

Tossing the radio onto the driver's seat, Cadell walked along the road, then turned onto the track which led to the old farm-house. Distanced, he looked up, seeing the Kent sky very pale, the trees, russet or bare, moving in the wind, the ground thick with leaves. His feet crunched as he walked. As he approached the house Murphy was there, "Sir," leading him inside.

In the living room, furniture pushed aside, Byrne was fastening metal cuffs around Paget's wrists. Paget was smiling into his eyes, mocking him.

"Where's Duncan?"

"Missing your pretty boy, are you? Must be difficult getting to sleep without his sweet little arse to keep you warm." Paget's lips were curled with scorn. "You're nothing but a bloody queer. Well, let me tell you, we fixed your piece of meat well and truly. With any luck he might even be dead."

He was silenced by Byrne's fist smashing his mouth into blood.

"Whatever you've done, you'd better pray he's still alive or I'll come after you, wherever they put you. And don't you think that being inside will make any fucking difference at all."

Breathing hard he turned away as Murphy came into the room.

Byrne hesitated at what he saw in his friend's face. "Where is he?"

"Second door on the left. I've called for an ambulance."

Byrne was running. The door was old, paint peeling in strips away from the wood. He pushed it open. Anderson was kneeling on the floor, swearing under his breath.

Transfixed for a moment in the doorway Byrne hesitated then, stumbling, he too was on his knees, desperate hands feeling for life.

"Peter!"

Duncan was curled on his side, hands behind his back. Byrne, his hand unsteady, felt for a pulse at Duncan's neck, fingering ice-cold skin until it was there, fluttering weakly under his finger-tips.

Alive.

It was almost too much. Byrne took a long shuddering breath and steadied himself. Reaching around the bound body, hunting for the rope, he found instead the bite of metal binding bloodied wrists. "Jesus!"

"Here." Murphy was there, key in one hand, blankets in the other. Byrne held Duncan's body while the cuffs were peeled away, then very carefully turned him

over, easing him flat as the blankets were wrapped around him, handling him with great care, avoiding seeing the worst of the marks that covered the thin body. Duncan had been beaten, more than once.

Beaten and more.

Pulling the blankets around him, Byrne checked his eyes, finding dilated pupils. He fought down panic. He'd seen men battered to death, knew that the body in his arms was barely alive.

"Peter ..." Duncan was cold, starkly pale around the bruises, eyes sunk deep into his skull. He held still, close to shock. A hand touched his arm and he looked up.

"Hello, sir."

"Byrne."

"He's alive."

"Good."

Startling them both, Murphy reappeared in the doorway. "It's going to take too long for an ambulance to get here, there's been a fire in Canterbury, everything's tied up there." He took a step into the bathroom, looking around, his face tight with tension. "We'd better get him there in the car. There's a hospital in Ashford."

Byrne shifted, lifting Duncan even as Murphy spoke. As he began to hoist the dead-weight up, one of Duncan's arms slipped free of the blanket. All three of them stared at the filthy, naked limb, at the livid path of injection marks that traced the veins close to the skin.

"The bastards!"

Murphy was gone again, Cadell close on his heels.

In silence Byrne traced his finger along the path of the bruises. And hated Paget more than he had ever hated anyone. Lowering Duncan carefully to the floor, tucking the blankets around him, he nodded to Anderson, and walked back to the room where Paget was being held.

Cadell was shouting, demanding, and Paget was smiling again. Byrne just stood in front of him, waiting.

"So you liked your little present?"

Byrne shuddered. "What was it? What did you give him?"

"Smack, speed, a little acid."

"Why?"

“We were bored.” Paget shrugged.

“Did you give him anything else?”

“Who fucking cares!”

Byrne took hold of Paget, one hand around his thick neck the other around his balls.

“I do. Tell me.”

“Fuck you!”

“Tell me!” Byrne was squeezing.

Paget squealed out loud. “All right!”

Byrne eased up when Paget gasped out, “Nothing.”

“Sure?”

A nod.

Byrne backed away. “You’d better hope he lives.” And he was gone, calling Murphy after him.

He was walking down the hall, Duncan cradled in his arms, when Cadell caught up with them. “Take my car.”

“Thank you.”

“Murphy, you drive, I’m coming too. Anderson’s going to liaise with the police and get Paget and Kerrigan back to HQ. And Byrne, the police have offered a fast escort to the hospital.” He tossed his keys to Murphy, following his men out of the house, across the garden and out into the road.

Byrne walked quickly, his feet quiet on the tarmac. He held Duncan’s body, feeling its seemingly slight weight, its absolute chill. There was no room in his mind for anything, not thought, or anger, or bitterness. He was too busy willing Duncan to live.

At the car he let Murphy take the still body, sliding into the back seat, the two of them easing Duncan in after him. Byrne settled him, and realised the cold body was shaking, subtle tremors running faintly through his muscles.

“Jesus - ”

Cadell turned from where he sat in the passenger seat. “What?”

“He’s shivering.”

None of them knew if it was good or bad, but Murphy had the Rover in gear and was turning, rubber burning on the road as he floored the accelerator. Cadell was radioing ahead, his voice soft and urgent.

They picked up the police escort as they pulled onto the main road and, sirens blaring, the three cars speeded off.

Byrne eased himself back against the door, trying to cradle Duncan's body with his own warmth.

He was shaking. He was alive.

But heroin!

He'd kill Paget. Rip him limb from limb. Later.

"Byrne."

The word was a faint murmur, hardly more than a breath, but it made Byrne's heart leap.

"Peter?"

"I thought I was dreaming - "

"No. I'm here."

"Wonderful." Duncan frowned. He tried to shift a little, then groaned softly. "Sweet Jesus, I feel awful."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault, is it?"

"I don't know - "

"I'm sure it isn't." He shivered hard. Turning to curl tight on himself. "Byrne. Hold me."

"I am, sweetheart, I am."

"I can't feel you properly, ache too much."

Byrne gently eased Duncan higher so that they were wrapped together. "Better?" He stroked lank hair away from Duncan's bruised face.

"I love you. Bet you didn't know that." The words were soft, slurred, but the drug in Duncan's veins spoke the truth for him, declaring it without sentiment or disguise.

"I did." Byrne could hardly speak the words, his tongue swollen, his eyes burning with tears. "And I guess I love you, too."

Duncan's head was nodding and then he was gone again, scaring Byrne even though his fingers were welded to Duncan's wrist.

"Fuck it, Murphy, can't you drive any faster than an old woman?"

"Nearly there, Byrne."

Cadell was on the RT alerting the hospital of their imminent arrival.

“Hold on, Peter, it’ll be all right. I promise.”

Awareness came slowly. The third time he opened his eyes he actually knew who he was, and was so pleased to remember something that he fell straight back into darkness.

The fourth time, it was all for real.

He tried to speak, but there was something down his throat, and in panic he clutched at it until a voice was there, soothing, and hands were touching him, bringing more pain, but taking the vile thing away so he could breathe alone. Someone was talking, but it was a very long way away. He was so very tired and, turning onto his side, he slept.

And wasn’t sure he wanted to wake up. For when he did all the memory was there, and along with memory came pain.

It was an uncomfortable conviction, knowing sin had to be paid for. Somewhere in Duncan’s feckless upbringing that philosophy had been so firmly instilled and so carefully observed to be true, that nothing had ever changed it.

He knew that he had sinned, at least in the eyes of God. Even occasionally in his own. But it seemed difficult to believe that he hadn’t already wiped his slate clean and that this was just fate’s maliciousness.

Heroin.

Mother of God, Sacred Heart of Jesus, not again! Why did the past have such a nasty habit of catching up?

Flexing his hand, he felt the strangeness of being alive. Through barely open eyes he looked at his arm, seeing the tubing laced into his veins, seeing the dark tracks that wove unsteadily up to disappear under what had to be a hospital gown. He shivered, feeling other chemicals buffering him from the truth, cocooning his nerve endings.

Smack.

Gathering his strength he lifted his hand and placed it over his eyes. Alive after all. Jesus.

With dream-like disassociation he wondered what had happened; the last thing he could remember was Paget’s face. Hardly a comfort. But, unless hell was a very strange place indeed, something had gone wrong with their plans.

By the feel of it there was more plastic hooked up to his body, liquid in, liquid out.

Something attached to his chest. Monitors? Alive, maybe, but he felt like death warmed up with extreme inefficiency. Drifting off, faint tremors running along his muscles, it was a while before he thought anything much.

He slept and woke hazily, knowing he was still heavily sedated. Doctors and nurses came and fussed. They smiled emptily, asked if he was all right, and at least removed the worst of the tubing from his body. He drifted again. Happy to feel nothing. And slept.

Waking to desperate thirst. Tongue running slowly over dry lips, he wanted liquid, but the effort needed to sit up and reach the glass that sat by his bed was almost too much. He stared at it, tantalised.

And out of nowhere, remembered.

Byrne.

The name brought a flood of memory and he squeezed his eyes closed and fought with his thoughts. Stop it! Byrne's a double-dealing bastard. He never promised you anything, get it straight! You were the one who made a plaster saint out of him - and you should know better.

The pain lay in the space separating how it had been from how he'd wanted it to be. He stared wide-eyed at nothing and tried to accept the logic, but his heart screamed back: You loved him!

He was shivering again, nausea catching at the back of his throat. Christ, he had troubles enough without crying over what Byrne might or might not be.

Well, he wasn't going to throw up in bed. But trying to move he found himself shaking with weakness, and simply pushing himself up in the bed left him panting for breath, close to exhaustion.

Cursing, he knew it was too late, was loathing himself, when strong hands came around him, steady, gentling, holding a bowl while he tried ineffectually to be sick.

Gasping for breath, white and sweating, he lay back with eyes closed.

Byrne looked at him and could have wept. Around the bruises Duncan's skin was translucently pale, temple and eyelid traced with blue veins, hair damply matted against the pillow. Two days in a coma had worn him to a thread, the deep hollows in his face making the scarred cheek painfully obvious. The sheet had slipped down and

with warm hands Byrne tucked it carefully back.

He was exhausted himself.

Cadell had called in from time to time after Duncan had been transferred to the London hospital, but Byrne had stayed through it all: the transfer, the tests, the hours of despair. Now, hopefully properly this time, Duncan was awake. Byrne, unnoticed, planted a swift kiss on Duncan's head and slipped out to find someone to tell.

"He's come round again."

"Good." A doctor followed Byrne into the private room. Duncan was scarcely awake, sweating freely, shivering.

"He was trying to throw up."

The doctor examined the monitors that flanked the bedside, then went to the notes hooked on the end of the bed. "How long has he been an addict?"

"He isn't."

The doctor raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

"Look, don't you people talk to each other?" Byrne sighed, turning away to hide his anger. "Read the notes. He's been forcibly given high doses of heroin. Apart from that, as far as I know he doesn't even smoke dope." He pressed on a far more important matter. "All that matters is that he will be all right. He will, won't he?"

"In time, yes." The doctor cleared his throat and continued reading. He looked up after a moment, and shifted defensively under Byrne's intent stare. "I do need to know if he has a history of drug use. Have you any idea where he might come from, where we could find his medical records?"

"No." Byrne shook his head. "All I've seen is his police service record and there's nothing in that about drugs."

Though Cadell had mentioned something. Byrne tried to remember what exactly had been said all those weeks ago. Cadell had spoken to a different doctor; if only the medical profession talked to each other. "He's clean."

"No."

The voice was faint, roughened, but clearly Duncan's. Byrne said quietly, "Hello."

Duncan ignored him. "I was a user. Years and years ago." Duncan closed his eyes to hide the hopelessness.

"Why can't we find your medical records?"

Duncan's mouth twitched into something that was almost a smile. "Listen, I've had

three different names and I've hardly ever seen a real doctor. I'm surprised that you have anything about me at all. I expect that his lot know it all; they seem to know everything else." He broke off with a shiver.

Byrne went to stand by the bed. He took a deep breath, but didn't touch, just stared. "It'll be all right."

"Fuck off, Byrne. Why are you here anyway?"

The doctor was standing close by, oblivious to the tension between the two other men. "There'll be some symptoms as the drug gradually leaves your body."

"Thank you, doctor. Fancy that." Duncan turned his face away.

"They're little worse than gastric flu." The doctor flushed as two sets of eyes glared at him.

"Really? If you think it's easy you should try it." Duncan looked feverish. He was sweating, his eyes still dilated, slightly dazed. Byrne frowned and wondered if he should just leave now, let the poor bastard be ill in peace.

The doctor went to the door. "I'll get your treatment sorted out. I won't be long."

"Don't trouble yourself too much."

Unsure what to answer, the doctor just left.

Alone, the two men were silent. Then Byrne took a pace forward and hesitantly touched cold fingers. "Look, I can help."

"No, you bloody can't." The fingers were snatched away, tucked under the sheet.

"Why not?" Byrne was shocked by the bitterness in Duncan's voice.

"Get out. I don't know what you told them in order to be here but you won't con me again. Get out of here." His voice was quiet, intense. "Just get out of here. Find somebody else to fuck, I'm finished with it."

"Peter, you don't understand. Paget and me, it was ..."

"Byrne, fuck off!"

Backing off in the face of an ill and shaking Duncan glaring at him, Byrne went to the door. "Okay."

"Don't come back, Byrne, just leave me alone."

"We do need to talk. I'll come back later, when you feel better."

"When I feel better? Really rich that is, when your friend did this to me."

"He's not - " Byrne stopped and made a lunge forward as Duncan, all rage, was free of the sheets and reaching for his neck. He fell before Byrne made it, weakness

and drugs taking his strength, leaving him collapsed, on his knees. Byrne crouched next to him, utterly unsure of what to do, watching the blood drip down Duncan's arm where he had wrenched the IV tubing away.

"Peter!" Byrne reached forward.

"Don't ... touch ... me." There was exhaustion and anger yet even so, even stricken and shaking, Duncan's voice brooked no opposition. "Just go away."

"I'll go and get the doctor."

"Yeah, you do that. Don't bother to come back."

"I can't. I need to see you, to explain!"

"Don't."

Byrne slowly stood up. He took a deep breath and walked away, pulling the door shut behind him. He stood still for a moment, taking one last look through the glass panel at where Duncan sat so forlornly. He didn't doubt his own ability to make Duncan see sense eventually. After all, what else would he be telling but the truth.