Don’t look so worried, Murph. There’s nothing to link us with him. And no I.D. Nothing. So... unless his grey-haired mum turns up to claim him, *and* he kept notes on us all...” An extravagant shrug. “Well, I can’t see it, can you?”

“You shouldn’t have done it.” Nearly a whisper. Murphy was speaking to his hands, curled around the mug of tea.

“I had to.” Impatient, stating the obvious. “Christ, you know that. Better than me even.”

“No. I don’t. Not any more. He was mad, that’s all. And so was I when I was with him. And afterwards, too, when he left me. He should have been locked up, that’s all. There’s no such thing as ghosts.”

“The Angel of Death, you said.”

“And *you* said you didn’t believe me. He was a man. And you killed him because you were in love with him and you couldn’t deal with it. Face it, Ray.”

“You gonna turn me in, then?”

“No. It’s done. And you’re right, no one’d care about him. But we shouldn’t act as if we’re heroes.”

“He *did* come looking for me, just like you said.”

“That *doesn’t* prove *anything*. You know it doesn’t. You’ve got to face up to what you’ve done.”

Silence. Slowly, the mug grew cooler against Murphy’s palms; London was turned away from the sun, and the depths of space had settled around them, and the heat slid away on the start of a long journey.

Rough fingertips brushed lightly against the back of his hand. He jerked violently, and couldn’t stop himself looking at Doyle. The touch lingered in his nerves, like sunburn.

“I’m sorry, Murph. Go home. I’ll deal with everything else. I shouldn’t have called you. I thought - Well, I suppose I was crazier than either of you. But it’s over now. Go home. Forget about all of this.”

“No. I’ll come with you.” Better than lying awake and imagining... What limits could you set on Ray Doyle now? “*Oh, no, he wouldn’t do that.*” Nothing.

Silence again.

“What were you doing when I called?”

“Sleeping. Dozing.”

“Mmm. You want to lie down upstairs? I’ll wake you when it’s time.”

Murphy nodded, got clumsily to his feet, and climbed the spiral staircase to Doyle’s bedroom.

* * * * *

Hours later, Doyle drove his car into the courtyard, then got out and went to shut the gates while Murphy was still unbuckling himself. Murphy had barely spoken since Doyle had woken him. He was heading for the gate in the side-wall and his own car, but suddenly Doyle was standing in front of him, taking his upper arm in a jailor’s grip.

“No.”

“Let me go.”

“No. You mustn’t just leave. We need to finish this properly.”

“It’s finished. You thought of everything, Ray. Congratulations. Now let me go.”

“It’s finished with him. But not with us. I think we should fuck.”

Murphy just looked at him, lip curled.

“We gotta let it out now. Fast. Before you go. Or come Thursday we won’t be able to face each other. You know it’s true. This is the best way. Just once, that’s all I’m saying. Then never again.”

“You were right. You’re crazier than me *or* him.”

“No. I know what we need right now.” Bared teeth and a rasping exhalation that was a hot gust over Murphy’s lips and chin. “I sure as hell know what *I* need.” Then he moved forward and their thighs were pressed together; the sensation of heat and hardness was instant, as if their trousers had melted away at the moment of contact. “I need fucking. Hard. And you’re going to do it, aren’t you? Don’t pretend you can walk away now. Not when I’m going to do anything you want. *Anything*. Reckon I owe you...” A harsh, amused sigh, and then a precise finger started tracing the outline of Murphy’s erection. “... this once.”

Bodie used to have the same effect on him. And he’d never had a chance to show Bodie what he’d felt for him and about him in the last long months. Now there seemed little difference between Bodie and this night’s Doyle. There was so much inside himself that he wanted to get rid off. Of course this wasn’t the best way. In fact, it was the worst way. It would be the end of their partnership. But really, that was no disaster.

He took Doyle on the bare, polished boards of the living-room floor, holding him down, feeling the strain in the splayed legs, not caring where the bruises would appear. Doyle showed not a flicker of fear or reluctance, and he came near the beginning of the brief act, and was nearly hard again by the end of it.

“You see. It was just what we needed. Wasn’t it?” Gentle and drowsy, a changed, untroubled man.

Murphy dressed and left without replying.

To his own surprise, Murphy arrived at HQ on Thursday morning feeling much as he had on many other mornings. Maybe he was just too tired to take on any more emotions. He had no worries about facing Doyle, and when they met in the corridor there was no jolt of guilt. It would probably come later, and he’d decide then what to do about it.

The body had not been found, or had not been brought to the attention of CI5. Maybe it never would be. The partners did not speculate - it seemed to be agreed that they would not talk about it. At the end of the uneventful day they went to Murphy’s local for a quick drink, and everything seemed truly back to normal.

* * * * *

It was on Sunday that they were called in. The body had been found late on Friday, and the case transferred to CI5 by the end of Saturday. While Cowley gave them a briefing, the corpse and its effects were being moved from Essex to the morgue of the pathology department that CI5 used.

Doyle was present for the autopsy. Murphy wasn’t, instead following Doyle’s suggestion that he have another look at the files on the Braintree killing, and then check on missing persons. The current theory was that they were dealing with the construction industry, since the initial examination in Essex had concluded that the marks on the second body (now dubbed “Mister X”) came from workboots.

The autopsy did show that the marks had been inflicted after death. Otherwise there was nothing that could be called a clue - just statements of the obvious, or further puzzles.

The slug wasn’t in the body, and the shot had been fired at close range. The digestive system contained something that the forensic lab decided was rabbit pie and potatoes. Mister X had been in his late twenties, and in excellent physical condition. He had some scars, most - apparently - from knife-wounds, with the newest maybe four months old. His anus was slightly dilated, but there was no sign of tissue damage, and no semen in his rectum.

* * * * *

“He had the exact same scars when I first met him. And that was over a year ago.” It was very late on Monday, and they were in Murphy’s flat with large glasses of Scotch.

“Yes,” said Doyle shortly.

“That one under his knee - he told me he fell over while eating a kebab in Streatham.”

“Easily done.”

“Tripped on a paving stone. Landed on broken glass.”

“He told *me* it was a Big Mac in Camberwell. I don’t think I stopped laughing for five minutes.”

“Yes.” A pause. “Maybe he healed very slowly.”

“Maybe he cut himself again and again so he could tell the same story to each of us. After all, he *was* mad.”

“What d’you think it means?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you’re right, Murph, maybe he just healed very slowly.”

“D’you think we’ll get anything from the clothes?”

“Like the name of the shop and then a credit-card slip? I can’t see it.”

“What about the pie? After all, how many places in town sell rabbit, in or out of a pie?”

Doyle shrugged. “Harrods? Someone *might* remember. But I bet you the most we’ll get is the proof that *someone* saw him apart from the two of us.”

“And Keller.”

“Yes.” A long pause. “What d’you think his name really was?”

“If he had one at all. I went to Somerset House immediately after, you know. And there was no sign of a William Bodie. But I still think of him as that. We could go back though, look for Andrew Phillips. Or some combination.”

“Yes. After this is over, though. We have to be careful. *Have* to keep calling him Mister X. Bodie. It *is* more like him. Phillips sounds like some pink-faced junior manager from Stevenage.”

“Keller called him Bodie.”

“He might’ve been a foreigner, you know. How far d’you want to search?”

“As far as it’s safe. We look too far, and Cowley’ll find out. We’re going to have to be very patient, Ray.”

“I know. It’ll be worth it. I think.”

* * * * *

They worked on the case of Mister X full-time for nearly four weeks. In the first few weeks they were so busy visiting police stations and clothes shops and food shops and construction sites that they paid little attention to what the rest of the squad was up to.

When all of their work brought in nothing and they were running out of ideas, they had time to kill in the rest room, and discovered that there was a very strong rumour that

everyone was going to be rehoused and that the intruder-detection system was under review.

A week ago an assassin had followed Young home, waited until he left again to go to the laundry and the local shops, and then let herself in with no trouble at all. Young (voted “Luckiest Man of the Year”) had turned back after a few minutes, having remembered a suit that needed dry-cleaning, and had seen Mayli enter the block. He recognised her from a morning of trailing that he and Grier had put in on their current terrorist case, and decided to play it safe and call HQ for help. Mayli had been captured without fuss, held in the basement for two days, and then released to her embassy.

Doyle had been vaguely aware of some of this, but it was all news to Murphy.

“When we gonna move, then?”

“s not definite yet,” said McCabe. “Couple of weeks for the review, I suppose. Then a month or so while they get the new places ready. They’ll stagger it. Could take three months all in all.”

“Shame. I was hoping for a year at least where I am now. First time I’ve had proper space to work on the bike. ’n’ a spiral staircase. That was my idea of the perfect house when I was a kid. That and a swimming pool.”

“And a circus in the garden,” added Jax. “Wonder when I changed my mind, decided I could live without it. What about you, Murph?”

“Oh.” Murphy had not been paying attention. He had been thinking about Doyle’s flat. “An aquarium. With...” Sharks, it had been. “... dolphins and stuff.”

When that topic was exhausted, McCabe said, “Haven’t seen you two for weeks. How you getting on with your mystery man?”

“We’re not. It’s as if he never existed.” Doyle spoke grimly, barely opening his mouth.

“Well, he must have made an impression on *someone*, if they felt strongly enough to do him in like that. If he’d been *really* dull and anonymous he’d have died of old age. Or killed himself, maybe.”

“He certainly didn’t do that. We’re starting to think... serial killer. It’s a case for a psychologist, not for us.”

* * * * *

Doyle was moved first, some five weeks after they arranged for Mister X to be buried and handed the case back to the Essex police to be filed away as unsolved. Murphy was moved just over a week later.

Doyle’s new flat was in a Victorian block. The small entrance hall and the stairwell were dark and unwelcoming, covered to chest-height with shiny institutional tiles, but the flat itself was large and light, like a studio, and Doyle was happy to invite Murphy up for a very select flat-warming.

“When d’you want to go back to Somerset House?”

“Few months yet. There’s no hurry, is there?” Murphy paused, and shifted his position on the striped sofa. “What do you think about it all? Now that it’s over.”

Doyle’s eyes swung round to him, then drifted away, and he shrugged. “That I’d do it again. That it seemed the only thing to do, the only way to make myself safe. He was too dangerous.” A deep sigh. “I keep thinking I see him. Walking on the other side of the street. Sitting in a parked car. Jesus, if you measured my heart-beat...” He rubbed his chest, half-smiling, half-frowning. “If I thought he was out there, even locked away... I’d spend my life waiting for the day he got out, came after me. I couldn’t live like that.”

Murphy wasn’t looking at him. “I miss him sometimes. Wish he could have been what I thought he was at first. Like something out of a dream. I’d give -”

“A nightmare, Murph. He knew just what you wanted him to be. It was how he worked. You said it yourself. Stop thinking about him so much. Get out more.”

“So you never wish -”

“No. Never.”

And Murphy decided he would never mention Bodie again.

* * * * *

The months went by, and Doyle started thinking about Somerset House, and about taking a few trips abroad. But was it worth the effort? What difference would it make? What was the point in stirring it up again when he was nearly over the whole business? He decided to let it slide; maybe some day it would seem important again.

One of the best things about the new flat was the bathroom, which was one of the largest he’d had, like something from an advert. He liked the old, deep, claw-footed bath that stood under the tall, thin window, pointing into the middle of the room, not hiding away beside a wall. He liked the clean, simple colours: the deep blue of the walls, the brown wooden floor, the white. He didn’t even mind that there was no shower. Gradually, he started to put pictures up, choosing carefully those that he wanted to see around him as he was soaking to the sound of Mozart or Kate Bush.

It was Sunday morning, and he’d just come back from a run, and his hair needed washing. While the bath was running he put a record on - a Haydn horn concerto - and made a mug of tea to take into the bathroom. He lay for a while with the water lapping his chin, thinking Sunday-morning-thoughts, then roused himself to reach up to the window-ledge for the shampoo.

Eyes tight-shut, face like a small waterfall, he reached out to his left, towards the towel-rail that ran along the wall. His fingers closed on warm, fluffy material sooner than they should have. He opened his eyes. Bodie was kneeling in front of him, handing him the towel.

A gasp that was nearly a scream, and he was hauling himself to his feet, thinking only of the gun that was strapped inside the cistern, three feet behind Bodie.

There was nothing but a strip of black tape floating on the water, and near his neck Bodie was chuckling.

“This what you’re looking for, Ray?”

The gun rested in the large palm. Doyle stood frozen, now far beyond the guidance of training and sense. He kept his eyes on the gun, waiting for the hand to close around the grip, and the barrel to turn towards him, but even his peripheral vision was enough to show him that Bodie’s chest was unmarked. And the man - or creature - was as naked as Doyle himself.

The wait was short. Bodie turned and leaned over the tub, and Doyle heard a thud as the weapon hit the floor on the far side. He flinched, and Bodie seemed to see the movement, and turned back quickly.

“Later, if you want. But talk first, eh? Make it even better.” Said quite pleasantly and calmly, as if they already understood one another perfectly, as if they’d just met in the pub.

Doyle didn’t move. He knew he looked terrified. He couldn’t stop himself cringing away from Bodie’s hands, though obviously there was no escape from this. Bodie had come for him.

But the hands were gentle on his arms. Their light pressure caused no pain, and he moved as they guided him, stepping clumsily, his sight fixed on Bodie’s face. It seemed to be showing concern, and affection, and that made things worse for Doyle, because it was so impossible that it proved that he must be going mad.

It’s the guilt. At last. They’ll find me tomorrow, drowned in the bath. Maybe I’m in there half-dead already, and this is a last dream.

“Don’t look like that, Ray. It’s OK. You’ll see.”

They were both standing on the bathmat now. Bodie took a step back, bent to pick up the towel, then moved much closer. Doyle was trembling uncontrollably.

“Ray. Oh, Ray. Shh.”

The towel settled around his head, covering his eyes, and Bodie’s hands closed on him like a helmet, then started shifting, inch-by-inch, massaging his scalp through the material. Bodie was murmuring something, but Doyle couldn’t make out any words.

Several times Doyle felt the brush of warm skin against his thigh, and when the hands reached round to the base of his skull, the full length of Bodie’s body was pressed against him. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out, and the trembling grew worse.

“There. Ah. So soft.” Fingers drifting through his bared hair. “Like dew on the grass.” A slow smile. “But it’s making you shiver. Too cold, I know.”

Doyle’s body was still tracked with water, gathering gradually into drops. Bodie started on his face, then moved downwards, not hurrying. He worked with just a light pressure, barely rubbing, and when he reached Doyle’s chest, he began following the path of the towel with

his lips. Doyle clenched his fists, digging the nails in hard. Some moments later, when the lips closed on his left nipple, he closed his eyes, and turned his head far to the right.

Bodie smelt of pine-needles and sweet wood-smoke, as he often had before. It was a smell that had found its way into Doyle's dreams, the good ones, the ones that made waking an amputation.

Moist breath shifted the hairs on his ribs, growing hotter and faster as it moved down to his stomach. But it wasn't as hot as Bodie's cock, which rubbed against his legs, sometimes sliding between them. It seemed that he was aware of each pulse into it, each surge that lifted it further. It was more real to him than his own, though that too was filling steadily, helped by its collisions with smooth skin.

And finally the towel reached his groin. He held his breath. But it just patted the drops from the hair there, prickling and cool.

Bodie was murmuring again, a single strange phrase over and over, interrupted by gasps.

The tingling of Doyle's nerves told him that Bodie's mouth was open, hovering over his cockhead. Before he was aware that it was happening, his left arm swung forward, fist finally relaxing as he reached out. A whisper of something warm against the inside of his wrist and instantly he jerked his hand back.

Long, stroking movements to dry his legs: down to his feet and then up again along the inside of his thigh. He dared not think about the time when he would be dry to Bodie's satisfaction. This progression about his body was the limit of his world. He had stopped trembling, but now his body jerked in time with his heartbeat, and his skull pulsed like a drum.

He felt and heard Bodie stand up, and almost immediately there was a light touch under his left armpit, and he was being turned. There was nothing to be gained now from keeping his face averted, or his eyes closed. Immediately in front of him was a black-and-white poster of moorland, long grass bent nearly double by the wind. Bleak. He'd liked that about it when he bought it. It had appealed to his imagination.

There were reflections in the glass, silhouettes laid on the grid of the window. Two ghosts framed in light, their outlines merging into one.

Bodie was not lingering over his task any more, though he was not rough. He never had been. Just efficient. Determined. Impossible to refuse. If this creature was the same then whatever happened would be... survivable. Mentally. Unless he - it - wanted Doyle to remember and hope, so that the change would be worse, and the revenge better.

A swift cupping of his buttocks through the towel, the cleft explored with a single hard stroke along the length. A small sound escaped him. His back arched, held tense for many heartbeats, then slowly straightened.

A lighter stroke in the opposite direction to the first. This time he moaned, more in despair than pleasure. But he couldn't control any of this, especially not the way his hips were pushing back against Bodie's hands.

“Oh, Ray. Wanted to come for you sooner but... Oh.”

The towel was thrown to the floor, and Doyle was pulled back against a steamy-hot body. A liquid mouth sucked at his neck, his shoulder. Yeast now, with the pine and the smoke.

His cheeks were pressed apart by the bulk of Bodie’s balls and by the base of the big cock whose tip was leaving moist trails in the small of his back. He imagined the orifice, exposed but far from any touch, even the tickling hair. He arched again, trying to close the distance. Bodie held him even tighter, but it wasn’t enough.

He grunted in frustration, and instantly Bodie’s left hand slid down to grasp his cock. The shock made him moan, and as the hand squeezed and explored, he twisted his head restlessly from side to side, eyes closed again.

Suddenly, Bodie’s cock slid down along the centre-line of Doyle’s body to press between his legs and nudge his balls. It had barely touched his anus, but now the hole felt wet and cool and open. He struggled to tilt his hips forward, grunting again repeatedly, but Bodie held him fast. Would he have to *ask*? No, please.

Then the right hand, that had been pressed flat on his stomach, left him, and seconds later his arse got what it wanted, or nearly. He rocked back hard onto the finger, feeling the flexing of the joints as it matched his movements. They were both panting loudly, Doyle almost growling, though when the finger withdrew he became very quiet, and he held near-motionless as the tip slid between his legs again, then nudged at him and circled, spreading moisture. He heard soft, quick licking sounds, and felt fleeting brushes against his buttocks, and then he stared fixedly ahead as the bulk stretched him open and forced its way slowly into him, an inch or so at a time. It was not painless, but it was worth it.

* * * * *

Doyle became aware of his surroundings only gradually. He was lying face downwards, sprawled over a damp body whose slowing pulse matched his own and whose breathing was loud in his ear. When he opened his eyes he saw mainly white: the bathmat inches from his face, and the bottom of the tub to his right. The nerves between his legs were still blazing with sensation, which did not fade as the minutes passed. Muscles flexed in the chest beneath him as hands drifted over his back.

He was sure that very soon he would be dead.

He waited.

“Have you any idea how long I’ve been looking for you?” Low and dreamy, a rhetorical question, really.

Doyle’s spine prickled at the memory of those five months of thinking that he was totally, totally safe.

“Since the beginning, it’s been.” One of the hands was in his hair now, on his neck. “Even before the first time I died. Sometimes I thought... But it always turned out that he didn’t understand. But you... I knew almost from the start that we had a chance. I wanted to

bring you through with me. I'd been thinking about how to tell you about the forest. Was nearly ready.

"And then... oh, love... you *proved* that I was right. As if you could see straight into my dreams, knew how to make it perfect for me. The way you watched me, so hungry, not wanting to miss any of it. You *loved* it, didn't you? And you knew I did too. And calling Murph. I thought - for a moment - that you were going to spoil it, that you didn't really understand." A low chuckle that shook both of them. "Oh, that was wicked. Couldn't have done better myself. He was so confused. So lost. It was like... we had a secret. Like we'd already talked about it all. Loved you before that, of course, but then... Felt I was full of light. Floating towards the edge.

"It's never felt so long in the forest. Waiting for this body to want to move. Wanting to be back with you. Hoping I hadn't missed you. But I couldn't sense it any more - yours, I mean - so I thought... And I was right, it *has* passed. But don't worry, I still want you just as much. If you hadn't guessed."

Bodie's other hand glided down to squeeze Doyle's left buttock, then came to rest in the small of his back. He seemed to have finished what he had to say, and there was silence except for their breathing, which had quickened as he talked.

* * * * *

"What are you?" Doyle's lips barely moved.

Serious, measured. "I don't know. I don't think there's a word for it. Stephen called me a vampire but - like I said - he never understood."

"An angel of death." Said on a breath. "Murphy thought..."

"Did he?" Interested. "I don't know about that one. I'll think about it. Can't say I *feel* like an angel. You'd think they'd tell you, wouldn't you?"

Doyle didn't know, and said nothing.

* * * * *

"How many -" Doyle's tone shifted. "How old are you?"

"Twenty nine. Or two hundred odd. Depending how you look at it. How d'you feel 'bout older men, eh? And, seventeen times. I've died seventeen times."

"How many men? How many?"

"Oh. Well, I don't keep count. Maybe I could, but a number doesn't say anything, does it? Not about falling in love. Anyway it always seems like the first time, because it is, with him."

"But there was Murph, Keller and me. In about a year or so. Is that -"

"I don't know. Maybe. If someone told me they'd counted and it was 429, or 680, or whatever, I'd probably take their word for it. I don't forget, though. Not one. Don't think that."

* * * * *

“Are you going to kill me?”

He felt Bodie’s head turn towards him. “Now? Is that what you think?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not. I thought -” A pause. “Why would I want to kill you?”

“Because that’s what you *do*. To Keller. To all of us when you can. And for revenge.”

“Revenge? What for? You can’t - You *did* feel it too. Didn’t you? Watching me go through?”

“And you’ll kill me if I say no?”

Bodie’s chest lifted slightly as he swallowed. “No. I’ll go back. You won’t see me again.”

A very long silence.

“I did feel something. That I shouldn’t have. I tried not to think about it.”

“Think about it now. Please.”

Another long silence.

“I wanted to kiss you.” Doyle’s voice sounded very remote to his own ears.

“I know. You would have, wouldn’t you, if Murph hadn’t been there? I wanted you to take my blood into your mouth. Taste it with me. Will you do that next time?”

Doyle swallowed hard, the saliva feeling like a stone as it moved down, and his body flexed once, slowly.

“Will you kiss me now?”

A violent flinch, and Doyle turned his head away, closing his eyes as he had before.

“Ray. If I was wrong, I’ll go. If you want me to, I’ll go. I’m not here... to force you.”

Silence.

“I’m not here to kill you, either. For revenge or anything else. It’s *not* what I do. I didn’t kill Keller. Or any of them. There’s no need to be frightened.”

Doyle’s pride fired his tongue, and his eyes snapped open. “You think I’m stupid? Keller died. Murph nearly did. Some coincidence. What’d you have planned for me?”

“Not me. Fate. If that’s what you want to call it. You were heading towards the edge, you see. You all were. There was a *chance*. That’s how it is for me. *That’s* what I am. I can sense when a man I will love is near the chance. I don’t know how. But there’s a smell like ginger and honey and I follow it through and when I see him... I’m lost. There’s nothing like it, Ray, not even sex with you - being with him as it gets closer, seeing which way it turns, watching him die if it turns out the right way.”

“What happened with me?”

“I don’t know. It was still a few weeks away when you shot me. It’s gone now.”

“You’d have watched.”

“Yes. Like you watched me.”

“I’d have hated you. Cursed you.”

“Maybe. Most don’t, you know. I think they realise then what I am. Maybe they *do* see me as the Angel of Death. And they know I love them. It gives sense to it. They always thought they’d be alone.”

“What happens to them afterwards? Where do you take them?”

“Nowhere. I don’t know.”

“You said you’d died seventeen times. I thought you’d know by now.”

“I’m not mortal. I think it’s different for mortals.”

Doyle said nothing. Bodie’s hands lay motionless now on his back.

“Are you still frightened of me?”

Silence.

“Do you think I’ll hurt you?”

A brief shake of the head.

“Is it the idea, then? Of what I am?”

No response.

“Or are you frightened of yourself? I was like that at first, when I started to realise what I wanted. Thought I’d be damned.”

Doyle just closed his eyes, and let Bodie’s shoulder take the full weight of his head.

* * * * *

“Are you comfortable? We’ve been here a while.”

“You’re cold.” They’d joked about his greater need for heat, long ago, when Doyle had thought he was human.

“The sun’s gone in. And you’re heavier than you look. Let’s go to bed.”

Almost immediately Doyle started getting to his feet, careful about where he put his knees. He had more aches than he’d realised. The bath-water was still warm. He pulled the plug, and watched as it flowed away.

“You won’t look at me, Ray. Are you ever going to admit I’m here?”

“I’ve talked to you, haven’t I? Let you fuck me.”

To his surprise Bodie laughed, a sound of uncomplicated amusement. “*That’s* the Ray Doyle I’ve been missing all these months. Generosity itself. You gonna go one further and let me clean you up a bit?”

“Can’t stop you.”

“Course you can.”

Doyle gripped the edge of the tub as Bodie swabbed between his buttocks with a flannel, and then patted him dry with the towel.

“Come and talk to me some more.”

* * * * *

Once they were inside the bedroom Doyle pulled his hand from Bodie’s loose grip and made for the bed with an air of determination. He slid over to the far side, and presented his back to Bodie.

“Believe it or not, you’re taking this better than I expected. By this time, Stephen had called the priest and the town elders, and the carpenter was on his way with the stake.”

He made it so difficult to ignore him. “You’re lucky. I don’t know a carpenter who’s open on Sundays.”

“Huh. Not had time to meet the local priest either, I bet. D’you fancy a drink? Haven’t had one in months. Nothing to eat, either.”

“Thought you’d be above all that, being immortal. Don’t hear about angels stuffing their faces with chips.”

“That’s just ’cos they’ve got good P.R. You should see Gabriel plastering the ketchup on his egg butty first thing in the morning. *Do* you fancy a drink?”

“Tea.”

“Be right back.”

Doyle lay thinking about his options, such as they were. The gun was on the floor in the bathroom, the ’phone was on the bedside table, and Bodie was whistling tunelessly in the kitchen. He hadn’t moved by the time Bodie returned with a tray.

“There you go.” A mug appeared in the limited range of his vision. The bed dipped, and the sounds of eating started behind him.

“Where’d you get the rabbit pie?”

“Eh?”

“The post mortem. It said -”

“Oh, that. Ma Jackson’s. Off Drury Lane. Best in town.”

“Never ’eard of it.”

“Not surprised. Closed down when she died. ’bout hundred and eighty years ago.”

“Bought a big stock of them, did you?”

“Yeah. And a wood-fired freezer. No, it was the last meal I had as a mortal.”

“When you were twenty nine.”

“That’s it.”

“What happened to you?”

“I went into the forest for the first time. And... I was changed.”

“Where *is* this forest?”

“I don’t think it’s anywhere. Not the way you mean. It’s just where I am when I’m not here. That first time... I went to a house in Mayfair, and the man let me into the drawing room, and the lights went out, and I looked up and there was the moon through the branches and the house had gone.”

“What’s it like?”

“It’s always night. Always a full moon. Very still. Sometimes I hear cries, things moving through the trees in the distance, but I never see anything.”

“What about the others like you? Are they there too?”

“I’ve never met any others. Just the Changer, that first time.”

“The Changer?”

“Yes. I’ll tell you later. If you decide you want to know.”

“So you’re there, by yourself, for two hundred years?”

“Except when I’m here.”

“It must be lonely.”

“Mmm. Time passes differently. I don’t age there, like I do here. Mostly it’s like being asleep, dreaming about my men. And then I smell -”

“Honey and ginger.”

“- and I’m wide awake again. It *has* been lonely, though, since I met you.”

“You want me to change too.”

“Yes.”

“Become like you.”

“Yes.”

“Join you in the forest.”

“Yes.”

“And what would we do then? Go after the same men? Take it in turns to kill each other? I *don't*... have the same feelings.”

“I think you do. You have them more than I did when I was mortal. They grew in me - slowly - after I changed.” A snort. “You know, I changed because I didn't want to die. And now it's what I hope for whenever I come back. You'll see. It's the... most... *intense* pleasure.” A pause, and then the bed dipped. “Your tea's getting cold. I've got some biscuits.”

Finally Doyle rolled onto his back and looked up at the man who was sitting next to him, mug resting on a raised knee.

“What *is* your name?”

“Bodie. William Andrew Philip Bodie.”

“Why did you tell it to Murph and Keller and not to me?”

“You and Murph knew each other too well. If you worked it out too soon everything would be spoilt. I know. It's happened before.”

“You broke Murph's heart.”

A shrug.

“If you'd really loved him, you wouldn't have treated him like that. It was just the dying you wanted. He had plans about *living* with you. Did you ever think about what you'd done to him?”

“I never lied to him.”

“You dumped him. He thought he was going mad, I think. You could have come back to him. Finished with him like a mortal.”

“Maybe I could. But when I got back to the forest I found that there was another man ready for me. And I had to go. Murph was past.” Another shrug. “That's how it is.”

“If I called him here now, would you explain? Make it up to him?”

“For you, yes.”

Doyle stared at him for nearly a minute, then sighed. “I think he's over it now, anyway. Decided you were just an ordinary human nutter and he'd been letting his imagination run wild.”

“Good. He's a nice lad.”

“Yeah. Makes you wonder how he got mixed up with either of us.”

“Bad luck.”

“Mmm.”

Doyle turned his head fractionally on the pillow, and studied Bodie’s face, almost unblinkingly. Bodie carried on drinking his tea, obviously aware of the scrutiny, but returning it only occasionally. The bedroom in Doyle’s last flat had witnessed similar tableaux.

Finally, Bodie seemed to become bored or to sense a change: he met Doyle’s gaze, then suddenly pulled a clown’s exaggerated face, eyes unfocused. Doyle gave a short, resigned laugh, and then they were grinning at one another, and nodding slightly. They had been here before.

Doyle levered himself into a sitting position and reached for the mug. The tea was at just the right temperature. “Any malted milks?”

“There. Warn me if you’re going to dunk.”

“I’ve seen *you* do it.”

“Yeah, but you’re so bad at it. Lousy timing. You let it get too soft and break off and then you fish around for the bits, and I’m always the one who has to wash up. I’m very sensitive, you know. Not used to sights like that.”

“What? Like this?” Doyle held up the sagging biscuit, and they both watched as it tore itself slowly apart.

“Right,” said Bodie grimly, and he took a bourbon from the plate, broke it in two, and dropped both pieces in Doyle’s mug. “You’re going to drink that now.”

“Hah. Make me.”

“Nothing simpler,” and he rose to his knees and advanced on Doyle.

There was much swearing and giggling and spilling of tea, which ended abruptly when Bodie put the mug out of reach. He crouched over Doyle, breathing heavily, face intent. It was Doyle who lifted his arms and drew them together.

For several minutes the room was silent except for small, moist sounds, and sighs and grunts. Then:

“Are you going to let me fuck you again?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I will.”

After a long, deep kiss: “Well, what are you waiting for?”

“Not today. Not now. I want mine. Are you ready to give it to me?”

“Turn over.” Doyle searched noisily through the drawers of the bedside table and then returned to the centre of the bed. “Are these... bruises? On this side too.”

“Expect so. Can’t feel anything. Or nothing bad.”

“God, you’re open. Gaping. Swollen, too. Are you sure...?”

“Positive.”

“It looks sore.”

“It was, but I’ve had over two centuries to get over it. I won’t break.”

“The change?”

“The Changer. I’ll tell you later.”

“Tell me now.”

“Wouldn’t you rather fuck?”

Doyle’s eyes narrowed, though Bodie wouldn’t be able to see that. “How bad *is* it? ’s it going to put me off for life?”

“Hah.” Bodie shifted onto his back and looked up at Doyle. “You? Get you going, more like. But - No, I *do* have to tell you. It’s just -”

“Yes. You do.”

“OK. Now. But come here.” Doyle let himself be gathered into the circle of Bodie’s arm, and they lay side-by-side. “It’s just so strange. And I’ve never told anyone before. I don’t know where to start.”

“At the beginning. The house in Mayfair?”

“Yeah. Well. The man took me to a little changing-room. A powder-room really. For wigs. And told me to get undressed. I’d been expecting that, anyway. I thought it was a coven, you know. They’d all be standing around in robes and masks. Initiation. Couldn’t be worse than my first few months as an apprentice.

“Then he opened the other door for me. It was a large drawing-room. Harpsichord. Portraits. Candles around the walls. A fire, crackling. No one else there. The curtains were open and it was dark outside and I could see myself in the windows. I couldn’t hear any sounds from other rooms. I thought, *Maybe they haven’t arrived yet. Making me wait. It’s part of it.*

“Then the candles went out - I thought - and... I was in the forest. I walked, going towards the moon, I think, looking for... them, expecting a bonfire, chanting. You know. I was excited. Pleased. Because I’d come to the right place. I hadn’t been sure. But this was what I’d been looking for. It had to be.

“There was no warning. No sound. He had hold of my hips. Hard. Really hard. Like talons. But his hands were scalding hot. I looked for blisters afterwards. He smelt of pine resin, all around, as if it was boiling off him.

“I shouted. Screamed, maybe. Tried to turn my head so I could see him. But he was so quick. He rammed his hand in my mouth, opened it wide as it would go, took hold of my tongue. His hand was huge, and from the angle of his arm... well, I could just guess how big he was. It tasted of pine - bitter - and salt. Not... flesh. Too hard. And hot.

“Then with his other hand he opened me up behind and then he went into me. I wasn’t a virgin. No way. But... Oh, God. Not flesh, I swear. Rough. Not jagged but... like studs, worn-down studs. I can still remember now what it was like going in. Every second. And it was the hottest thing of all. The resin was slick, like oil, it was so hot.

“When he was all the way in he wrapped his arm around my chest like a clamp, and lifted me off the ground. A foot or more. I was making sounds like an animal. I could hear myself, but I couldn’t stop. And it *hurt*, but...” A ragged, gurgling inhalation. “... I’d never been so hard. I knew even if I didn’t come it was already better than...” He closed his eyes for the space of several breaths.

“He let me down onto my knees, and... then it really started. I forgot for a while who I was. Completely. As if I’d been born seconds ago and this was all I’d ever known. My life felt like... someone else’s dream when I started to remember again. Maybe that was when I changed. I don’t know. Or when he came. Or when I did.

“I don’t remember him pulling out. I remember feeling carpet under my face, and hours later - it seemed - thinking, *Drawing-room*. *Oh, yes*, and then the man was making me get to my feet. He was urgent. Scared? I don’t know. Maybe just worried about the carpet. He dragged me into the changing-room, shoved my clothes at me, and a few minutes later I was standing on the street.

“I could barely walk. Was out of my head. Got home somehow without being stopped. Fell into bed and passed out.

“When I woke up I thought... Well, it was obvious I’d been fucked halfway into next week, but I thought, *Opium*. *Tricks*. The coven, you know. But when I undressed I found an enormous, dark red-brown mark across my chest where he’d held me. Deep brick-red, as if I’d been baked. As if it had been burnt into me. It wouldn’t wash off. And when I looked in the mirror, the side of my face was the same, and inside my mouth, and all along my back.

“His come was white, though, and thick, almost like treacle. But it tasted of salt, and there was a sharp smell... Kelp, I think, but I couldn’t place it then. I thought most of it was still inside me. And I found that it scorched everything except me. My sheets had been burnt through in places. And my breeches and underclothes.

“It... cooled after a while, and the marks faded in a few days. I didn’t feel different except... still sore. But *knowing*, yes, that made a difference.”

After over a minute Doyle said, “Do you think he’s still there? In the forest?”

“I don’t know. I suppose so.”

A longer silence.

“When did you die? How long after?”

“Less than a year. I was knifed outside a pub. Stupid.”

“You knew what the change was? Where you’d go.”

“No. I thought it was the end. I’d carried on looking for... a promise, I suppose. A club to join. Got nowhere. I thought it was the end. It was like sailing off the edge of the earth. I was frightened, but not in the way I thought I would be, not angry, not thinking, *Give me more*. I felt I was meeting myself for the first time, with exactly enough time to say all that was needed.”

“And you... woke up in the forest?”

“Mmm. Thought it was hell. Not that it was torment - it suited me. But there was no way I’d make heaven. Thought I was there for eternity. Then... honey and ginger... and I was standing in Daniel’s bedroom in the middle of the night, stark naked, and my heart turning itself inside out just at the sight of him sleeping. I was more confused than he was. But I was lucky with him. Gradually, I realised. I learnt how to be... whatever I am.”

“Are there others?”

“I think so. The man in Mayfair - whatever he was, he wasn’t surprised.”

Doyle turned his head and gazed, unblinking, at the ceiling. Bodie lay quietly.

“Is it *very* dark in the forest?”

“There’s a full moon always. No clouds. Sometimes it’s very low in the sky. Very large.”

“Draw the curtains.” A whisper.

Without hesitation, Bodie obeyed. Then he stood by the window looking at Doyle, one eyebrow raised.

“Is it like this?”

“Yes. Sometimes.”

“Was it like this the first time?”

A quick survey of the room. “Darker.”

Doyle got up from the bed and shut the door. “Like this.”

“Yes.”

The tube of lubricant was lying near the middle of the bed, visible if you knew it was there. Doyle annointed himself quickly, looking at Bodie all the while.

“Do you know what I want? Can you guess?”

“Of course.”

“Show me how it was.”

Bodie turned and stood quite still, arms by his side. Doyle’s approach was not noiseless: the foot of the bed brushed his thigh, the floorboards flexed beneath his feet. But Doyle did not hear these things.

He remembered the position of the bruises, tried to match them, dug his fingers in. There was no scream, but a low, shocked cry. Delicious.

Suddenly he wanted that mouth. Understood exactly.

It was open for him. The tongue slid between his searching fingers. He wanted to hold it hard, but it was too wet and slick to be gripped, and he could feel the muscle working to stay with him, not to slip away. He relaxed, and it was easier for them both.

With the other entry there was no struggle at all. Too simple really. He'd wanted it to be memorable. But maybe it was. Bodie was the one trembling now, panting very rapidly, and grunting deep in his throat. It was touching to see him so helpless, or so willing to appear helpless. Doyle had forgotten what the next step was supposed to be - his own impulses had taken over.

He held his left hand very lightly to Bodie's throat, feeling it jump with each harsh sound, hearing the sounds become more desperate. Gentle strokes downward, maybe tickling, the skin soft and damp under his fingertips. Along the collar-bones, out to the shoulders, dipping into an armpit.

"Lift your arm." There, now he could reach properly. The left nipple, then the right, then back again. Then tracing along the ribs, barely touching.

Bodie's hips would buck once, twice, then stop abruptly as if at a command. Doyle enjoyed the rush from his deeply-buried cock, but he was enjoying the exploration more. He could wait, and so could Bodie.

When he slipped his hand between the slightly-parted thighs, he judged the position nicely, so that he stirred the hairs without touching the taut skin directly. Bodie's entire body jerked, and his tongue slid free. Doyle made no effort to recapture it; the point had been made.

Very, very slowly, he pulled his hips back, until just the head of his cock remained inside. Just as slowly, he pressed in again. Out. In. Again. Bodie groaned softly at each re-entry. Doyle knew that this was not what he had been expecting. It wasn't what Doyle had intended, either, when he'd spread the gel on himself and advanced on the other man. But how could he compete with the Changer? This was another way of taking possession of Bodie, a human way.

He came to rest, fully inserted. Bodie made a small, questioning noise, and his internal muscles grasped at Doyle. Pleading? Doyle gripped harder with both hands, pulling the big body back against him, as if saying, "I'm not going to move." Bodie fell still.

Suddenly Doyle released him completely and withdrew in a single swift movement.

"Don't turn around." Though there had been no sign that he would.

Doyle's right hand was running with saliva, the fingertips slightly wrinkled. He trailed it from his left nipple to the right, sighing at the sweet, wet shock, closing his eyes as he reached further down and took hold of his balls.

But soon he felt the need to see Bodie. Such a beautiful back. Wonderful strong legs. He ran the back of his hand along the top of the thighs, tracing the curve of the buttocks with a line of moisture. *Oh*. He wanted to be in there again. Soon. It would be soon.

“Do you want it hard? Do you want me to rape you? Like he did?”

“I want whatever you want.”

“Nice try. But that doesn’t work with me. *Show* me what you want.”

Instantly Bodie reached back and pulled his cheeks apart, displaying himself. Doyle felt a rush of heat just under his skin, from his balls to his forehead. But he kept his excitement out of his voice.

“And you want it hard?”

A short, high gasp, as if Bodie couldn’t get his voice to work. Three rapid breaths, then, “Yes.”

“Do you think I’ll give it to you?”

“I don’t know.” Distilled frustration.

“Get into position. Show me exactly what you want. Maybe it’ll persuade me.”

Maybe! Was there any man who could see Bodie stretched out on the floor, shoulders low, buttocks high, legs apart, and consider leaving his arse unused? Doyle ran his hands over his face, trying to pretend for a few seconds that he was such a man. It was no use. And there was nothing more he wanted to say.

* * * * *

Once again, Doyle was lying on a solid, damp body, echoes fading from his nerves and his ears. Noises like an animal. From both of them.

He knew that he could not let this man go. He could not send him back to the forest. So where did that leave them?

“Oh. Ray. No one’s ever... You give me everything I want. Everything.”

“Before you... It used to seem so simple. I *knew*.” Very quietly.

“Ray? Don’t sound so sad. Please. Don’t. Let me look at you.” Bodie was struggling to turn over. Doyle pulled out of him, shivering at the sucking sound, and knelt up, eyes on his hands.

Bodie lay on the carpet studying him, then rose easily to his knees beside him. “You know I didn’t come back to hurt you. I didn’t come to make you unhappy, either. You’ve tried to understand. You’ve given me some good memories. Thank you. It’s more than I expected. And now... take a tip from Murph, eh?”

“What are you talking about?” Doyle was looking at him, frowning.

“You don’t want it. You were right. I can see.”

“What d’you think I was just saying?”

“Dunno. Maybe you want it. But you don’t *want* to want it. Comes to the same thing. It wouldn’t work.”

“It doesn’t. Stop rushing off like an idiot. And stop trying to manipulate me. You’re rubbish at it. ’s insulting.”

A pout. “Thought I was doing OK.”

“Only ’cos I let you.”

“What’s wrong then? And don’t tell me sex always leaves you like this, because I know it doesn’t.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes it does. When it’s with someone I killed five months ago, who’s proof that nothing’s what I thought it was, who wants me to change into something I *should* hate. And when it’s so good it makes me think... it might be worth it. Maybe it happens to *you* every day, but I need a chance to get used to it, OK?”

A shy smile. “It was that good?”

“That was all you heard, wasn’t it?” said Doyle indulgently, unable to be angry or worried when there was that light of pleasure in Bodie’s eyes. “No. It was better than that.”

“I heard the rest. I do understand. C’n I’ve a kiss, then, to be getting on with?”

“While I get used to it? Alright, but you pay me back later, you hear.”

They knelt under the window, arms wrapped loosely around one another, tongues gliding and turning as if directed by the same mind. It had been like that after their very first time, which was now something that Doyle could bear to think about again.

Bodie was the one to pull back, a long time later.

“What d’you say to another bath?”

“Hello, bath.”

“Yes or no. Fool.”

“You complaining? ’bout my standards of hygiene?”

“Mmn. ’s a nice stink. My favourite. Was just thinking about getting dressed. Going out. Talking. ’n’ I need it more than you.”

“Yes, then. To the bath.”

* * * * *

They shared the tub, awkwardly but happily, washing one another, kissing frequently. Doyle wondered if they’d be able to soak in it together later, when they were in the mood, or if it was just too small. If not, he’d see about getting a shower - solitary bathing had just lost its appeal.

“Have you got a track-suit I can borrow?” They were in the bedroom.

“Second drawer down. Haven’t you got any clothes with you? D’you always come through like that?”

“Yeah. ’ve had some bad moments. I’ve got together a stash out Fulham way, but I didn’t have time to go there. Didn’t see the point this time.”

“How d’you get money?”

“Steal it. Same as everything else. I’ve never needed much, just enough to buy things for my man. Usually go back to the forest when he’s busy.”

“Is that what you’ll do tomorrow when I’m working?”

“Don’t know if I can. We need to sort something out.”

“You can’t stay here. The security system -”

“I know. I’ll rent something. You’ll give me a reference, won’t you? Need to get a job, too.”

Doyle started laughing, but stopped when he found he was on his own. “You’re serious, aren’t you? What’s wrong with the forest? Why get bogged down in all this... mortal stuff.”

“If I go back, I may not be able to find you again.”

“You know my address. Your sense of direction’s not *that* bad.”

“It’s not like that. If I go back, and there’s another man ready for me... I’d *have* to go to him. I know how it is.”

“So come to me when *he’s* busy.”

“I can’t. I’m not free to do what I want. I used to try. Going to a play. Taking a walk just to see how the city had changed. I can’t. Everything I do has to be for him. And when it was over with him, there might be another. I might never come back.”

“You’re saying you’d stay. For me.”

“Of course.”

“What if... I decided not to change. Would you stay here until I died as a mortal?”

“As long as you wanted me.”

“It could be years. I could want you for years, live for years.”

“I know.”

“I’d be crippling you. Like... cutting your wings off.”

“Nah. It’s what I want, Ray. To be with you, whatever way you’ll have me.”

“You don’t really know me. You’re making a mistake. You’ll hate me before this is over. We’ll hate each other.”

Bodie took hold of his upper arms, fingers just resting on the cotton, not pressing the skin at all. "You don't really believe that. Do you?"

Doyle opened his mouth, then shut it again some seconds later.

"I know you better than anyone *ever* has. Even you. It's true, isn't it? And you know *me* just the same way."

"Didn't know about the Changer, did I? Didn't know you'd bloody come back."

"Just facts. They're not important. You've never got it *really* wrong about me. Like today - did you try to get away from me? Even once?"

"Maybe I was terrified. Maybe I thought, 'What can I do to him? Killing him doesn't work.'"

"Maybe. I'll pretend to believe that if you want me to."

"This is a stupid argument." Doyle shrugged himself out of the loose grip.

"You're just saying that because I've won."

"Christ. I knew you'd say that."

"Aha!"

Doyle batted away the accusing finger. "Doesn't prove anything. I thought we were going out."

"Where'd you want to go?"

"It was *your* idea."

"Are you like this with Murph?"

"Most of the time."

"God, he's more of a saint than I'd thought."

"Battersea."

"Battersea?"

"Yeah. I want to see the peacocks. And the power station."

"And the pagoda."

"Not fussed about the pagoda."

Bodie was nodding his head in exaggerated resignation. "You know, I *may* end up hating you. But I won't be bored."

* * * * *

The peacocks were sulking, huddled at the far end of the enclosure, looking as drab as possible.

They watched for a few minutes, then wandered away.

“D’you fancy an ice-cream?”

“Mmm. Not today.”

“That’s a first.”

Bodie didn’t reply.

Without either leading the way, noticeably, they headed towards Battersea Bridge. From the other bank the park looked small, the pagoda a drop of gold in the middle. The sky was getting dark.

“It’s been a busy day,” said Doyle, looking west up the river. “I thought I’d be calling Murph. See if he wanted to come and watch the Western. Bring some beer.”

“You still can.”

“No.”

“I can go.”

“You just said you can’t.”

“I can walk to my stash from here. Find a hotel for a few weeks. You can call when you want to see me.”

Silence. Ahead of them, a couple left one of the raised benches that faced the park. Bodie climbed the steps and sat down, and Doyle joined him. Behind them the cars passed in a stream as the city filled again at the end of a weekend. More and more had their headlights on, and then it was all of them. The Western would have started.

“I love you, you know.” Doyle spoke without emphasis, without looking at the other man.

“I thought so.”

“I watched your autopsy.”

“What was it like?” Active curiosity, as if Doyle had been talking about the latest film.

“Disgusting.”

“Ah. So you hated my guts.”

No reaction.

“Sorry. Couldn’t resist it.”

“No. I’ll probably laugh tomorrow. Doesn’t it bother you that I’ve seen... everything?”

“No. Would you -”

“I didn’t have to watch, you know. Murph didn’t.”

“D’you wish you hadn’t?”

Doyle took a long time answering. “I can’t imagine it any different. Not even if it happened again now. I wouldn’t be able to look away. I wouldn’t want... someone else to see, and not *me*.”

“Good. That’s what I hoped you’d say.”

“I made a hell of a mess of your chest.”

“Yeah. Wish I had some scars to show for it. I’d love to see you touch them.” His voice grew very deep. The two men shifted restlessly on the bench without looking at one another, and Doyle uncrossed his legs, and re-crossed them the other way round.

“You always go back to the time when you changed?”

“Yeah. And start aging. Living. I’ve never got much beyond thirty.”

“But you will if you stay with me.”

“Yeah. Find out whether I go bald or not. When I start going grey. Always wanted to know.”

“I don’t think you know what you’re suggesting. You’ve been in the forest too long. You’ll get so bored. Going to Tesco’s. Getting to work on time. And how often will we get to see each other?”

“But that’s *your* life. It’s Murph’s. And you do OK, don’t you? Why shouldn’t I?”

“It’s not right. You don’t belong. It would be like -” Vividly, he saw the peacocks behind the chain-link fence; imagined the feathers fading to grey, the bodies shrinking until they looked like nothing more than tattered pigeons.

“So you want me to go.”

“No. *No*.”

“You want me to stay, then.”

“Stop it, Bodie. Please.”

* * * * *

The day had been warm, but the night was turning cold, a reminder that they were a long way yet from summer. Doyle welcomed the chill - it made him feel more alert, less dazed. There seemed to be light all around, from Albert Bridge, from the streetlamps, from the tall, ornate buildings behind them. A couple walked by, glanced up at them. He thought he saw curiosity in the woman’s face.

He hadn’t looked at Bodie since sitting down. Maybe Bodie was staring at him. He didn’t know. Probably he was just staring out over the river. Still and calm. Like his forest. Doyle had never met anyone else who would leave him alone when he needed to be left alone.

His left hand found Bodie's right without any fumbling, laced their finger together, then came to rest on the rough wood of the bench, in the gap between their thighs. Bodie's palm seemed rough, too, but warm.

Holding hands on a public bench. That was for teenagers. For those who hadn't gone any further. Not for two men who'd... *gone about as far as you could go*. He swallowed jerkily as parts of him remembered parts of the afternoon. But you couldn't do that every time you needed to touch. Holding hands. Maybe it wasn't pathetic, after all.

He didn't want Bodie to leave, not even to book into a hotel for the night. The idea of seeing him walk around the corner, out of sight... *He'll never come back. Something will happen, and he'll never come back*. Doyle had never before felt that sense of impending loss.

Only human. He now knew the full meaning of that expression, knew that what he had would not be enough. There were other claims on Bodie, and they would draw him back sooner or later. Doyle knew it, even if Bodie didn't yet.

"Don't stay in a hotel tonight."

"What time d'you want me to leave tomorrow? Is Murph picking you up?"

"Yeah, but... You *could* stay in the flat, as long as you don't open any windows. Or open the door. Or make the wrong sort of noise."

"Quack, quack. Oink, oink."

Doyle laughed. Bodie had this way of making the world seem simpler, even when he was the one causing most of the complications. "I mean they only monitor for unauthorized entry, or sounds of violence."

"What about sex?"

"No. They said. Why? What're you planning while I'm out?"

"Was thinking about this afternoon."

"Don't. It's bad for your heart."

"What a way to go, though."

"You're the connoisseur." Smiling, Doyle turned, and saw a matching smile.

Bodie lifted their joined hands, and pressed his lips to Doyle's knuckles. "Did I tell you today that I love you?"

"Not in so many words."

"I love you."

Doyle turned further and drew Bodie's head down. It was a brief kiss; another couple was approaching the bench. They were too silent and oblivious as they passed by, and Doyle knew that they had seen, and he didn't care.

"Have you really not eaten in months?"

“Depends how you look at it. My body thinks it had rabbit pie... um... ten hours ago.”

“But your mind is starving.”

“Yeah.”

“What d’you fancy?”

“Pasta? If we head towards Fulham Road we’ll find somewhere open. Or did you want to go home?”

“No, let’s eat around here.”

* * * * *

They ended up in an American restaurant opposite the cinema in Fulham Road, where they were probably the only customers who weren’t students. It promised unlimited pasta, and Bodie proceeded to test the establishment’s generosity to the limit. Doyle had tacos, which were tasty but kept on sliding out of their shells on their way to his mouth.

It wasn’t until the dessert that they really started to talk again, beyond trivia.

Doyle had been housed in Chelsea only briefly, three years ago. “But I can see the differences. This place, for instance. And that off-license is new.”

“Is it? I lose track. This area doesn’t change much, though. You’d be surprised. Not like Covent Garden. Christ, people *want* to live there now. Time was you made your will out before stepping into Long Acre. It was like Beirut with gin shops.”

“You saw the Industrial Revolution,” said Doyle wonderingly. “You knew London *before* there was a tube.”

Bodie assumed a yokel accent, and gestured in the general direction of the door. “I can remember when all this was fields.”

“Doesn’t it get lonely, being the only one who does remember? Don’t you get fed up with us, talking about a shop here, and a house there, when you know what *real* change is like?”

Bodie shrugged. “No lonelier than anything else. And *I* don’t miss the big things either, just the small things - places I went to with my men. Because they’re what’s *real* to me. If you want history lessons, forget it. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Will you tell me stories, though? Show me Ma Jackson’s, things like that.”

“Course. I might make some of it up, though, when I feel like it.”

“You would. And the house in Mayfair. Will you show me that? Is it still there?”

Bodie put down his spoon and concentrated on Doyle’s face. “It’s still there.”

“Is *he* still there?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been in since that time.”

“Can you find out?”

“I think so. The people in the house, they might not know, but I think I could tell.”

“And if he isn’t?”

“We look for... covens, things like that. Like I did last time. There’ll be clues. I don’t think it’ll take long.”

“You’re assuming I want to change.”

“Yes. I am.”

“How do you know we’ll meet afterwards? We might be in different forests, going after different men. It might be worse than it is now.”

Bodie looked surprised. “No. It wouldn’t - It’ll work out.”

“How? You say there are others, but you’ve never met one, in *or* out of the forest. It might... not be allowed, like you’re not allowed to wander off sightseeing.”

“I think it’s encouraged. Or I wouldn’t be here with you now. *This* would be sightseeing now you’re past the edge. I’m being given a chance to make this work. And... I’ve been looking for you for so long. I think it’s part of what I am -” He dropped his voice, and leaned closer to Doyle. “- needing a lover of my own kind. Needing *you*. No, I don’t know what the rules will be for us, but I didn’t know what they’d be when I started all of this, and I don’t regret a second of it.”

“You’re just convinced you’ll get what you want.”

“Well, why not?”

“Are you gonna eat that, or just sit there and watch it melt?”

They ordered coffee, and Doyle persuaded Bodie to have a Drambuie (not a difficult task). He liked watching him get more and more relaxed, not drunk by any means, but noticeably easy to deal with. It made him feel like a good host, and he *was* paying.

“I’ll do it,” he said while the waitress was pouring them a second cup. “I’ll change.” She probably assumed they were a couple recovering from an argument, talking about doing the dishes or something similar.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Anything else is... Well, it wouldn’t work. And you’re right, we’re not that different. If it suits you, *I* can deal with it.”

Bodie shut his eyes briefly and leaned back in his chair. Then he smiled at Doyle, saying nothing, not needing to. Doyle nodded in agreement, and smiled back. The waitress left them.

“Have another.” Doyle tapped a fingernail against the Drambuie glass. “Celebrate.”

“Not on my own. No, I *know* you’re driving. Wait till we get home, I meant.”

“Let’s do it soon. There’s no point in waiting, is there?”

“No. I’ll go to Mayfair tomorrow.”

“How long d’you think it’ll be afterwards? A year, like you?”

A shrug. “Could be anything. You’re nowhere near now. But... we don’t just have to sit back and wait, you know. I can do it for you.”

“Of course.” Doyle gazed across at the opposite wall, not seeing the large paper butterfly. “If we take the effort we could really confuse them. A classic locked-room mystery. They’ll write books about it.”

“You’ll have to plan it, then. I’d miss something obvious.”

Doyle gestured for the bill. “D’you think we should tell Murph?”

“Tell him what?”

“Dunno. Not to worry about me. Not to get upset. We’ve put him through a lot, you know, between the two of us.”

“Well. If you think it’s worth it. If you can think of a way of telling him. He probably won’t believe you.”

Now that Doyle tried to imagine the conversation, he wondered if Murphy’s peace of mind was really that important, or that fragile. Murph was a member of CI5. He could take care of himself.

Doyle got his credit card back, Bodie scooped up the rest of the mints, and they made their way to Battersea and Doyle’s car.

* * * * *

“This afternoon was very special,” said Doyle, laying his hand on Bodie’s stomach. “The sex was. In here.”

“Thanks to you.”

Doyle shook his head, but carried on. “We started arguing too soon afterwards. Something like that deserves more time to itself. I wanted to tell you that... I didn’t know you could be like that. That anyone could. I felt... strong as steel, and... melting, all at once. I’ll never forget it.”

“Next time we won’t argue.”

“No.”

They made love, although it did not count as the “next time”. It was gentle, face-to-face, unspectacular, laden with kisses and sighs.

“Yes. That was the sort of celebration I had in mind.”

“Mmm. Who needs Drambuie? Bodie? Stay here tomorrow when I’m working. Don’t go to Mayfair. We’ll look together, in the evening.”

“You want to keep me locked up, eh?” Bodie was joking, obviously didn’t believe Doyle’s nod.

“Do you mind?”

“No. I’ll be OK. Catch up on the news. Might even do some housework.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it. The fridge’s full. I should be back around six.”

“There’s a pub in Mayfair does turkey soup. Or used to.”

“We’ll start there, then.”

* * * * *

“Called you last night,” said Murphy. “Thought you might want to come round and watch that spaghetti western.”

“Was it any good?”

“OK. Not as good as last week’s.”

“I went out for a walk. Lost track of the time.”

The idea of telling Murphy now seemed ludicrous. Pointless too. He realised how very different Murphy was from himself and Bodie. Murph was a mortal, through and through. There were so many mortals, all so oblivious. How could Bodie *not* have felt lonely, through two centuries? For Doyle it was only the first day, and he spent every second longing to be home, with his own kind.

Bodie was not in the living room when Doyle let himself in, and the flat was in silence. After a moment’s panic he went searching, and found him immediately in the bedroom, reading a horror novel that Doyle would have denied owning, and drinking tea.

“I thought Murph might come up with you. Better keep out of sight.”

Doyle had bought him some clothes: trousers, a shirt, a short jacket. Bodie dressed while Doyle watched, and did not mention the wardrobe that he kept in Fulham.

“Damn.” Muttered, but sincere. “I want you *out* of those now.”

“Patience. We’ve got some turkey soup to eat.”

“Drink. Well, let’s go, then.”

* * * * *

The pub was very quiet, very civilised. They sat alone at the long bar and made their soup last.

“Are you frightened?”

“What of?”

“Him.”

“Just enough to make it interesting.”

Bodie nodded, but said nothing. He didn't need to.

“You'd better take the keys.” He handed them over. “Drive us home afterwards. I guess I won't be up to it.”

* * * * *

The house was still there. Lights were on in the basement and on the ground floor.

“How d'we get in?”

“Through the front door? You've got your I.D. with you, haven't you?”

“Yeah, but this lot, they're likely to *know* Cowley. They won't just let us in. They'll 'phone all around first.”

“I know. We're cousins. Our grandmother used to be in service here. She's dead now but she used to tell us stories about the house. Would they let us see some of the things she talked about? The place that used to be a powder-room? The drawing room? Just for a minute.”

Doyle looked at him, serious, assessing. “OK. It's got a better chance than anything *I* can think of.”

It worked. The Spanish housekeeper took less than a minute to make up her mind about them. Bodie was overflowing with details: names, dates, chores, treats. Doyle confided that they were thinking of writing a family history.

“It hasn't changed. Ray -” His voice was urgent. “- it hasn't changed.” Then he smiled at the woman, and gestured around the drawing room. “It's just how she described it. The yellow carpet. And the blue curtains with the fringes.”

“They say the room has looked like this for over two hundred years. Since the house was first built. Each time they re-decorated - New things only, not different. Your grandmother did not tell you?”

The two men looked at one another. Bodie said, “No. No, she didn't. Maybe they never re-decorated while she was here. Is the house still with the same family?”

She shook her head. “No family now. A Japanese company. Maybe this will all change soon. Your grandmother would be sad, I think.”

“I think so.”

They left soon after, with an invitation to return during the day when she was less busy, to see more, and have tea.

“Well?”

“No. I thought at first - But no.”

“Maybe it was the family. Not the house.”

“Could be.”

They walked back to Doyle’s car in silence.

* * * * *

“I got all keyed up.” Doyle was frowning fiercely as he lay in one corner of the sofa, beer-can held against his stomach. “What a waste.”

“Make it up to you? Needn’t waste it *all*.” Bodie knelt in front of the sofa, and curled one hand around the underside of Doyle’s thigh.

Doyle lifted the hand away. “It’s gone the other way. Wouldn’t work. Just give me time. Put a record on or something.”

Bodie put a record on, or rather put the needle back on the Haydn horn concerto that had been there since Sunday morning.

“Will you let me go out tomorrow? To find out about the family. The libraries won’t be open in the evenings.”

Doyle looked at him, frowning again. Which was worse? The sense of loss, or the waiting? “D’you know where to look?”

“More or less. I can get a book on it anyway.”

“I’ll give you some money.”

* * * * *

“How big is he? His cock?” A whisper across the pillow.

“Big. I didn’t see, just feel, so I can’t - But bigger than any of my men. Much bigger.”

“You’re the only man I’ve had.” Well, it was nearly true. “Compared with you I’m practically a virgin.”

“You’ll be alright. I’m sure.”

“I want to be prepared.”

“We’ll take K-Y with us. You’ll be ready. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not. I’m not having second thoughts. But I know I must be tighter than you were. I want you to prepare me. Open me up ready for him.”

“Now?”

“Now. Tomorrow morning. Tomorrow evening. Whenever there’s a chance.”

“Oh.” Bodie was breathing heavily. “With you there’s *always* a chance. You won’t have your arse to yourself.”

“That’s the idea. Time to start.”

* * * * *

They’d exhausted themselves, found energy enough to kiss though not to speak, and then fallen asleep.

Doyle’s bladder woke him up some hours later. He lay enjoying the sound of Bodie’s breathing, trying to convince himself that he wouldn’t have to get up. He was very sticky. *Bath tomorrow. Or Murph won’t let me in the car.*

It was no good. He slid out of the bed very carefully. Bodie didn’t stir. Avoid the squeaky floorboard by the door. There. Into the bathroom.

He shut the door to reduce the noise, but didn’t put on the light; he could see well enough without it, and he knew how the sudden brightness would hurt his eyes.

Bladder emptied, he spent some moments swabbing at his stomach and between his buttocks, then just stood, eyes closed, face raised towards the window, hands drifting over his satisfied body.

When he opened his eyes again, it took several seconds for him to realise that he was no longer looking at the moon through glass.

The bathroom had gone. There were trees all around, as far as he could see. It was exactly as Bodie had described it. His mind fought briefly, insisting that the ground ahead was really empty air above a London street.

Then he started walking towards the moon.

There was no wind. The smell of pine-needles was no stronger than the scent that still lingered in Bodie’s hair. He knew there would be no warning, so did not bother to tense himself.

A cry, ahead of him. An owl?

He carried on walking.

No, not an owl. There were still sounds, but it was no bird. Grunting, and snarling. Foxes fighting? Wolves, even. He did not imagine he would find out; Bodie heard these sounds but never saw anything.

As he got closer, he could make out something else, that wasn’t produced by any throat. A piston. That was all he could think of. A regular pumping. And then he realised that the strangled cries had a rhythm too, and then it was obvious, and he was instantly erect.

He *was* in Bodie’s forest. Two hundred years ago. This time his mind made no protest at all.

It didn’t occur to him to move the last few yards, past the screen of trees. He understood, without the need for proof, that it would not be possible. His part was to wait, as Bodie had waited for him.

The pumping stopped, and then he heard Bodie's voice, freed now, moaning softly, with no note of complaint. Something heavy fell to the earth.

There was silence.

Doyle kept his head facing straight forward. Would there be a time for recovery? Or was that only for flesh? He was ready. For anything.

Something was moving through the trees. To his right at first, and then circling behind him. And he understood that there *would* be a warning, that it would not be the same for him, because he already knew.

The pine resin, though, that was the same. And the heat, reaching him many seconds before the footsteps did.

He opened his mouth wide, tilted his hips back. The hands gripped him, hard and hot as Bodie had said. He could feel the stickiness, imagined the marks the heat was leaving on him, and he was gasping, heart racing, opening his mouth until his jaws ached.

But his mouth was left empty. Instead, the thumbs dug in, parting him, and something huge, that was not flesh, began to push in. He knew he was feeling exactly what Bodie had felt. More than that, the slickness which made the entry possible was Bodie's juices. Maybe there was the hot resin, but for him it was all Bodie: this... cock had been gentled and anointed inside Bodie's arse, and his own arse was still wet with Bodie's come.

Love and pain and excitement swelled his heart and his cock, the emotions so strong he felt almost sick, crammed to capacity.

When the inward pressure stopped, he gave a soft sigh, his first sound since it had started. With a human, with Bodie, he would have felt the tickle of pubic hair, drops of sweat running cool down his legs, a heartbeat. But there was just scalding, clinging roughness, tugging at his hair, covering his back and his thighs.

The hands and the cock were lifting him off the ground. Two feet, he guessed, looking down, imagining the size of the creature behind him, imagining the sight of himself impaled on it. The angle of the unyielding cock thrust his torso forward, and his back separated from the resin-covered surface with a slow sucking sound. He felt like a figurehead on a sailing ship, leaning into the salt spray, his hips and legs encased.

As the thought formed, the creature took a step forward, then another, and they started to move through the trees. The pace was steady and deliberate, and the forest seemed to clear a path for them, with no obstacles to cause a change in speed or direction.

With each step, the cock shifted inside him to left or right, and his body rose and fell under its own weight. The movements were continuous, too slight to bring him to orgasm, impossible to ignore. His breathing took on the rhythm of their travel.

The forest went by on either side, endless but not uniform. In some places the trees grew so thickly, they were just a bank of darkness. In others there were wide clearings, large enough to let the moonlight reach the bracken on the forest floor. As they were crossing

such a clearing, he looked down and saw the moisture on the tip of his cock gleaming like silver.

There were young trees, barely reaching his knees, and jagged stumps, with all the branches broken off. Once he thought he saw an owl perched on the top of a stump, but it was far away, and he couldn't be sure.

After a long time he stopped looking, just set his face to the front, and let himself be carried. Was he here to see and think, or just to feel? His mind was almost dozing, his body was fully awake. Where the trees were densely packed, cold branches brushed against him, and he felt each caress for minutes afterwards.

* * * * *

There was a sound of running water. He raised his head. They were in a clearing, and the moon was high above and to the left. Ahead was a wall of trees - a hill so steep it was nearly a cliff - and racing down it was a narrow stream that sometimes leapt away from the earth and jumped sparkling through the air.

At the foot of the cliff they came to rest. An ice-cold spray dusted Doyle's stomach and groin. He looked up, trying to see the top of the cliff. Were they going to climb?

"Ah!"

His cry echoed back to him. A velvet warmth had nudged his foot. A deer was standing in front of them, sniffing at him, nuzzling the inside of his calves, licking him. And behind it another, stepping delicately over the stream towards him. Had they seen a man before? Or was this *all* they'd seen of men, naked creatures whose feet did not touch the ground, who smelt of musk and sweat?

Soon they left him, and bent their heads to the pure water. He watched their swift movements, listened to the lapping sounds. They did not run off as the footsteps approached them. The stream descended the last six feet as a waterfall, and Doyle was brought to face it, then lowered until his soles touched damp moss. His mouth was open ready, and he drank deeply, feeling the liquid chill his gullet, imagining it meeting the furnace lower in his guts.

The water poured over his cock, soaked his pubic hair, trickled back between his buttocks. It never occurred to him that his erection might shrink from this, so he felt no surprise when the excitement only increased. But he wouldn't come yet, he knew, this was just the beginning.

When they started to move again, they did not climb, but turned back, away from the cliff and the deer. Soon they were deep in the forest again, and Doyle's eyes were half-closed, his head nodding gently with each step.

He didn't know if this would end with the violent coupling that Bodie had enjoyed. Maybe neither would come, not here. Maybe he would be taken back to where they had started, and lifted off, and sent back to Bodie empty, with only the markings to show that it had happened. It didn't matter. He was sure of that. He had already changed. This was his home now. It must be or the deer would have fled from him as an intruder. Maybe you

could even say that they had welcomed him, that that was why he had been taken there. He wanted to come back soon, to find the waterfall again, show it to Bodie, drink with him.

The next time they stopped they were on the shore of a great lake, inside a bowl of trees. On the other side of the lake Doyle saw a castle, enormous, sprawling. He opened his eyes wide, looking for signs of life, but it was derelict, large sections of the roof and walls missing. There was a quick splash near his feet, and he looked, but could see nothing, not even ripples, and when he raised his head again to the castle, he saw fine plumes of smoke rising from the building, from rows of chimneys, from empty air. Over the still water came the faint smell of woodsmoke. For a long, long time he watched the plumes rise and disperse, and then he was carried away again, into the forest.

* * * * *

He had not been aware that they were climbing, but they must have been, for hours maybe. He had been drifting, seeing only trees, and then a gust of wind stirred his hair against his cheek, and he raised his head, and saw that they were in a high place, among bare rocks, and far below was the forest spread out like a carpet, without end.

Haze clung to it in small patches, miles apart. Castles? Ghost villages, maybe?

An eagle flew over his head, circled with a flurry of wings, and landed on an outcropping of rock just ahead of them. It looked at him briefly, then turned back to survey the forest.

Doyle found himself set down on the same rock. It was hard under his feet, but warm with lichen. He looked straight forward, seeing what the eagle saw.

The cock started to draw out, and he sighed, regretfully. It was a slow withdrawal, slower even than the insertion had been, although there was no need - the pain was just a faint echo. When just the sharply-defined head was left in, it suddenly occurred to him that he might never ride the Changer's cock again. Never. He pressed back with his hips, regaining about an inch of it. But that inch was pulled out again, and now the hands held him so firmly that he couldn't move.

He groaned, pleading, expecting to be denied.

There was a harsh cry as the eagle launched itself from the rock and sailed out over the forest. For a long time it was a point of lightness against the dark, and then it was gone. Doyle groaned again, feeling homesick for a place he had not yet left, feeling his banishment settling around him.

Then the cock powered into him, and he threw his head back, shouting his joy to the moon. When he stilled he could feel an intense, surging heat deep inside him, and he knew that the Changer was filling him with semen. A gift. To take back to Bodie.

He took a deep breath, about to offer his thanks, but the hands shifted their grip and pushed him up and forward with a force that should have snapped his spine, and he was in the air, following the path of the eagle. There was no fear, even when gravity started pulling him down, and he could no longer see the moon or the horizon, just the dark carpet with its complex, subtle pattern. He kept his eyes wide open, fascinated by the details as it came closer and closer, rising up to envelop him in blackness spotted with moonlight.

* * * * *

A cool, hard surface was pressing on his erection, and forcing his face to the side so that his neck ached. When the ache got too bad to ignore, he located his arms and pushed his torso away from the surface.

Eventually he opened his eyes. A polished wooden floor. The bathroom. *Oh, yes.*

He struggled to his feet with the aid of the bath, then transferred his weight to the nearest wall, and slowly made for the door. *How did Bodie manage? Out on the street. No choice, I suppose. But still...*

The doorhandle felt strange against his palm. An alien, man-made shape. The door to the bedroom was open, Bodie fast asleep in the same sprawl as when Doyle had last seen him.

I won't wake him up. Tell him tomorrow. He'll be so pleased.

But he was too clumsy in his exhaustion to slide quietly between the sheets. He fell against the foot of the bed when he left the support of the wall, and heard Bodie grunt in complaint and then in interrogation.

"Mmm. Ray?"

"s OK, love. Go back to sleep."

Bodie drew a deep breath, eyes scrunched closed, nose twitching. A lungful of pine-resin, and he was wide awake, sitting up, and then moving over the bed towards Doyle. Doyle fell backwards into his arms.

"Where have you *been*?"

"Just to the loo." Doyle's voice was barely audible. "I got up to take a slash and... it happened. I thought I'd been away for days."

"Days?" Bodie swallowed. "What did he do to you?"

"Took me sightseeing. Parts of the forest I... don't think you've ever seen. A castle. Smoke. An eagle. Deer, even, by a waterfall. It's beautiful. Strange. Want to show you."

"Didn't he fuck you?" Anxious.

"Why'd you think I can hardly walk?" Mild, a simple reply. "He carried me everywhere on his cock." A deep sigh. "It was wonderful."

Bodie gave a long groan that was filled with envy. But: "Are you sure you're changed? D'you think he'll let us be together?"

"Oh, God, yes. When I arrived he was - I heard him fucking you. Changing you. Christ, you were wild. You were - I've never -" He struggled to control his breathing. "He went into me just seconds after he finished with you. I think you're right. It's encouraged. It's what's *supposed* to happen. And showing me all those things... I think he was saying, *This is yours. This is for the two of you.* I feel... I'm yours."

“I want to come. Now.” Tight and urgent.

“Yes. Yes. Help me into position. Oh, that’s so good, you’re so good to me. Use your hand on me. *Yes*. Oh, love. Oh, Bodie. Oh.”

Doyle was already half asleep when Bodie eased them onto their sides and reached back for the corner of the duvet, covering them as well as he could. And Bodie was deeply asleep himself when his cock was finally pushed from Doyle’s body.

* * * * *

It was Bodie who reached out to turn off the alarm clock. They had just under an hour before Murphy would arrive to collect Doyle for work. They lay in bed, entangled, rubbing their faces together.

“Will you kill me this evening?”

“If you want. What about the perfect murder? Have you planned it already?”

“I can’t be bothered with that anymore. I just want to go home. Let’s go home. How will you do it?”

“I thought I’d knife you. It’s quiet. Won’t set off the alarm.”

“Yes. I’d like that. Can you make it the same as *your* first time?”

“I could but - It hurts. Takes a while. I can make it quicker if you like. Instant.”

“Hnn. Doesn’t sound like you. I thought this was what you’d been waiting for. Thought you’d want to watch. Savour it.”

“I do but it can wait. Till you get used to it.”

“I’m not frightened, Bodie. I know what can happen - I’ve seen it often enough. But you’ve told me how sweet it can be... and I saw that too, on your face, when *I* was watching. I don’t want to miss that. I’m ready.”

“This evening, then. D’you want to take some clothes, leave them with my stash? Get some cash, too. They’ll close your bank account when you’re dead. Bloody inconsiderate.”

“Will you pack for me today? You know my favourites. I’ll go to the bank.”

* * * * *

Later, in the bathroom, there was a change of plan.

“God, Ray, it *must* have been days. You’re stained almost black.”

Doyle twisted his head over his shoulder, but could see very little except the clear marks of fingers on his hips. Bodie was kneeling behind him, stroking his buttocks.

“I think it’s inside you too. *Right* inside you. It *is* kelp, that smell. I knew it.” His voice was as deep as Doyle had ever heard it, full of awe. He crushed his face into the cleft, licking ravenously.

“Oh, Ray. Each minute I love you more and more. It’s way past the point where it hurts. Do you think... we’ll come back this time? I don’t think I could love another man. I don’t think I could bear to leave you.”

Doyle’s eyes were closed, his head thrown back. “Maybe we won’t. Maybe it’s all changed.”

Bodie bathed Doyle with great care, sponging every inch of him, washing his hair. When Doyle was being dried, he said, “You know, it’s less than two days since -”

“I know.”

“I feel I’ve lived all the rest of my life in those two days. Devoured it. And this really is the end coming up, exactly where it’s supposed to be.”

“I can do it now.”

“No. Let’s take our time. And maybe... we should wait until the marks fade. They’d look... too strange. Cause questions. Maybe it doesn’t matter to us, but... Be good to have time to empty my savings account, too. And I *do* want to talk to Murph.”

“Thought you’d decided not to.”

“I hadn’t changed then. It was all... far away. Now I can imagine... what I’ll look like when he finds me. Losing a partner... I’ve seen what happens on the squad. He’ll be treated like a leper. Even though it isn’t his fault. No one’ll dare to get close to him. If he’s feeling guilty too... And with everything that’s happened to him since he met you...”

“What’ll you tell him?”

“Dunno. I’ll think about it today. Invite myself back for a drink if I come up with anything. It won’t take long. I should be back by seven.”

* * * * *

The partners were in their cubbyhole of an office, catching up on paperwork, when Doyle, who had been very quiet for most of the day, cleared his throat and said, “What’re you doing this evening? Straight after work?”

“Nothing planned.”

“Fancy a quick drink? A pint or two.”

“Yeah, why not?”

They stuck their heads in the door of Murphy’s local, but Doyle hung back as Murphy started for the bar.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s not usually this noisy, is it? I fancied a *quiet* drink.”

To Murphy it seemed the usual Tuesday evening crowd, but he shrugged and said, “Well, there’s always my place. ’n’ I stocked up at the weekend.”

For the first can they talked about work. Doyle fetched the second pair, and as soon as he'd sat down again, he said, "Murph..." with a rising intonation that signalled that something very serious was to follow.

Murphy paused with his nail just under the ring-pull, eyebrows raised.

"Murph. I've got a premonition. About death. Mine."

"Be surprising if you didn't, in our job."

"I know. I've had them before. But not like this. It's like reading a history book. I think it's going to be very soon."

Murphy was shaking his head. "It's just... all that happened. *You* know. Catching up with you."

"Bodie? Maybe."

"D'you still think you see him? In the street?"

"Yes. I do. But it doesn't frighten me any more. That's what I wanted to tell you, talk to you about.

"If it happens... *If*... I'm ready. It won't be a tragedy. I'm not being 'cut down in my prime'. I'll be moving on. I believe that. Not to heaven or hell. But somewhere. Somewhere that's right for me.

"So... if it happens, I don't want you to be upset. Miss me, yeah. But on your own account, not mine. Don't let it spoil the job for you. Wherever I am, I won't be blaming you."

Murphy said nothing for several minutes. Then, "I'd no idea you were working this sort of stuff out. I thought you were an atheist."

Doyle shrugged. "I don't know what I am. I don't think there's a name for it. I just wanted to tell you. We've never talked about it. Maybe all partners should. A regular thing. And don't worry about work. It won't stop me covering your back. I've not had any premonition about *you*."

"Well. Thanks, Ray. But I hope you're wrong."

"We'll see." A brief pause. "So what do you believe, then? Heaven and Hell? Reincarnation?"

"Nothing. We're animals hurtling through cold space on a lump of rock. We're a chemical reaction that doesn't want to stop. There's nothing to save us or damn us except in our own minds, our *own* judgement. That's what I believe."

Doyle looked startled, then: "What about love?" He was frowning.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Is that just another chemical reaction? Doesn't it make you feel that you've made contact with something... bigger?"

Murphy just looked at him, but Doyle was sure what he was thinking.

“He *did* love you, Murph. He told me. Don’t think anything different. He said, ‘I will always love him. It never fades.’ Don’t... doubt what you felt for him.”

Murphy got to his feet abruptly, and took two paces away from Doyle.

“Please leave, Ray.” His voice was not quite steady.

“Murph? I didn’t mean -”

“Go. Go away.”

Doyle stood up, put his can on the coffee table, and made for the door. As he passed his partner, he rested a hand briefly on his shoulder. Murphy turned further away, determined to hide his face.

“I’m sorry, Murph. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

When the door closed, Murphy leaned his face against it, cushioned by one upraised arm. Slowly, he regained control. He had times like this, one or two a year, when the news of Ray Doyle’s death would not be a calamity.

* * * * *

On Thursday evening they made a final trip to Fulham. Bodie paused at the door of the car as they were about to drive back.

“A meal?”

Doyle screwed his face up in puzzlement. “Why? I’ve been waiting for this all week. Why put it off by another hour or more?”

“I thought you might want to say goodbye to somewhere. We might not come back.”

“No. You, though?”

“No. I’ve said goodbye before.”

* * * * *

They took a bath, then in the bedroom Doyle said, “What should I wear? What would you like?”

“Something light.”

That doesn’t hide the blood? Doyle held up a sand-coloured cotton jumper. “This? And jeans?”

“Yes. Please.”

“You wouldn’t prefer me naked?”

“I...” Bodie dragged his hand back through his hair, eyes closing briefly. “It would be too much for me. Too much at once. I might spoil it.”

“Next time.”

“Yes, next time.”

They dressed. Doyle freed one of his knives - a switchblade - from its taping inside the bedside table, then led the way to the sitting room.

“How were you, your first time? Lying down? Sitting up?”

“Flat on my back.”

Doyle moved the coffee table well out of the way, then lay down. The tall windows were to his right, letting in dim light from other buildings. Bodie knelt between him and the windows.

“What will happen to *you*? When it’s over?”

“Oh. I’ll just... get taken back. Almost straight away.”

“Disappear?” He snapped his fingers. “Just like that?”

“I think so. No one’s ever seen me go - that I know of. But it feels like that.”

He took the knife from Doyle’s hand, fingertips grazing the palm, and laid it on the carpet, out of sight. Doyle raised his head, but Bodie’s left hand settled around his mouth, pushing him back.

“In case you cry out. The alarms. The neighbours. It shouldn’t last long. Just at first.”

Doyle nodded, wide-eyed but not frightened, and tried to relax. He wanted to be clear-headed, so that no second would be lost in a haze of panic. He hoped the pain would not spoil it for either of them.

A finger stroked along his ribs on his right side, pulling at the cotton. He closed his eyes briefly, feeling the line clear and fine on his skin.

Soon. Soon it would be even better.

When he opened his eyes, he found Bodie was smiling at him, and he knew that Bodie felt the movement of his mouth as he smiled back. He wanted to kiss him, would tell him once it had begun.

Without looking away, Bodie picked up the knife. Still Doyle couldn’t see it. Suddenly the gentle weight on his mouth became a clamp, and his head tilted back so that he could see nothing except the ceiling and the top of the curtains.

The air gasped as the blade was released, springing out faster than seemed possible, as it always did.

The sound thrilled Doyle. He had always loved switchblades - they were so exciting, so cunning. This was all exactly right.

A gun was fine, but it didn’t have this beauty, this purity. *Shouldn’t have used one so often. Shouldn’t have forgotten this. Could have made it so much better for Bodie. If I’d known.*

He lifted his right hand, brought it to rest around a broad, warm curve. Bodie's thigh. A slight squeeze, small circles with his thumb. He felt the movement as Bodie knelt up.

When the blade went in, he screamed, or tried to, even though he'd thought he knew what to expect. Pain so sharp, so final - nothing had prepared him for the shock. His hands clawed at the carpet, dug into hard muscle.

And then he screamed again, and longer, as Bodie quickly pulled the blade along the line of his ribs. Bodie had not warned him of this at all, and he did not know when, or if, it would stop.

Two inches, though, maybe three, and Bodie was finished, and then the pain did start to fade. As soon as he could think again: *Of course. It was like that for him. Exactly like that. We'd have the same scar. Exactly.* And within seconds the pain had become just an ache.

The hand was lifted away, and he turned his head, and looked down the length of his body. He could see the bright red, even see it spreading, but not the cut itself, which was hidden by the rise of his chest. Maybe if he raised his head... His muscles would not obey him, and he did not struggle against them. It was not important. He could feel the rivulets on his skin, heat from the centre of his body.

His hand still rested on Bodie's thigh, relaxed now. *I'll never move it again.* Such peace, to know at last the details of this death. The edge had no room for doubts or possibilities - they fell away with each second, leaving Doyle with these last certainties.

As he looked at his hand, memorising the grooves of the knuckles, the constellations of freckles, Bodie's hand descended, and covered it. It was the right hand, still wet and slick. Nearly as good as seeing the knife. Their fingers slid together, grasped, were still.

Doyle smiled, and sighed, imagining their last kiss, knowing it was to come, opening his lips to ask. But as he sighed there was an unpleasant sensation of something tearing, moving slowly upwards from the wound, and the bubbling sound of his breath got louder and deeper.

He looked down at his chest.

Lung collapsing. He had a good working knowledge of physiology - it had been part of his job.

The chance for speech had past. With each power that fell away, he felt lighter, freed from something unimportant.

Unimportant now, that was. Not always. He felt a surge of affection for his body, for the processes that had brought him to this place, for all the parts that had worked for him and whose names and tasks he didn't know. It had brought him great pleasure. And it had fallen in love with Bodie from the first, and held steady through the strange times and the doubts. This was a sweet reward for it too - a simple death, hot and moist, with the feel and the smell and the sight of Bodie so close.

It was clear that Bodie too was beyond speech. He looked nearly mindless in his absorption, an empty creature filled only with wonder. He was staring at the welling blood, and Doyle

watched him, and felt his love for the man as something pure and soaring and gentle, far above the familiar molten fierceness. The love was the core of him, it was what would remain when the last power was gone, and then it would lift him and carry him safely over the edge.

No, he would not have hated Bodie or cursed him if he had died like this before, as a mortal. Like the others, he would have understood, at the last. For now it all made sense.

He is the Angel of Death. Whether he knows it or not. Look at him. He's in the presence of his god.

There would be no kiss, he could tell. The linking of fingers was the last contact. No disappointment. It did not matter. His body was content. It knew they could not be parted.

Doyle was starting to see thin lines of light over Bodie's face. They vanished when he tried to focus on them, and he thought they were a trick caused by the blood loss. But they returned to the same places, and if he turned his eyes to the side and focussed on nothing, they looked like tracings of moonlight over the contours of the bones. On his hair too, and lips. Warm moonlight, carrying its own deep-blue shadow that was so fine he could barely make it out - the ghost of a ghost.

The light fell on the rest of Bodie's body too. Doyle could see that now, could make out the faint glow through the weave of the dark shirt. Long, lazy curves on his arms, on his legs. Was it a beacon, calling the two of them home?

The light was brightest of all on his hands, and Doyle's flesh looked dull as damp wood in that gleaming grasp. It looked mortal.

It occurred to him, not for the first time, that the forest might have been a dream. This might really be the end. But what an end. And dreams are simply different from reality - they are not inferior. It meant something. That he'd had the dream, that death had welcomed him with Bodie's form, and surrounded him now with such beauty and such feelings. It was not meant as a betrayal. Not at all.

Suddenly Bodie was bending towards him, mouth opening. Doyle did not see them touch his chest, was barely aware of any pressure, but he saw the shiftings of Bodie's throat, heard gentle liquid sounds. There was a moment of dizziness as blood he could not spare tried to fill his cock.

The black fringes cleared from his sight in time for him to see Bodie raise his head. A quiet sigh, and he was kneeling, looking into Doyle's face. The blood on his lips and chin looked luxurious, framed in silver by the moonlight. His mouth was still open, and he seemed dazed, almost intoxicated, as if pitched beyond all his other experiences and beyond his expectations.

Doyle felt like the centre of the universe, provider of all things. He was ancient, older than Bodie. And this was not his first time at all. He sensed around him all the men who had drunk from him, and looking away from Bodie he saw them too, or saw the moonlight on them, hinting at the bodies that had long vanished. They lit the room like a cloud of fireflies, surrounding him on all sides, overlapping one another. And they all looked like Bodie.

They were like an ocean, lifting him up, carrying him away.

He couldn't feel the carpet beneath him any more, could feel little except Bodie's hand. The room was growing dark as a thunderstorm, so that Bodie and the others shone ever more brightly. Breathing was a nuisance, a childish habit he should now outgrow.

A dull taste in his mouth, getting stronger, then a cool tickling moving down across his face.

Slight shift in the grip on his hand. A creak from the floorboards to his right. A shape approaching through the blackness. Warm pressure on his lips, in his mouth. He pressed back, or thought he did.

* * * * *

Someone had once told Murphy that he had a pathetic attention-span for emotions. Long after that person had gone from his life, he hauled the idea out of his memory, and looked at it again. Now he decided it was the reason he was still working with Ray Doyle - he could rarely sustain his angers overnight.

By Wednesday morning, Ray was just a good mate again - buckets of imagination in some areas, none at all in others. He believed that Doyle was sincere about this premonition, was even touched by the short speech, but he was not worried. There was no need for extra precautions, no need to discuss 4.5's state of mind with Cowley or Ross.

On Friday morning he pressed the buzzer to Doyle's flat at 8.15, exactly on time. There was no reply, neither "Come up," nor "On my way." He buzzed again, leaning hard for several seconds, as if the effort would transfer itself to Doyle.

And again.

Right. That was the limit they'd agreed. He fished his house-keys out of his pocket, and tried two before he found the one to the front door - he'd never had to use them before. He called HQ as he ran up the stairs two-at-a-time. At the door to the flat, his guts turned cold and hard as he went through each high-security lock in turn, and found them unset. Ray would *never* do that. Not after Young.

The last lock, and he burst through the door, gun in his hand. But it was all over. Long ago. Still, he searched the flat, maybe putting off his return to the sitting room.

Doyle was on his back, a couple of feet from the window, head near the armchair. Blood caked his right side and the carpet, stained his mouth, and his right hand. In some places it was dried brown, in others still scarlet and congealed. It had been a cold night, and the heating did not seem to be on.

His head was tilted slightly to the right, and his eyes and mouth were open. He appeared to be looking at Murphy, who knelt beside him.

Murphy reached out to close the eyes, then stopped. They were calm, as you would expect in a man who was simply moving on to somewhere that was right for him. But it was a calm that Murphy had seen before, just five months ago.

The weapon was by his knees, as if it had been dropped there, forgotten. No sign of a struggle, No trail of drops from Doyle's fall. The knife might even be Doyle's own. In training, he'd always gone straight for the switchblade; it had suited Murphy, who hated them. The handle was smooth and shiny. There *might* be prints. Whose? He had an idea, but he would be keeping it to himself.

The sirens were approaching. He forced himself to look again at Doyle's face. The rust-mark of blood around the mouth was not a simple trickle under gravity. It had been smeared. Maybe no one else would see it, but to Murphy it was plain: the print of another mouth. Leaning closer, he could see the tip of Doyle's tongue, rising from a lake of blood, pushing past the teeth to the parted lips.

Later that day, excellent prints were taken from the knife, but no match was found in the records. Murphy carried a copy back to his office, shut the door, and looked out the summary file they had kept when they sent the complete set back to Essex. It included fingerprints taken from the corpse, never matched against anything in records.

Raymond Doyle's murder was never solved, although each agent has his own theory, which he will discuss at length provided Murphy is on the other side of town. Murphy does not talk about Doyle. He works well solo, and in groups, but has never again been partnered.

The End